

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

INTERPRETING CHRIST

Luke 12:49-56

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

12:49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." 54He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. 55And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 56You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Author's note: This text is like Jell-O; it can be molded into any shape we wish. How do we interpret it? Dare we, as Christ-trusters, interpret it according to Christ's "cross" as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 1? The original context here is eschatological-ours, too-with Christ as the center of everything. But failing to recognize "us" in the text as well is to make Christ useless for us. The text is an announcement that "the end of the world as we know it has come upon us."

DIAGNOSIS: Unable to Interpret Either Christ or Ourselves

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Theological Jell-0*

How do we “interpret the present time” (v. 56; “time” from the Greek *kairos*, means “significant time”)? What is the significance of the present time-for you, for us? Could “the crowds” (v. 54) discern what was happening with Jesus of Nazareth in their midst? Christ didn’t think so-a warning also to us! Without Christ’s “fire” (v. 49), without Christ’s “baptism” (v. 50), without Christ’s “division” (v. 51), any interpretation of religion or of humanity or of your/our life is bound to be self-interested, limited, and untrue. To relegate Christ’s fire, baptism, and division to a moment in time 2,000 years ago is relegate Christ himself to insignificance. As much as we would like to interpret Christ according to our own significances, as Christ-trusters we must avoid turning Christ into some kind of theological Jell-0. However we might choose to interpret Christ, his significance for us is absolutely decisive.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Who Is This Christ?*

The crowds were unable to discern the significance of Christ (v. 56) because his “fire” was not yet kindled (or set ablaze) upon the earth; because his “baptism” (meaning, as we shall see, his crucifixion and resurrection) was not completed; and because the “division” he was bringing upon the earth was unimaginably offensive. In short, even though God’s Christ was in their midst, the crowds did not want him or trust him. He was useless to them, or so they believed. And, insofar as we, too, are not recipients of his, fire, his baptism, and his division, Christ

will remain useless to us as well. Without Christ, we have only ourselves; and even that will be taken from us.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Christ's Fire*

Using the theological Jell-O method, we might interpret Christ's "fire" as a refiner's fire, that makes us better people by tossing out the dross and leaving behind the purified metal. According to this interpretation, we aren't so bad, really, just a little mixed up. Or perhaps we might like to interpret Christ's fire as a Pentecostal fire, as a blazing gift of the Holy Spirit of God. But according to this interpretation, Christ is added to us like an ingredient in a recipe, turning us into unreal, religious super-humans. But if Christ is not to be used as theological Jell-O, if his baptism is to be beneficial to us (see below), if the division he brings is more significant than anything that divides families (v. 53), then his fire must completely consume us! Nothing must be left; nothing at all. No wonder Christ was crucified! Christ does not wish to purify us or to add anything to us. That is the way of religion; it plans to keep intact what we suppose as the "better part" of us, unaware of the complicity of our religion in our very sinfulness. No, Christ's fire means to take away our noble religion as well as our very lives, lives that are wholly devoted to fulfilling our own dead-end projects.

PROGNOSIS: Christ Interprets Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ's Baptism*

Only Christ can interpret Christ. Only by means of his passion, his death and resurrection, can Christ become Christ for us. Unless Christ is fully "baptized" into our sin and death (v. 50), and thus completely immersed in our humanity, Christ is not beneficial for us and we remain in our sins. In Christ crucified, our sins are removed-forgiven. In Christ raised from the dead, we are secure in the promise of our resurrection in

him. Christ's baptism is his death and resurrection; that is, his passion, his suffering, his cross. As Luther said, "The CROSS alone is our theology." Christ's baptism, then, is decisive for everything we have to say about Christ and his benefits for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Christ's Division

The "division" (v. 51) announced by Christ is a consequence of his fire and his baptism. But this division takes place in the heart-not Christ's but ours. Not that our own heart is divided, as though we partly believe and partly don't. Rather, some of us trust wholly in Christ and others of us don't. Christ's fire and Christ's baptism have completely changed us! Our old heart is completely destroyed in Christ, and a new heart has been created for us by the Holy Spirit. At the time of Christ's announcement of the kingdom of God, 2000 years ago, everyone was expecting the Christ to be a politically decisive fulfillment of God's promises. But as some hearts began to trust in a crucified and resurrected Christ, and others did not, a wonderful yet horrible division began to take place: "father against son and son against father . . ." (v. 53). Wonderful, because "peace" with God was assured in the Crucified and Resurrected One; horrible, because families were "divided" according to whether some were Christ-trusters and others were not. With the announcement of the Gospel, the same division takes place today. And it is still unimaginably offensive.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Interpreting Christ

The Gospel is interpreted by Christ himself, by his crucifixion and resurrection; in short, by his "cross." As Christ-trusters, we do not hide behind the cross as though it were a religion or a kind of noble spirituality. Rather, religion and spirituality are themselves judged by the cross. We ourselves are judged by

the cross, but also forgiven by the cross. "The cross judges all things" (Luther). We cannot interpret Christ or the Gospel with the kind of theological Jell-O that under-uses Christ as a religious teacher or godly man. Christ is more decisive for us than that. In him, the end of the world as we know it has come upon us! "For there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Let us therefore understand Christ properly: first by trusting in him only; then by loving one another, including our erstwhile enemies.