

Was it Something I Ate?

Discerning the Voice of the Spirit

Ben Pugh

Paul: Flesh or Spirit?

The Background: Being Caused to Walk in God's Ways: Ezek.36:25-27

The Spirit in Paul may be identified with the gift of the Spirit long promised by the Old Testament Prophets (e.g. Jer.31:33; Ezek.36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29).¹ The presence of the Spirit was a sign of restoration to God's favour, of forgiveness, of redemption. He is identified as the one who, by His presence in the lives of the recipients, makes it possible for them to enjoy the New Creation. He brings a wonderful foretaste of the age to come, acting as the seal and guarantee of it (Eph. 1:13-14) and the First-fruits of its full possession: Romans 8: 23.

But Paul's understanding of the work of the Spirit seems to be *especially* rooted in Ezekiel's understanding of the Spirit as the originator of a new heart of flesh in place of the old, desperately wicked heart of stone: Ezek.36:25-27. There, in Ezekiel, is the marvellous promise that God, by His Spirit would *cause* people to walk in his statutes. This is why Paul has such faith that the Spirit will *cause* former pagans to no longer walk in the flesh but to walk in the Spirit. He is convinced that *if* we walk in the Spirit we won't get around to gratifying the desires of the flesh: Gal.5:16. This basic idea is the reason why Paul showed such ' . . . deep-seated confidence in the Holy Spirit to guide, preserve, and pastor the church during his sustained absence.'²

Two Voices: Galatians 5:16-25; Romans 8:1-17

So just how do we discern the difference between the leading of the flesh and the leading of the Spirit? Desires can easily get the better of us and wishful thinking can easily be taken for divine guidance. Emerging treatments methods for addictions are quite illuminating here. Addicts tend to have two voices vying for control: the one rational, the other irrational. What addictionologists mean by "irrational" is: "unreasonable, too demanding." The unreasonable "must" thought wins and yields to cravings while the more rational thought might, if heeded, have helped the person move out of their addiction. Hence there is a constant ambivalence in the mind of the addict: on the one hand they know they could lose everything that matters to them if they continue and therefore really do want to quit, and on the other hand they want to plan for a life in which they will play the recovery game and relapse whenever they feel like it. The rational voice is the voice of the person, their true inner voice that really does want to quit. The other voice is the Addictive Voice, portrayed as a kind of beast that desperately wants the addict to carry on. Similarly, Paul describes the flesh by personifying it as a power that rules (Romans 6:12), enslaves (6.13, 18, 20; 7:14), makes war (7:23), imprisons (7:23) and kills (7:10, 11, 13). Addicts need help to stop to listen for the other voice, realising that whenever we face this kind of choice there will always be another voice speaking more quietly. This other voice will always be a more rational, reasonable and helpful voice – the voice of the Spirit in our minds. And the more we obey that voice the stronger it will become. Paul says, "whoever you present yourselves as slaves to obey, you are the slaves of that one whom you obey" (Rom.6). The Addictive Voice enslaves us, the other voice sets us free.

So, there are always two voices. There is a voice that says "I must have this and have it right now. I cannot stand being denied this," and there is a quieter voice, one that is reasonable, peaceable, rational. It is not excessive, demanding, strict, or condemning. If you listen out you will find that this other more reasonable voice is *always* there, however faintly. The key difference is in the tone: the one is demanding, has no morals and misses out important facts such as the short term pleasure and long term harm of the action; the other voice is gentle, kind and honest. Even to recognize that there are these two voices, and to no longer keep trying to make the unreasonable voice seem reasonable, is probably at least half the battle won. A former porn addict put it this way, ". . . there are two dogs in my heart's backyard. One dog always craves pleasure, sin and selfishness. The other dog craves

¹ Fee,G., *op.cit.*, 806.

² William Larkin and Joel Williams (eds) *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 77.

justice, mercy, peace and obedience to God. When I wake up every day, I choose which dog gets fed. The one I feed grows until the other dog can't even be seen."³

To sum up:

1. The Voice of the Flesh is...

Demanding, excessive, dogmatic, self-damning, cares only about now, enslaves us.

2. The Voice of the Spirit working in harmony with my 'inmost self' (Rom.7:21) is...

Peaceable, moderate, yielding, gracious and merciful, reminds us to take a long view of things, sets us free.

Reflection

Are you conflicted about something, and does the description above accurately depict the nature of the inner conflict that you feel? Does this help to show the way forward?

John: The Glorifying of Christ

- **He Advocates for Christ.**

John sees the Spirit's role as always having reference to the Son: 'The Spirit of Christ is known by the witness which He bears to Christ.'⁴ He is the 'chief witness for Christ,'⁵ a task that Christ's followers are invited to join in with. Even John's celebrated term 'Paraclete,' Comforter, one who comes alongside, is now more commonly regarded as referring to the Spirit's witness-bearing activity. The term continues the legal language of advocacy. He is Christ's witness-advocate, the one who knows him intimately and can 'vouch for him,' in the sense expected in first century court hearings.⁶ The word paraclete is now generally agreed to have this legal colouring.⁷ The Spirit is the witness for the defence, whose role is to persuade us of the merits of following Christ. The term 'Advocate' is therefore probably the best translation. In a secondary sense, this may, of course bring comfort and boost our faith.

So what? Receiving guidance from the Spirit is about being sensitive to the Spirit's appeals. He will appeal to us like a council for the defence, to be on the side of Jesus and not act against him.

- **He is *Just Like Jesus*.**

There is continuity between the work of Christ and the ongoing work of "another paraclete" – 'another of the same kind' (*allos paraclētos*) – following Christ's glorification.⁸ The work of the life-giving Spirit in John is thus, "...derived from the mission of Jesus in history."⁹

³ Groves, "I'm a Christian Addicted to Porn." *Christianity Today*. [accessed online 1 Nov 2016] <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/trueifestories/ithappenedtome/im-christian-addicted-to-porn.html?start=2>

⁴ H.B. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (London: MacMillan, 1909), p. 269, referring, in particular, to John 15:26 & 16:14.

⁵ S.B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1996), p. 36.

⁶ Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, p. 36.

⁷ Beginning with Johannes Behm, "Parakletos," in G. Kittel (ed) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 809

⁸ He, "...mediates the presence of the Father and of the Son to the disciple." Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), p.

⁹ Ramsey, *Holy Spirit*, p. 91.

From womb to tomb to throne, the Spirit was the constant companion of the Son. As a result, when he comes to Christians to indwell them, he comes as the Spirit *of Christ* in such a way that to possess him is to possess Christ himself, just as to lack him is to lack Christ.¹⁰

So what? The Spirit will only ever do or say things that have the character of Christ about them. This is best put in the words of the great James D.G. Dunn:

*The character of the Christ event is the hallmark of the Spirit. Whatever religious experience fails to reproduce this character in the individual or community, it is thereby condemned as delusory or demonic; it is not the work of the eschatological Spirit. For the eschatological Spirit is no more and no less than the Spirit of Christ.*¹¹

- **He Effaces Himself and Advertises Jesus.**

Here is Anglican renewalist, the late Thomas Smail:

Without the Son the Spirit would have nothing to convey, because he brings no content of his own. On the other hand, without the Spirit, what the Son has would be shut up in himself.¹²

The Spirit thus, '...effaces himself, and advertises Jesus.'¹³ Because the person of Christ is so central to the Fourth Gospel, the self-effacing role of the Spirit is a result.

So what? Caution is needed in situations where, through extraordinary phenomena, a highly charged, uncritical atmosphere is created for the prophetic. We end up focused more on the phenomena than on the person who is the chief delight of the Spirit: Christ.

Luke: Community Discernment

The Holy Spirit does a lot of speaking in the book of Acts. He gives:

Direct guidance: *Positive:* 11:12; 13:2; 15:28; *Negative:* 16:6 (forbidden); 18:5 (constrained)

Supernatural Foresight: 11:28

Powerful visions: 7:55

Supernatural knowledge: Acts 10:19.

We will focus on two episodes that highlight Luke's particular contribution: the Council of the Jerusalem and the Macedonian Call. These both illustrate a useful safeguard that can help us to listen to the right voice (as in Paul) and listen Christcentrically (as in John), and that safeguard is the community of faith.

1. **The Council of Jerusalem: Acts 15:28.** A long deliberation around the conditions for the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Covenant concludes with Spirit-reception as the main condition together with a set of guidelines for avoiding offence in mixed Jew-Gentile settings.

- This is a decision 'of the community and the Spirit.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, p. 37.

¹¹ Dunn, J.D.G., *Jesus and the Spirit*, (London: SCM, 1975), 321-2.

¹² Thomas Smail, *The Giving Gift: The Holy Spirit in Person* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 51

¹³ Joseph Fison, *The Blessing of the Holy Spirit* (London: Longmans, 1950), p. 137.

¹⁴ Derrell Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 145.

2. **The Macedonian Call: Acts 16:6-7.** The Spirit prevents Paul and Barnabas from preaching in Asia, where they had churches needing input from them, and then forbids them to head further north into Bithynia, a highly civilised region.
- Note again the corporate setting: the Spirit did not permit *them*. One commentator conjectures that this may have come via prophetic words given in church¹⁵ as they attended churches along the way, for instance, the church in Lystra which Paul and Barnabas had founded.
 - Note the phrase 'Spirit of Jesus' (unique here in Luke-Acts) with the second of the two warnings. The Spirit obstructs the missionaries for the second time in a Jesus-like way. This may have been a prophetic utterance given in the name of Jesus.

So what?

- Receiving guidance from the Spirit may come as the result of a long meeting with other Spirit-filled people, and long deliberation without a big revelation.
- Receiving guidance from the Spirit may involve being checked and stopped, but again in a setting of communal discernment.

To Sum up

How do I know whether I have heard the Spirit?

1. From Paul: What was the tone of voice?
2. From John: Has it increased your focus or distracted you from Christ?
3. From Luke: Has it been opened up to scrutiny from other Spirit-filled people?

¹⁵¹⁵ F.F. Bruce, *NICNT: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19880, p. 306.