

The Spirit gives life!

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John 6⁶⁰⁻⁶⁵ / 1 Tim 4 / Acts 2^{1-13, 36-47}

The Spirit gives life! The flesh counts for nothing! Two statements which sum up not just the importance of the Spirit and the weakness of the flesh but the heart of a truly Christian worldview. If we analyse what churches do and if we're honest we have to admit that the world can replicate almost everything we do and improve on it. Christians might have started the great hospital and health movement but the world now builds the biggest hospitals and spends the most money on health care. The Church might have started the first welfare schemes but the world now runs huge welfare programmes in both developed and developing countries. The church started the parish based system of education in Britain but the state in most countries now ensures access to education for most people. The Church might have developed a wonderful tradition of worship music but the world's musicians are of greater number, its music of greater variety and its industry immensely bigger than the music of the Church. Should we be concerned about these things? Not in the least. It is the Spirit which gives life. The flesh counts for nothing.

But what is meant by this? The 'flesh' in the New Testament stands for the power of independent human endeavour. The 'Spirit' stands for all that God accomplishes by His power through His Spirit. So, for example, often size and wealth are aspects of fleshly power. The Spirit, however, is not at all dependent on these things. The single penny put into an offering by a poor widow, says Jesus, was of more worth to God than all the grand offerings of the wealthy which for them was no sacrifice. It was the widow who was truly moved by the Spirit; it was she who truly denied the flesh.

Again it is salt that keeps the meat preserved and tasty and, says Jesus, we are to be salt in the world.

And again, it was the faithful centurion, the one who trusted implicitly in Jesus though he had not been trained in the faith of the Jews, who was moved by the Spirit. And Jesus exclaimed that in all Israel He had not come across such faith. In all of His own people no one had demonstrated such an affinity with the Spirit as this pagan and so despite his background, despite the fact that he was technically amongst the enemies of Israel, that he was charged with maintaining a defeated Israel and that he had the right to kill Jews if he felt they were endangering that situation, **he was awake to the Spirit**. 'In all Israel,' says Jesus, 'I have not found faith such as this!' It's the Spirit that makes the difference. Don't look at race, at upbringing, even at culture. These things are of the flesh and the flesh counts for nothing. What counts is the Spirit.

But the world is fixated on the flesh. O how we worship the flesh today. Take work for example. How we honour those who are 'self-made,' who've worked for their lot in life; who've carved out a niche for themselves. This is a marvellous rendition of the idea by a sculptor called Bobby Carlyle. We raise

up these men and women almost to god-like status despite the fractured relationships found so often in the wake of their speeding boat through life and despite the little people who've been buried in their bulldozer like path – we love those who give themselves to work. They have, to a great or lesser degree become our heroes. But Jesus says to that great worker Martha – the one who was working furiously to feed all those who'd turned up with Jesus at her house that day – 'your work is fine, but your sister about whom you are complaining because she's not working but is sitting here listening to me – **she's chosen the better thing**; she's listening to the Spirit; she's been moved by the Spirit.' And don't imagine this is an encouragement to the lazy because it's not. **It's just that the flesh can never achieve what the Spirit does.** The flesh works but the Spirit learns. The flesh works but the Spirit loves. The flesh works but the Spirit lives!!! Jesus said 'I have come that they might have **life** and have it in abundance.' And where does that life come from? John 6 ... ⁶³**The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.**'

Now let's just take breather here and make one or two provisos. What does Jesus mean when He says 'The flesh counts for nothing?' Does He mean we shouldn't care for our flesh, that we should treat it with contempt, that we should dismiss it? Not at all! After all, as Paul says, our bodies are the **temple** of the Holy Spirit – they are what the Spirit works in and through. And Jesus cared for bodies – He healed them and He took joy in them and He rescued them. So when Jesus says 'The flesh counts for nothing' He does not mean we should abuse our flesh or take it for granted. What He means is that despite the fact that we are flesh and that God cares for our flesh and so should we – the higher principle of life lies with the Holy Spirit and that in order to discover our true lives and our true purpose we need that Spirit.

We can get so caught up in 'body stuff,' how we look, how we perform, how we rate with others and even though caring for our body is a good thing there is so much more to life than this. Relationships don't revolve around how we look. They revolve around how we love. Performance is much more than being fit and looking good. It's about listening, learning, waiting, doing the right thing at the right time. As the old saying goes 'A stitch in time... saves 9!' And beauty is so much more than what looks attractive or how sexy we look. Beauty is not skin deep. Beauty, real beauty goes to the heart, it's about gentleness, caring, sensitivity, joy. And these things are fruits of the **Spirit!!!**

This is why when the Spirit comes at Pentecost we consider it to be the birth of the Church. Was the Church meeting before this? Well yes, the believers were meeting before this and had known each other for years before this. Were they worshipping God before this? Of course! Were they hearing from and learning from the Word of God before this? Yes. And had they been involved in miracles before this? Yes! Some had even been healed by Jesus and others had already performed miracles in His name. But the Church's life is more than the sum of its activities just as we are. Rather it is the activity of God **through the Church** which makes it the Church. The coming of the Spirit changes the church's activity because it brings both the leading and the heart of God to what the Church does and it is this which makes the Church's activities so potent.

How does the Spirit do this? If we examine Timothy 4 we see two ways the Spirit brings God into the Church. The first is that the Spirit provides a heavenly context for Timothy's work. At the beginning of the chapter Paul says this...

¹The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. (1 Tim 4)

In other words Timothy's work isn't just a product of guesswork. The Spirit has spoken to Timothy and to the Ephesian church letting it know what to expect and giving it some idea of where to put their energies. And when the Spirit comes into us we are also given a God's eye view of our life. (Story of speeding to the forest)

Secondly in this chapter we find the Spirit then providing the ability to work in that context by giving Timothy a gift. Again Paul says...

¹⁴Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. (1 Tim 4)

Timothy was called to a specific work by the Spirit **and** he was equipped for it by the Spirit. We are not left to our own devices. The Spirit will gift us with what we need to deal with the situations we are faced with. (Andrew's testimony.)

⁶³The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. We so easily mistake life for activity; life for pleasure; life for abundance; life for the fulfilment of our desires. But life is so much more than these things. Life is what the Spirit brings when God is allowed into our life, to fill it and to redeem it and to guide it. Life comes as we give God permission to come by the Spirit into us. Are we prepared to allow that this morning? Can we say with that ancient Christian tradition 'Come Holy Spirit!'