

A Church Alive: Raising Our Spiritual Sails

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God... for "who has the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. – I Corinthians 2:12,16

Background and Recap

Last week we talked about the coming of the Holy Spirit as the Promise of the Father, and focused on the fact that all that happened on that day was not of the disciples doing. The disciples only knew they were to wait, but had no idea *what they were waiting for* or when it was exactly going to come. God was moving in the way He wanted to, and his moving was, on the one hand, independent of the actions of the disciples, and on the other, inclusive of their submission and obedience.

Fast forward to the establishment of the Corinthian church. This group of disciples was very attuned to the movement of the Spirit, seemed to have more of a focus on the operation of the Spirit than some of the other churches, or at least had the need for Paul to address certain things to them that he did not have to with other churches. The Corinthian church also had issues of internal struggle: Many of them judged their spirituality based on the leader they followed; some participated in cliques to the exclusion of their brothers and sisters; Paul even had to deal with their lack of discipline in addressing falsehood and sin in the body. Paul spent most of his letters bringing the church back to the right mindset they were to have about God, about each other, and about the Spirit of God that was at work in them.

Seeing The Unseen

*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, **we know** that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, **he cannot see** the kingdom of God." – John 3:1-3*

Nicodemus came to Jesus because he recognized the operation of the Spirit of God in him, or at least what he perceived to be the truth about the kingdom of God. To Nicodemus, everything that Jesus was doing: casting out demons, healing the sick, even the gospel he was preaching, was evidence that he had come from God. While Jesus did not deny Nicodemus' claim he did challenge *what he thought he saw*. As much as Nicodemus saw, he was unable to tell where it was from, because he was not born again.

Now Jesus was not talking about the contemporary view of “being born again”: raising your hand in church, walking the aisle, reading some scriptures, repeating a prayer and marking that **event** as the time you were born again. To Jesus, Nicodemus needed a mindset shift: he needed to see, not what he could understand with his own intellect and experience, but he needed to see the entire kingdom that and the operation of that kingdom that Jesus spoke of. For this, Nicodemus could not just be born of “water”, or be born naturally, but he needed the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to give him the ability to see the unseen.

Tactical Christianity

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born? – John 3:4

Nicodemus responded to Jesus in the way we do many times – he sought to understand the specific words and phrases Jesus said. The good thing was that he was asking Jesus directly, but it was clear that he was having a hard time grasping this life that Jesus was talking about. Jesus didn’t do him any favors: he went deeper with Nicodemus, and instead of unraveling the mystery, plunged him deeper in it:

Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again”. The wind blows where it wishes, and you can hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. – John 3:7-8

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that there was more to the life than he was seeing. That even though he could *detect* that there was something there, and that something drew him to Jesus, in order to fully understand and experience what Jesus was talking about he would have to be *born of the Spirit*.

*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, **not in words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them because they are spiritually discerned.** – I Corinthians 2:12-14*

Paul was having a similar discussion with the Corinthian church, helping them to look at things from a completely different mindset. They knew what they saw, and made their judgments and commitments based on that, but Paul pointed out that God does things different than we would. For us, we have to realize that the life of the Spirit is not one that fits our normal way of thinking, but it is something that we have full ability to participate in, if we are willing to approach it in the way he would want us to.

As a practical example, I went to a Vietnamese restaurant, because I saw some interesting looking dishes, and read a number of good reviews. I decided that I wanted a particular dish, but had no experience with the dish itself: I only knew

what I saw in the picture. When they brought out the dish, they started with a plate of greens (what appeared to be a salad), a smaller dish of a type of dressing, and a few minutes later, the “main dish”. I looked at what they brought and the manner in which they brought it and determined, *from my Western mindset* that the “salad” was to be eaten first with the dressing, and then the “main course”. One of the people working there, however, told me the proper way to eat the dish: take some of the greens, some of the dish, mix it in the empty bowl and pour the sauce over it. *What a difference!* While I was satisfied with the dish **in the way I experienced it initially**, it took someone with the right mindset to show me what I couldn’t see – the right way to experience the dish.

For:

Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?

But we have the mind of Christ. – I Corinthians 2:16

Paul quotes Isaiah, in the section that is the turning point for Israel. In this section of Isaiah, God is declaring that he is so much bigger than Israel thought, and that his goal was to cause those whose minds were turned to him to soar. As Paul challenges the Corinthian church, he also gives them the answer – in yourself, you cannot understand the Lord, much less instruct him, but because we have his Spirit, we have his mind, and with that, we can understand how to live in the Spirit. When Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, he was giving him clues to the means to experience the life of the Spirit in the right way.

Capturing the Wind

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said to him, “How can these things be?” – John 3:8-9

An appropriate response from Nicodemus. After all, he was a teacher. He was used to giving specific instruction and leading people into a certain way of believing and acting. Jesus appeared to be advocating a life that had no perceivable source or destination. “You determine that I am from God because I do certain things, but you will see others who do not do these things, and they are no less from God.” The life of the Spirit was fluid, responsive, and at times, unpredictable. *How do you structure a teaching, a program or a discipline around this?* Jesus’ response was basically, *you don’t*. Rather, you change to flow with the movement of the Spirit.

Sailors have a goal of getting from one point to another, but they have one problem: they cannot control the water or the wind in order to get them where they need to be. They do have a tool at their disposal, however: a sail. The sail is used to capture the wind, which becomes the boat’s means of propulsion. The sailor’s job: steer, and keep track of the movement of the wind. If there is a shift in the wind, there needs to be a shift in what is done with the sail, but with every shift, the sailor is responsive to the movement of the wind.

Paul used this thinking to help the Corinthian church focus, not on what they thought was “right and acceptable” Christianity. Jesus used this to cause a Pharisee to go deeper and abandon his claims to understanding the kingdom based on his own sight. God is also using this to cause us to “release him from our box”: to lay our understanding, or methods and our practices before him, and allow him to determine our path.