

Church of the Crossroads  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 28, 2006  
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## THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26  
John 17:6-19

For many years now, there has been a consensus among New Testament teachers that the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same author. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says to his disciples, “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father [Mother] promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” These words provide a bridge between the gospel and the Book of Acts, which has often been referred to as “the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” The gift of the Spirit, promised by Jesus at the close of the Gospel, is fully received by the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate a week from today. Following Pentecost, according to the Book of Acts, it is the Spirit who guides the formation of the Jerusalem Church and its leaders. Then, it is the Spirit who will guide the Apostle Paul on his missionary journeys.

For now, though, the disciples must await the gift. Jesus has ascended into heaven at a place outside the city; the disciples return to the city and retire to the room upstairs where they were staying to be together as they wait. There, the disciples are joined by others. We read: “All [the disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” The followers, we are told, numbered one hundred and twenty persons.

A problem soon presents itself. What are they to do about the vacancy in the ranks of the twelve disciples? Who is to take the place of the departed Judas? The one selected needed to be a witness to the resurrection. Let us review again the process that took place:

So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these

two [men] you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place. And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

- Acts 1:23-26

The story presumes that the Holy Spirit was at work here, in this act of discernment. Yet, I wonder. Why is it that only the men seem to be in the running? Why must it be a man that replaces Judas? After all, as it says, a number of women, including the mother of Jesus, were also present. Were *they* in on the praying and the discernment?

From all that we know, Jesus in the three years that he carried out his ministry changed his mind about this matter. One of the things that got him into trouble was the way in which he began to bring women, and also Gentiles into the circle of his followers. The inclusive nature of his ministry was expressed most profoundly in the Gospel of John, the last of the Gospels to be written. In John's Gospel, as we have discovered, an egalitarian spirit moved through the community of Jesus' followers. In the gospel story as presented by John, the male disciples often take a back seat to the women. Yet, even in the three synoptic gospels, women are increasingly important participants in the ministry of Jesus. One example. In the Gospel of Mark, you will remember the woman who anointed Jesus with a costly ointment of nard, just before the time of his death. Of her, it was written that that "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." In all of the four gospels, no greater honor is conferred on any one of Jesus' followers, man or woman.

So why at the beginning of the Book of Acts do we encounter such gender bias? Why must apostleship be reserved for only those who are male?

I have been reading a wonderful book written by Bart Ehrman, the same New Testament scholar who wrote the book we are using in our Adult Education classes. This book is called *Misquoting Jesus*.

The idea behind Ehrman's book is that it did not take long before the original spirit of the ministry of Jesus began to be replaced by the old patterns of the world. As the church was organized, the early Christians tended to forget the egalitarian spirit that had begun to permeate the ministry

of Jesus. This forgetfulness seemed to set in especially following the ministry of the Apostle Paul, who once wrote that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

We need to understand that the Book of Acts was written at least twenty years or so *after* Paul composed his letters. In those twenty years, the Christian community began to insist on the old hierarchical patterns that Jesus had begun to break down.

Bart Ehrman argues, successfully I believe, that the old patterns began to be written into the scriptures of the Newer Testament *themselves* as additions or changes by scribes who allowed their own biases to enter their work of copying the ancient manuscripts. He points to a number of examples, but one is especially interesting in our question as to whether or not apostleship ought to be reserved for men only, given the original spirit of the ministry of Jesus. It occurs in the 7th verse of Romans 16 in which Paul sends special greetings to members of the church in Rome. In the New Revised Standard Version, the verse reads: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives/compatriots who were in prison with me, they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” Andronicus and Junia, both males, are identified as apostles. But, in a number of copies of the ancient manuscript of the Letter of Romans, Junia reads *Julia*. Bart Ehrman argues that it is the more ancient of the manuscripts that reads “Andronicus and Julia, . . . prominent among the apostles.” If this is true, then Julia was recognized as an apostle, and *she* was a *woman*! Some scribe, unwilling to entertain the notion that women could be apostles, changed her name in the text. Julia became Junia.

Now, Acts assumes that the choice of Matthias was made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One wonders. The ministry of the Spirit, after all, is a ministry that seeks to break out of the old ways and patterns of the world rather than simply confirm them. One must always be suspicious of anyone who says that the Spirit led him or her to understand this or that, or do this or that, especially if the “this” or the “that” reflects more of the ways of the world than the ways of the Gospel as taught and lived by Jesus.

Recall what Jesus says in his farewell prayer given on behalf of his disciples:

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they may be sanctified in truth.

- John 17:14-19

We need to remember that the “world” in John’s Gospel is not the same as “planet earth.” The “world” in John’s Gospel is identified with the principalities and powers that oppose Jesus and the spirit of his ministry. In John’s Gospel, the Spirit of God is the agent that will keep the disciples true to the teachings and way of Jesus after he is gone. The Spirit will not allow the disciples of Jesus to become part of the world again, to fall back to the ways of the world.

As the early church moved towards establishment, the old patterns of the world were re-enforced. The church adopted a male hierarchy. The Gospels written by women were not considered for the canon of the New Testament. Hatred against the Jews became written into the texts of a number of New Testament Books as they were copied from one scribe to another.

The inclusionary, egalitarian spirit of the ministry of Jesus was increasingly lost. One can see evidences of that loss in our reading today from the Book of Acts. It has to be a male who replaces Judas.

We human beings, even when we want to follow Jesus, seemed to be embedded in the ways of the world. One would hope that we could get back in touch with the original spirit of the Jesus movement. It may be that as the Christian church increasingly becomes disestablished in our world, we may have a greater possibility to get back in touch with the spirit of that movement begun in Jesus. Getting back in touch with the spirit of the ministry of Jesus may indeed be the ministry the Holy Spirit seeks to work through us.

But how can we recognize the ministry of the Holy Spirit? How can we be confident that we are not fooling ourselves into thinking that it is the

Spirit that is leading us, when in actuality it is just some old pattern or habit, some old ideology, some old cultural or political value, that has captivated us? Well, if it is the Spirit leading us, we will surely feel some discomfort. We may even be a little fearful. We will sense that something beyond us is beckoning us to a new insight, to a new way of doing things, to new forms of faithfulness. All these will be evidences that the Holy Spirit is working her ministry among us.

Let us wait upon that Spirit. Let us trust that Spirit. Let us allow God's Holy Spirit to open us to new possibilities and forms of faithfulness. Then we shall become a movement once again. Then we shall be faithful followers of the One who sought to include everyone in the circle of his ministry. Then we shall be the people, the church God has created us to be. So be it. Amen.