

What Does It Mean to Be Church Today?

A Sermon on Romans 8:12-25

Proper 11

July 23, 2017

Introduction

Paul has been saving his trump card. He has gone through a litany of theological terms: faith, justification, sin, death, flesh, body, law. In Chapter 8 he finally comes around to spirit.

Spirit was something that the early Christians all experienced. It was the new thing they were experiencing that brought them together.

Spirit is not something that the mainline church is noted for. Reformed theology, whose heirs include Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ, were formed in part as a response to the Anabaptists and what were perceived to be their spiritual excesses. Mainliners are known for having a lot of words in our worship, focusing on the sermon and readings from Scripture. Spirit? Not so much.

That may be part of the reason that the mainline church has been declining for the past 40 years.

Today I want to look at what spirit means for Paul and what we can do to receive the spirit into our church.

First Move: Receiving the Spirit

Spirit was not a new phenomenon for Jews. They believed that the prophets were filled with the spirit of the Lord. It was the spirit speaking through them that brought the world of the Lord to Israel.

There was a widespread belief in Second Temple Judaism—that is Judaism from the time of the construction of the Second Temple in 515 B.C.E. through the destruction of the Temple by Rome in 70 C.E.--that the prophetic spirit had been withdrawn from Israel and that prophecy had ceased.

Early Christians were not the only apocalypticists. They inherited it from Judaism. Apocalypticism was a big movement in Judaism in the first century. There was an expectation that the spirit would be poured out again when the present evil age ended and the new age began.

The early Christian communities all believed they had experiences of the spirit. It added to their expectation that the new age was coming soon.

Paul began his discussion of the spirit in last week's text. He tells the churches in Rome: "You are in the spirit since the spirit of God dwells in you." These churches already had the spirit before Paul wrote to them.

For followers of Christ, spirit has replaced sin as the power that rules over them. They are no longer debtors to the flesh, they live according to the spirit.

Paul says, "For as many as are led by [the] spirit of God, these are sons of God." If you remember one verse from today's text, that is the verse to remember. Followers of Christ are led by the spirit. The spirit is a power that draws them in. When they act, they act under the influence of the spirit. They internalize the spirit. It becomes their inner motivation. They put to death the activities of the body. Life in the flesh is dominated by the appetites and desires of ambition and self interest instead of the desires of God.

Receiving the spirit is something different from baptism. Baptism is a symbolic death to the old way of life under the power of sin, but you can only tell whether someone has received the spirit by looking at how they act. Are they a different person? Are they transformed? Paul says in verse 9, just a couple of verses before today's text: "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." If you have received the spirit of Christ, you will act like Christ.

Just as Israel was led in wilderness by pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, followers of Christ are led by the spirit of Christ.

Paul says, "When you received the spirit, you were adopted by God." It is common in contemporary theologies to say that every person is a child of God. God created each one of us. That is a good theology--Mary and I often say things like that--but it is not Paul.

In Paul's view, those who are led by the spirit are children of God, not because they are created by God, but because they are adopted by God. In Paul's words, they are sons of God. Sons of God means those who are specially favored by God. Followers of Christ share in the sonship of Christ. Women are sons, too. Paul meant sons in a gender-neutral way that included women.

When we receive the spirit of Christ, we have the same intimate, familiar relationship with God that Jesus had. Our spirit cries out, "Abba! Father!"

James Dunn, an evangelical scholar, says that Paul would have had little sympathy with a purely rational faith or ritualistic religion. Which is what the mainline church has come to be known for. The emotional quality of faith and spirituality comes to the front with Paul. The Spirit is the power of God that integrates emotion, thought and conduct in a life-giving way.

It is possible to have both intellect and emotion in worship. My role model as a preacher was Kyle Maxwell, who was the minister at FCC Edmond for 34 years. Kyle's sermons were academic and passionate. George Young is another role model as a preacher for me. He also combines intellect and emotion.

Paul draws a contrast between slavery and sonship. As slaves of sin, we are bound to carry out the wishes of our master. The spirit gives us an intimate, parent/child relationship with God. We obey God but we act out of respect and love instead of compulsion.

Second Move: Eagerly Awaiting the Spirit

Being adopted carries with it an inheritance. Israel is referred to in the Old Testament as God's son. For ancient Israel, the inheritance was the Promised Land. The gift of the spirit is only the first part of the inheritance for followers of Christ. They also will inherit the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the body at the end of the age.

Glory will be bestowed into us as a gift from God. James Dunn compares it to a cast of actors that comes out for bows at the end of a play. We can see them as their true selves instead of as through the mask of the character that they are playing. In the new age all people will be able to recognize that the followers of Christ are children of God.

Glory awaits us, but the glory lies at the end of the road of suffering. If we are filled with the spirit of God, we will share in the suffering of Christ.

Paul says that creation eagerly awaits the unveiling of the sons of God. Creation also has been in bondage to sin. Paul is referring to the curse in Genesis 3:17-18. God cursed the ground because Adam and Eve disobeyed God. "Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you."

Creation has been subjected to futility—it hasn't functioned as it was designed to do. Humans continued to abuse the environment in Biblical times. Leviticus 26:34-43 says that God allowed Israel to go into exile in part so the land could have its own Sabbath.

Creation must be redeemed so that people will have a fitting environment when their bodies are resurrected. The whole world will be transformed. Creation will be liberated when God's children have glory because they will bring wise, healing restorative divine justice to the whole creation.

Until then, creation co-suffers and groans with Christians as they await the end of the age. The groaning is a sense of frustration in living with the tension between the already and not yet. The ages overlap. Christians can see glimpses of the

kingdom. They can see the way things ought to be, but they cannot realize it in their present embodiment. The time in between is a time of groaning in frustration.

The person who lives in the flesh does not have this sense of frustration. He is unaware of the alienation between what is and what ought to be. The groaning is a sign of the spirit's presence. It is a longing for the fullness of life that will come in the new age.

Christians eagerly await the new age with hope. Christian hope is confident because Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection and we already have received his spirit.

Third Move: Led by the Spirit

Robert P. Jones has written a powerful book, *The End of White Christian America*. Jones is the founder of the Public Religion Research Institute. By White Christian America, he means the mainline church and the evangelical church. Mainline and evangelical Protestants have virtually all-white churches. The mainline church has been declining for 40 years. We have been talking about that for a long time. What is less well known is that evangelicals started declining about 10 years ago. They are catching up.

What makes the decline even more concerning is that millennials are giving up on the church. Most millennials grew up in church, but about half of them consider themselves not affiliated with a church or with a religion. Surveys show that millennials believe that church people are judgmental and hypocritical. Millennials are more accepting of LGBT folks than either mainliners or evangelicals and they are turned off by the way that the church has treated homosexuals.

Mainline churches have become closely associated with liberal or Democratic politics. Mainline churches were leaders in the civil rights movement, but they haven't been at the head of any parades since then. The mainline church no longer has any real political power. Mainliners supported the women's movement and the environmental movement, but they were less supportive than the population as a whole. Mainline churches have wrestled with accepting LGBT folks and it has torn apart some churches. Conservative church members see acceptance of gay marriage as selling out to the secular culture.

Evangelicals have become closely associated with conservative or Republican politics. Homosexuality and abortion have become the most important cultural issues to them. Evangelicals also were slow to support civil rights. Private Christian academies were formed in part to avoid integrated public schools.

Evangelicals have enjoyed more political power in the last 20 years than mainliners, but their political power is shrinking. Jones believes that their embrace of Trump will make their numbers decline even more. It will show that they value political power more than personal integrity.

Mainliners and evangelicals appear to be corrupted by politics. They appear to be getting their values from politics instead of living the gospel and bringing gospel values to politics. Millennials are turned off by it.

Paul would say that White Protestant churches have been living in the flesh. Not enough spirit. Millennials don't see the spirit of Christ in churches.

White Protestant churches would do well to remember that the gospel is counter cultural. Democrats and Republicans are part of the culture. Their partisan gridlock is polarizing the country. That same polarization has infected Protestant churches.

Imagine the difference in millennials' attitude toward church if the impression that they got was that church people are generous, forgiving and healing. If churches actually reminded people of Jesus.

I still believe that churches should get involved in political issues but we have nothing to contribute as churches unless we offer a Christian perspective.

It is important to address criminal justice, but we are not trying to be smart on crime, save the state money. We are trying to be humane on crime, we are concerned about the least of these. We want to raise awareness of the humanity of the people who are being ground up by the system.

I am the Chair of the Oklahoma Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. I want to change our focus. We have been offering a pragmatic message: the death penalty costs too much and it is arbitrarily enforced. Christians should want to bring out the compassionate reasons: the condemned person is a beloved child of God. He may have committed a terrible crime, but he is not a monster. I would like to see churches get more involved, but they will only get involved if they see Christ in the process. Assign a church to each offender and their families and to the families of each victim. Minister to them. Get to know them. Tell their stories. Don't just say that Richard Glossip is innocent. Talk about what kind of a person he is, what are his hopes and dreams. It is dehumanizing to live on death row. If we can't abolish the death penalty for the time being, what can we do to give the condemned a little more dignity?

I also believe that church should be about a lot more than politics. What people are longing for and what churches are failing to offer is spirituality. People want a deeper connection with God and the sacred. They want to be part of something bigger.

Edmond Trinity is known as an open and affirming congregation. Mary and I attended a meeting of Central Area Clergy last month and we had a discussion about why more Disciples churches have not become open and affirming. The response we got was that they don't want to be seen as political.

I think our church is perceived as political because we are open and affirming. And also because of some of my posts on FaceBook. I wish we were perceived as a spiritual church. We are building a culture of non-violence here, and being open and affirming is part of that. Our focus in worship and on Wednesday nights for the past several years has been on spirituality: recovering the mystical tradition, deepening our prayer lives, learning how to live a non-violent life. When churches embody that kind of spirituality, the millennials will come.

Conclusion

Jordan designed an awesome, new banner. We put it out by the road this week. I tweeted that now we have to live up to the claims: Real Gospel, Real Preaching, Real Worship.

We are real when we take our lead from the spirit of Christ. That is what it means to be church.

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