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Case Study

How will we know when the Holy Spirit comes?

The question of discernment

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When the Apostle Paul stood in front of the Areopagus, he began by connecting with the spirituality of the ancient Athenians, affirming their search for God and the spiritual awareness of their poets. Paul attempted to use the Athenians' spiritual language to tell about the Creator God and about Jesus and his resurrection. At the same time he discerned a spirit of idolatry which prevented repentance and practical obedience to the Holy Spirit of God (Acts 17:16-34).

Trying to bridge the spiritualities of the Jewish and Greek worlds in this way, Paul faced misunderstanding and had limited immediate success in terms of new Christians—but from our standpoint two thousand years later, we can see this is a Christian city and we know how the use of Greek thought and language has contributed to the formation of Christian theology, partic-

ularly to our understanding of God the Holy Spirit. So I consider it doubly appropriate that here at our conference in Athens we pray, 'Come, Holy Spirit!'

My research into the Holy Spirit and mission¹ arises from my personal experience of different spiritual contexts: in Britain, where I grew up; in South Korea, my husband's home country; in the United States where we studied; and in India, where we taught for four years in a seminary. I found that, in each country—and even in different Christian denominations—the spiritual milieu and the cultural meaning of the word 'spirit' is different, and this gives a different nuance to the biblical testimony to the Holy Spirit. I also came to believe that, in many cases, we may better communicate the good

¹ Kirsteen Kim, *Mission in the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Indian Christian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003); *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY / London: SPCK, 2007).

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news of Jesus Christ by beginning with the language of the Spirit.

The Father sends the Spirit into the world and, as followers of Christ, we are privileged to participate in that mission (Rom. 8:14-17). In this case, the first act of mission is discernment.² To join with the Spirit in mission, we need to ask how the Spirit comes and how we recognise the Spirit.

In the Bible there are three main events in which the Spirit comes. At Pentecost the Spirit gives birth to the church (Acts 2:41-42) and Christian mission (1:8). But this is possible only because of a prior event: Jesus Christ our Saviour was conceived in the Spirit (Lu. 1:35) and the Spirit of God shone and shines forth from him³ (2 Cor. 4:6;) so that Christians refer to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus or the Spirit of Christ (Jn. 7:39).⁴ Nevertheless, the Spirit was also known in a much earlier event, long before even the coming of Jesus Christ, as the agent of creation and author of life (Gen. 1:2; 2:7; cf. 6:17), who continues to be creatively present and active everywhere in the world (Ps. 104:30; Job 33:4).

These three ways in which the Spirit came—and comes—are inter-related because the new community begun at Pentecost is significant for the future

of the whole creation (Rom. 8:19-23). Due to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the church is given the Spirit as a foretaste of the liberation and new life which God desires for all (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1.13-14; Rom. 8.23). However, the Spirit of God is not the possession of any community but as wind moves in the whole creation (Jn. 3:8; Ps. 139:7) and as living water is freely given (Jn. 7:37-38).⁵

People look for the Spirit in different places—above, below, outside, within, beyond, among—and have different criteria for spiritual discernment according to their faith or conviction. For the Christian, by definition, discerning the Spirit will relate to Jesus Christ. However, no group can prove its spiritual vision before the end so, in the meantime, if we are to live together in our common home—the earth, we need to share our resources for discernment. The Indian theologian of dialogue, Stanley Samartha, once wrote that the claim that the Spirit is with us is not ours to make; it is for our neighbours to recognise⁶ (cf. 1 Cor. 14:20-25).

Discernment is a matter for ecumenical debate as well as individual conscience. It requires wide horizons—in view of the breadth of the Spirit's mission, openness—because of the unpredictability of the Spirit's

² James D.G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit: Collected Essays* Vol. 2: Pneumatology (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 72.

³ Stephen B. Bevans, 'God Inside Out: Toward a Missionary Theology of the Holy Spirit', *IBMR* 1998: 22/3 (July), 102-105; 'Jesus, Face of the Spirit: Reply to Dale Bruner', *IBMR* 22/3 (July), 108-109.

⁴ Samuel Rayan, *Come, Holy Spirit* (Delhi: Media House, 1998; originally published 1978), 37.

⁵ I am indebted to the work of Vandana for her stimulating reflections on water as a symbol of the Spirit in John's Gospel: Sister Vandana, *Waters of Fire* 3rd edn (Bangalore: ATC; New York: Amity House, 1988; first published, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1981).

⁶ S.J. Samartha, 'Milk and Honey—Without the Lord?', (*Indian*) *National Council of Churches Review* 101/12 (Dec 1981), 670.

movements, and humility—since the Spirit is the Spirit of Almighty God. Many questions of discernment are not around criteria but about power: about who has the authority to discern the Spirit for others. We are not obliged to accept someone else's identification of what is good or spiritual, however strong their tradition, however weighty their theology, or however much power they wield, if their exercise of that authority is incompatible with the Spirit of Christ (Mk. 3:29; Mt. 12:31-32).

I find four biblical criteria for discernment, though none alone is proof of the Spirit's presence. The first is ecclesial: the confession of Jesus as Lord, which is made possible by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Jn. 4:2). We hope and expect to find the Spirit in the Christian community, where Jesus Christ is proclaimed and worshipped. However, it is the Spirit that defines the church not the other way round. Calling 'Lord, Lord' is not necessarily a guarantee of a spirit of obedience (Mt. 7:21-22).

The second criterion is ethical: the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and so on (Gal. 5:22). The Spirit changes our lives, producing Christ-likeness. But good works alone are not a sign of the life of the Spirit—they may be the result of unregenerate legalism (Rom. 7:6)—the whole character is important.⁷

⁷ These first two criteria were recognised in the reports of the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, 'Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation' (see Michael Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit*. Official Report of the Seventh Assembly of the WCC, Canberra, 1991 (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 256.

The third criterion is charismatic: the practice of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11).⁸ Where there is empowerment to prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, compassion (Rom. 12:6-8), we have good reason to believe God is at work (by the Spirit). However, exercise of a spiritual gift is not a sign of the Spirit's presence if it lacks love (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

The final criterion is liberational: being on the side of the poor.⁹ The effect of the Spirit's anointing on Jesus Christ was that he announced good news to the poor (Lu. 4:18), and this must be a touchstone for all spiritual claims.

When discerning the Spirit in any activity, we need to ask whose interests are being served; who is benefiting from this? But the criterion of liberation also needs to be qualified. The liberation struggle must be waged in a way that is loving to our enemies (Mt. 5:43-48), and does not aim to crush them, but to live in peace with them¹⁰ (Rom. 12:18).

'Discernment of spirits' is listed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10). The use of the plural 'spirits' here raises a question: Are we seeking to

⁸ This suggestion from the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has been made by Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*. JPT Supplement Series 20 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁹ This is suggested by the work of liberation theologian Samuel Rayan, *Come, Holy Spirit*, 132.

¹⁰ Donal Dorr, *Mission in Today's World* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000), 128.

discern one Spirit or to distinguish between many different spirits? In large measure my research suggests that this depends on world view or cosmology. Whether we talk about spirit (singular) or spirits (plural) may also indicate the difference between a philosophical approach and popular religion. Furthermore, the language of 'spirits' may be used with widely differing reference. However, it may be useful to think that, in the course of mission, we encounter many diverse spirits and powers in the world, whether we regard these as supernatural entities or natural forces, or simply use this language as a metaphor for socio-economic powers.

We need the Holy Spirit to discern these spirits.¹¹ We need the Spirit of wisdom to distinguish good from evil, and to know with whom to work and what to fight against. We can have confidence that, however powerful and threatening they may be, all 'thrones', 'dominions', 'rulers', and 'powers' are only creatures of God and, at the end, will be reconciled in Christ (Col. 1:15-20). On the other hand, it may be that those who are not against us are for us (Mk. 9:40). At the very least, we may need to give them the benefit of the doubt, and perhaps even cooperate with them for specific purposes. In showing hospitality to strangers, we may be entertaining angels without

knowing it (Heb. 1:14; 13:2). There are good as well as bad forces at work. A mission theology of the Holy Spirit should allow us to appreciate creativity and love wherever it is found and affirm whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable (Philp. 4:8).

The focus for the conference in Athens was on the Spirit's role as healer and reconciler. Both these ministries encourage a comprehensive understanding of the Holy Spirit. For many 'spiritual' has to do with meditation, contemplation, and other religious practices and techniques. For others, the Spirit primarily drives action for social transformation and development. In Christian healing, we learn to hold both these aspects of the Spirit's work—presence and activity—together. Moreover, in reconciliation work, we balance truth-telling with listening, justice with peace because the Spirit is the Spirit of truth (Jn. 16:12-13) and also the Spirit of love (Rom 5:5). In practice, healing and reconciliation each link the creative and redemptive roles of the Spirit together¹² as we see God at work by the Spirit to bring well-being and joy in our hearts, in the church, and in the world (Acts 14:17).

So, together in the Spirit and discerning the spirits by the criterion of Jesus Christ, we look for the coming of the Spirit that we may catch onto—and be caught by—the Spirit's movement in the world, which is God's mission.

11 Justin S. Ukpong 'Pluralism and the Problem of the Discernment of Spirits' in Emilio Castro (comp.), *To the Wind of God's Spirit: Reflections on the Canberra Theme* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 81.

12 John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 25-41.