

Free for All

The single most useful thing I heard in my formal theological studies happened on the first day...of the first year of study...in the first few minutes...of the first lecture...in the first class meeting...of the first required course: Introduction to Hebrew Scripture. There we were...the 'motley crew' of students who would go on to become 'the great class of 1987' at San Francisco Theological Seminary—all 50 of us, 25 men and 25 women, ranging in age from 21 to 60, representing several different Christian denominations but mostly Presbyterian, all of us both eager and anxious about what our newfound sense of faith and calling would mean, all of us with pen and notebooks in hand (this was, of course, well before the advent of iPads and online learning), all set to record the most important points of the profound words we expected soon to hear.

The professor entered the room (taller, not much older, and better looking than most of us, I thought), we fell quiet from our nervous chatting; he said a brief prayer, then looked at us with a gentle wry smile and said:

If you are ever tempted to forget what you hear and learn here, I urge you *not* to forget this: We almost always ask the wrong question of the Bible. We say, *What really happened?* That is absolutely and entirely the wrong question; we should probably never ask that! Instead we should only ask: *What does this really mean?* I'm here to help you find answers to this second question, but if you think you need an answer to the first, you will be gravely disappointed.

So, with that in mind, just let me be really clear about this: I don't know what really happened on the day of Pentecost in the year Jesus died. So I will neither defend nor deny the biblical account. But I will have a thing or two to say about what I think it means.

We can take the author's word for it that the two volume work of the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles* was designed to be "an orderly account," based on the testimonies of eyewitnesses, written documents and investigations that were available to him (or her) at the time—which was probably (though we don't know for certain) about 75 AD. We can also believe

this author's sincere motivation for undertaking this great work: that newly-initiated Christians (the 'God-lover' euphemistically literally named 'Theophilus') might "know the truth about which you have been instructed."

[Luke 1.1-4]

This is a magnificent work. Imagine this: If all we had of Christian writing from the first century was this two-volume opus, we would still have all the basics of the story of Jesus as preached by the first apostles *and* the story of the church's first few decades in a history that has never been measurably contradicted to this day. Well done, Luke (or whoever you were) who gave us this!

However, as with all literary efforts, we also have this author's personal opinions, biases, particular interests, and peculiar interpretations—and none is more important the emphasis on the Holy Spirit in both gospel and history volumes. This author mentions the Holy Spirit more often than all the rest of the New Testament combined. Here is a big clue to the time and context of the work, for it was not until the late first or early second century that Christianity began to develop a theology of the Holy Spirit, which led eventually to the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a description of the nature of God. This occurred only after the importance of Jerusalem as a power centre of Christianity had declined and Rome's was rising, after the missionary activities and writings of Paul, after Christianity had become almost entirely separated from its Jewish heritage.

Even so, Luke is clearly very knowledgeable about Jewish scripture, religious practice and history—and there is no hint in this work of a political anti-Jewish bias such as we find in John's gospel. There is, rather, a consistent balance of story and theology presented here which is unique in Christian literature. It's really likely that Luke's own experience of the church was in a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians (such as could have been found in Rome or Antioch or Ephesus), and from that Luke is eager to encourage a new universal reality for the church: *a totally inclusive community that both embraces and re-defines the heritage and experience of all its members.*

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As I say that, I'm pretty confident that this description sounded good to most of us in this room—but we also know, some of us with a great measure of sadness, how very difficult this is to accomplish. Human history clearly shows

that ‘like clings to like,’ and then usually wants to exclude anyone who is ‘unlike.’ Thus we have nations and denominations, races and classes, clubs and congregations, teams and gangs, factions and parties—all with the one overriding purpose of keeping some people ‘in’ and others ‘out,’ and all with the result of encouraging the divisions and evil ‘isms’ that produce rivalry and conflict rather than consensus and peace.

[Personal story: ‘embodying the ecumenical movement,’ and where the church went wrong]

Divisiveness and distrust remain the norms of human relations. But Luke had a different vision, at least for the church. It’s not a unique hope, for similar ideals had been expressed in philosophy and theology long before the gospel and Acts was written (one of which, the prophet Joel’s, is even quoted in today’s reading), but it is a uniquely daring and dramatic vision nonetheless. So it is that the supposedly ‘orderly account’ of the *Acts of the Apostles* begins with a decidedly *disorderly* event.

“Are these people drunk?!” [Acts 2.12] bystanders ask, and it’s a legitimate question because the scene appears to be noisy, ill-disciplined ‘free for all’ of the kind that never happens when people are sober and acting according to their usual every day behaviour. But then, that’s the point: the church is supposed to be something different than human ‘business as usual,’ something far more wonderful, something far more meaningful, something far more fun and fearless. The church is supposed to be *free for all*.

On the day of the Festival of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, fifty days after Jesus’ death that year, did the wind blow through his disciples’ meeting room as when “the wind from God swept over the face of the waters” in that first moment of creation? Was this, then, a new divine creation?—The beginning of new world?—The renewal of human community? [Genesis 1.2]

Was there a vision of “tongues, as of fire” that rested on the heads of Christians like the red-plumed helmets of Roman soldiers, as sign of incomparable power and authority? [Acts 2.3]

Did Jesus’ first disciples begin to testify of his mighty deeds in ways that people—both Jews and non-Jews—from every part of the known world at that time came to understand what was being said? [Acts 2.5-11] Was this a new reality for human community that completely reversed the

story of the Tower of Babel's crushing division of humanity? Had God's angry punishment for human arrogance at last been lifted? [Genesis 11] Was this the beginning of universal salvation?

On that day was Joel's ancient oracle fulfilled? Did both young and old, both male and female, both slave and master, both rich and poor all prophesy, see visions and dream dreams? [Joel 2. 28-32]

I don't know. All scholarship and speculation aside, I simply don't know.

But what this story means is something far beyond any of these ponderings.

The 'truth of the things in which we have been instructed' is this: that in those days and weeks and years after Jesus and all his original disciples were no longer in this world, the real power and authority of his ministry still was—and still is. And it is incomparably, indescribably, inexhaustibly wonderful! Grasping hold of that with all our might is still 'the way, the truth and the life' [John 14.6] that leads to real salvation—that is the complete liberation of our minds and souls *now*, in *this* life (not to mention what we may well hope for in eternity).

Even Paul, by all accounts among the sterner and more serious of the early apostles, had some of this enthusiastic liberating insight in his earliest writings. To the church at Galatia he wrote: "For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." [Galatians 5.1] And the first Christian baptismal statement (to which Paul refers in this same letter) was almost certainly this, or something very like it:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [Galatians 3. 27-28]

This is the breaking down of all social, political, economic and theological barriers between humans. This is a reality merely glimpsed for ever so short a time in the early church, and yet kept present and alive before us even today as both a hope and a challenge: *a totally inclusive community that both embraces and re-defines the heritage and experience of all its members.* Wherever and whenever we come somewhere close to that reality, we are the church at its best; when and where we move away from it, we become the church at its worst. And wherever individual Christians and whole Christian

communities take the lead in proclaiming and promoting such inclusion, nations (and, indeed, the world) are blessed.

Even so, we must always be on guard about our own motivations. The most 'liberal' congregations can become locked in their own narrow self-identity just as surely as any conservatives. The most 'contemporary' worship can become absolutely inflexible about its content just as surely as any 'high church' liturgy. The most sincere faith-filled people can be vulnerable to their own pride and prejudices. The history of the church proves this, even in the later chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Fundamentalism, arrogance and exclusivism can raise their ugly heads in *any* human community, whatever the values or socio-theological perspectives of its members. Left to our own devices, resources and natural responses we will almost always inevitably fail to grasp our highest calling. But, as the evangelist and historian we name Luke tells us so beautifully and dramatically: by the power of the Holy Spirit we *can* be changed, we *can* be better, we *can* be the people of God and worthy to be called by Christ's name, we *can* offer the church to the world—free, for all!

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