

DID YOU RECEIVE THE SPIRIT?

Paul wrote many letters that have not been preserved, but among those we have, I think Galatians was the first, and everybody knows it was *one* of the first. Though it doesn't matter (content matters, and truth matters), Galatians may well be the earliest writing in the New Testament – the very first written words we have about Jesus, His people, His mission and message, His church. That doesn't impress some people very much, not even enough to make them want to read Galatians. But stuff like that moves me. In this case, when I do read it, I am even more enthralled.

I have told you that Galatians is the best fast-fix in the New Testament. I do not claim that it is better or superior to all the other writings, only that its six brief chapters – coupled with Paul's concern for the churches he had started on his first missionary journey – make Galatians the earliest and most accessible fast summary we have of Christian faith and belief. So what about Philipians, or Colossians, or First Thessalonians, which by the way is another contender for being Paul's first letter? They each have even fewer chapters than Galatians. Well, I forbid you to read the other letters in order to figure out why I am suggesting you read Galatians the most. (Hey, it works for Catholics; I thought I'd try it.) Anyway: Read Galatians constantly until it becomes, in the old phrase, as familiar as the back of your hand. And when days seem hard or issues confusing, I hope you will turn to it and, mixed with prayer, find renewal.

In recent sermons I have tried to hint at some of the treasures contained in Galatians. Last week we were in the third chapter, and of course the sermon was far longer than the chapter. Even so, there was much we skipped over lightly. Today I want to back up to the early verses of the third chapter so we can take time to listen to a key question – a critical question – that Paul asks us: “*Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?*” (verse 2)

Perhaps we should even back up to the first part of that question: *Did you receive the Spirit?* After all, if we have not received the Spirit, there is no way we can track the rest of Paul's question. As you know, some churches still equate receiving the Spirit with speaking in tongues

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of ecstasy. I do not. If some individuals find this experience a satisfying further manifestation of receiving the Spirit, why would any of us complain? Still, we don't want to confuse sideshows – or side effects – with main events. If we do, we get sidetracked and end up with cheap shots that actually obscure what matters. Then we get people thinking they haven't received the Spirit because the sky didn't fall in or because they didn't experience some particularly dramatic emotional high in some particular way.

Did you receive the Spirit? Rephrase: Are you aware of the presence of the Living Christ in your own life? Do you receive the guidance, comfort, correctives, confidence, assurance of God's love for you because Jesus is part of your life – a real *being* in active relationship with you? "Spirit" is shorthand for the Holy Spirit, alias the risen and present Spirit of Jesus the Messiah, our crucified and Risen Lord.

Can we all agree that Jesus did not come here – did not live His life, die on a cross, and rise again – merely because He wanted us to speak in tongues? That kind of thing is okay, maybe, as a side effect. Even Paul suggests that you should do it in the privacy of your own home and not mess up the worship services with it. (I Corinthians 14) Speaking in tongues is not *our* experience of ecstasy, though certainly we have our moments of ecstasy – times when we are so filled with gratitude and appreciation and love for Jesus that it goes off all the charts. But that also is a side effect. Jesus comes because He wants to be part of our lives. And, we suspect, because He knows that without Him, our lives are not filled with joy, love, meaning, or purpose, at least not the kind that lasts. Worse than that, doing things our own way goes quickly into the negative side of the ledger. Now, you might say that even *with* Him, that happens far too often. And you would be right. But without Him ... well, some of us call it depression, some of us call it despair, some of us call it Hell on earth. But my real point is that when we speak of receiving the Spirit, some of you instantly wonder if you are disqualified from the question because you do not speak in tongues. I guess you have friends who insist that this is so. So I find it necessary to insist, backed by Scripture, that it is not so – not even close. There is the thirteenth chapter, as well as the fourteenth, of First Corinthians: "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love*" – meaning, if I do not know and receive the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus – I am what? Nothing! Noisy gong – clanging cymbal – "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (*Macbeth*) Tongues by themselves are nothing. And by the way, do you think Paul

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is talking about *our love* in this famous passage? That would only be another way to trade Gospel for Law. Yet that's what most people think when they read or hear it. *Our love* is going to save the world? Maybe you think so, but you can be absolutely certain that is not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about Christ's love, and how that must fill us – not about something we can whomp up within ourselves, all by ourselves.

Did you receive the Spirit? This is not an academic or theoretical question. Have you turned your life over to the influence, guidance, and authority of the Risen Christ who is alive and eager to be in continual dialogue with you? This is still the hottest and most important question in the life of the church. It always has been. It was the very issue that was getting Paul into so much hot water all through his ministry. It was the primary reason for Jesus' coming, and the culmination of His life and ministry on earth. *“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”* (John 16:7)

I do not carry the Message nearly as effectively as Jesus or Paul or Peter – of course – and the proof is that I am still alive. But I can still tell you that this question is at the root of every church battle and fight that I have ever been in. Some people want to turn the church into a minor social club without serious commitment or purpose. Others want to take it back to reliance on some form of the Law, where the focus is on outer behavior or outer causes. Either way destroys the church – one from hypocrisy, the other from Pharisaism. The question is: *Did you receive the Spirit?* Is the Living Christ in charge of your life? If so, then your major purpose is *not* to speak in tongues, but to follow His guidance, walk the Path, be part of His WAY. And your major concern, beyond being faithful yourself, is helping others to claim their own relationship with the Living Christ. That's because you can think of nothing that would so bless them, help them, and fill their lives with joy and purpose as knowing Jesus. If you love somebody, you want the best *you* have found in life to be part of their lives too.

Christians need to learn to be patient, discerning, and careful about how they go marching in to control or judge or manipulate other people's lives. Among other things, Jesus was very careful about such things. He put it out there and then waited for authentic response. Jesus never strong-armed anybody. That's how we know that the Second Coming, as usually presented today, is an atrocity and a satanic lie.

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Going to the Cross and then throwing people into eternal torment are not two sides of the same coin. They are totally contradictory. “I love you, so I will punish you forever in the worst agony I can devise because you wouldn’t receive my love.” Maybe humans love that way. God does not. When will the Christian world rise up and throw out this unforgivable smear on Christ’s love? Especially when we can track how humans brought it back in *after* Jesus lived and died and rose again to throw it out!

Did you receive the Spirit? The promise is that if we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit – if we invite Christ to lead and guide us; if we offer obedience; if we take down the barriers of pride, fear, mistrust, and anger that stand between us – we will receive the Holy Spirit. We will begin to experience the love and caring – and the very special power and perspective – of the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. And this experience will keep expanding and influencing more and more dimensions in our lives, unless we back away or shut down the channels between us. It is not just a story about “back then.” It is not just for biblical heroes or for special people destined to be “saved.” The promise is for everyone. The Spirit is yours if you will have it. We do not need special music, great sermons, or somebody designing powerful emotional settings – though if they help, we are grateful. All we really need are willing hearts.

So, if we have received the Spirit, then we get to hear Paul’s real question: *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?*

How quickly and simply that brings everything back into focus. The summer of my sixth-grade year, I had a startling encounter with the Spirit realm. It changed my life forever. Most of you have heard the story. My response, consistent with the background I grew up in, was to commit myself to disciplines of hard work and moral behavior as stringent as I could come up with. Nothing illogical about that. As Paul keeps telling us, the Law is fine in its purpose. But I was too young to learn from Paul, Luther, Augustine, or Jesus. So I got to experience for myself the fruits of focusing on the Law. Eleven years later, halfway through seminary, the Spirit came for me again. Sure enough, by this time I was so focused on behavior, self-righteousness, and the judgments which inevitably come with focusing on the Law, that the revelation of grace and mercy and love was so startling to me that it literally blasted my life apart. I had never understood the Damascus Road before then,

and have never had any trouble understanding it since. My disciplines and my efforts to be “good” and acceptable to God, all of them logical, appropriate, defensible, and justifiable as “good Christian behavior,” had become a barrier – thick, wide, and high – between me and Christ, and between me and other human beings. I was particularly annoyed toward all those who were not trying as hard as I was, which, from my perspective, was just about everybody. And the ones who *were* trying as hard as I was, I couldn’t stand either. But I hadn’t figured that out yet. (After all, if your hope for God’s love is based on being good, then others who look good are not necessarily friends. They are the competition; they are a threat; they might make you look bad. If somebody else is doing better and your hope of love is based on performance or accomplishment, then why would God love YOU?)

So, in response to that first special revelation – the caring of the Spirit to reach out and touch my life – I became a self-righteous prick. That is what concentration on the Law does to us. “Lily white, and clothed in light – and deaf, and dumb, and blind.” Blind especially to Christ’s grace and mercy ... and therefore to the love He can bring to life within us. There is a reason for the association between blindness and the Damascus Road.

Oh, I admit it: Satan still uses the standard temptations of carelessness toward greed, lust, sloth, pride, and the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins to cause mayhem in the church. But Satan’s greatest tool for destroying the church is the jealousy, by people who are trying to be good, of other people’s goodness. By the way, that is also one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It’s called “envy.” The church is mostly oblivious to this danger. That is because people think envy is about cars, houses, jobs, money, or good looks. How typical to focus on outer stuff that we can handle, and miss the real danger.

Back to Paul’s question: *Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* Doing good and being good have always been the world’s solution to a better life. It certainly seems like it ought to work. What could possibly be wrong with trying to be good and do good? Isn’t that what it’s all about?

Jesus died on the Cross so you could try harder to be good and do good? Is *that* what you hear and know? If so, as Paul said: Christ died for nothing. (Galatians 2:21) Strangely enough, our own experience supports the truth of the New Testament message. Focusing on doing

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good and being good has always taken us further and further away from the Spirit. Spirit is about relationship. Relationship is based on love. And while love can be the source of behavior, behavior is never the source of love. Many other things can be the source of behavior too, but behavior is never the source of anything. So if love is not the source, you can be sure that something else is. That is why the Gospel of God's love is so revealing. When the love of God becomes the source, it throws out all the other motives and sources, and this is always so disruptive and surprising that we call it "conversion," or "transformation." Or in Jesus' words: "*You must be born anew.*"

Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message? I dated Mariana back in our college days. In the summer and on vacation breaks, I still wanted to see her. She lived in Altadena; I lived in Long Beach. There were no freeways yet; it was two hours of stop-and-go traffic between Long Beach and Altadena. Money for gas was no joke for me back then either. Once in Altadena, her parents would interfere as much as possible. They liked to take as much advantage of some free labor as they could. I noticed, but it was worth it; it was part of the game – so be it. But did I travel two hours so I could mow lawns and paint houses? That is, was it for the Law, or for the Love? Was it the driving or the working or the expense that gave my life a light and wonder that it had not had before? (This was a different age, you might remember. We weren't "doing it." I wanted to marry her, but that seemed a long way off in a distant future; certainly it would have to wait at least until after I graduated from college. That seemed like forever at the time, kind of like waiting for Heaven in some far-off future realm. But instant gratification was not the only creed in those days.)

You know what? A lot of us get married for love and still go right back to the Law (at least for a while). We go back to behavior and whether we are pleased by everything our mate is *doing*. Paul is so annoyed! "*You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*" Having started out with love, are you going back to the Law – trading love on the inside for what pleases you on the outside? Oh, it isn't just an ancient letter – it is everywhere we turn in life.

And it's tougher than we are told or taught because the world around us has no inkling – no awareness at all – of the newness of the Gospel. When she says she loves you, do you believe it – I mean *really* believe it? Everything depends on believing it, or you cannot even begin

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to experience the incredible new possibilities. How easy it is to doubt it. In forty-five years of marriage counseling, I have never talked with a couple having problems where one or both of them had not concluded that their partner had stopped loving them. “If he truly loved me, he would do this, and he wouldn’t do that.” “If she really loved me, she wouldn’t do that, and she would do this.” Is that not back to the Law? Do we have to call it “The Ten Commandments” before you recognize it? Even if we know better on one level – even if we realize it’s not completely true – that is how we are feeling: That we are not loved. He does not love me, because he is not keeping my commandments. She does not love me, because she is not keeping my commandments. Right! And there are more than ten of them, too.

How easy it is to doubt her love, especially when it makes no sense to begin with. Why would she love me? Even I don’t, most of the time, so why would she? So when we are apart, which is a good part of any normal day, it’s hard to remember. Every kind of doubt and question comes into play, if we allow it. Just so with God.

Everything in a relationship depends on believing that you are cared about. If it is an important relationship, it depends upon believing that you are loved. That is the critical issue in a marriage, and it is most certainly the critical issue between us and God. Do I really trust that you love me? “Trust” is the real meaning of “faith.” That is why we started calling it the “Christian Faith.” It used to mean that *we trusted God* – by the revelation in Christ Jesus – *to love us*.

Abraham believed – he trusted God’s personal promise to him – and it was counted to him as righteousness. That is, it established the relationship between Abraham and God. This was not a relationship for later, after he got perfect. It was enacted and established to form the relationship from its beginning. Nobody else we know of had ever trusted God on such a level before Abraham. They thought God (the gods) only wanted service – that is, sacrifice. Humans only existed to bring food to the gods. But Abraham had stumbled into the presence of a God who wanted to make covenant – promises – and who wanted to bring benefit to Abraham and, through Abraham, to all people. Unheard of! Impossible! Who could possibly imagine such a thing back then? But Abraham ended up believing it. It took him from Ur to Haran to Canaan, and it took him into a whole new possibility for the meaning and purpose of life. And nothing was ever the same again. If you have a personal relationship with God, God began it with love for you too.

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Some of you are appalled when you study Genesis. What a questionable, imperfect character Abraham displays. You were expecting some great spiritual giant, full of wisdom and flawless character and impeccable behavior. After all, Abraham is called the “Father of Faith.” How interesting! Scratch the surface and we still don’t get it, do we? We want Abraham to be perfect – right back to the Law. But God deals with Abraham because of who God is, and because Abraham is willing to play. It has nothing to do with Abraham being perfect. Perhaps if God had perfect people to choose from, he might choose them. Meanwhile, God has to make do with folk like me and you.

Being a stupid Galatian does not mean your IQ is low. It means you have gone back to the world’s way of thinking, and back to trusting your own behavior instead of trusting God’s love. You expect too much of yourself, and too little of God. *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* Did you receive the Spirit because you went to college or earned a Ph.D.? Did you receive the Spirit because you got a promotion, bought a new car, or married the prettiest girl in town? Did you ever get closer to God because of your moral straightness, or because you thought you were doing things better than your neighbor? Have you ever, in any way, on any basis, received the Spirit because you deserved it, earned it, figured it out, or claimed it as your right?

Oh, it’s obvious, isn’t it, once Paul’s question reminds us. We get closer to God by trusting God’s love – by believing the Gospel. And of course, Paul knows that the Gospel would never even have occurred to us if Jesus had not come here – if He had not lived and died and risen to reveal it.

Happily, you might concede that *because* you receive the Spirit, you might also discover a truer identity, and in that process come to a clearer understanding of your vocatio. It is possible that then you might go to college, or go back to college with a different purpose in mind. It is not unlikely that in responding to the guidance of the Spirit, you might become more and more effective in accomplishing what you are here to accomplish – which might get you killed, or it might instead get you promoted; it might get you raises; it might get you into positions of more and more responsibility; you might find yourself with more resources with which to serve your Lord and His Kingdom, even here on earth. But that is still a true inversion of the process our world usually claims and

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teaches. And of course, at any juncture along the way, the Lord might require you to risk it all – or even lose it all – if that would serve a higher purpose.

Why would we care about that? Are we after the world's rewards, or the rewards of the Kingdom? *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* The problem with the church is that in many places, the people of the church do not truly live with Jesus, or for Jesus. Christianity is an afterthought, instead of the main show. But who are Jesus' greatest enemies? Satan is a problem. Evil people like Pilate and Herod are on the fringes, of course. People with earthly power, like Caesar and his officials, can become important from time to time in the drama of Jesus' church. But who are the *real* enemies? The Pharisees: the most "religious" people in the story – the people focused on being good and doing good deeds to prove their own righteousness. They do not mean to be enemies of God, but they cannot receive a relationship of love between themselves and God because they are too busy trying to earn and deserve it. They end up hating Jesus. He makes all their hard work seem foolish and unnecessary. They have so much time and effort invested, and He makes it clear that it will never bring them to the acceptance or peace they long for.

So they do not care for Jesus. They do not really care about you either, though they might sometimes do nice things for you if it matches their idea of being good. But they do not care if you find your soul, your vocatio, or your own relationship with God in Christ Jesus. They only want to build up the organization or the program, or get famous for all the good they are doing. But never do they care about *you* – your spiritual destiny or your true identity – even as they do not care about their own spiritual destiny or their own true identity or vocatio. It is sad. They are doing the best they can, from the best that they know. That is the anatomy of Pharisaism. Gospel simply has not yet registered on their souls. A few hypocrites are inevitable, but most Pharisees are incredibly sincere. After all, they wouldn't kill Jesus if they didn't care so much for the Law.