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COME HOLY SPIRIT - HEAL AND RECONCILE

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HOW DO 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, particularly to our understanding of God the Holy Spirit. So I consider it doubly appropriate that here in Athens we pray, “Ελθέ, Πνεύμα Αγιο”, “Come, Holy Spirit!”

My research into the Holy Spirit and mission (Kim 2003) 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 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 (Dunn 1998: 72). 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 only possible because Jesus Christ our Saviour is conceived in the Spirit (Luke 1:35) and the Spirit of God shines forth from him (2Cor 4:6; see Bevans 1998) so that Christians refer to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus or the Spirit of

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Christ (John 7:39; see Rayan 1998: 37). Nevertheless, the Spirit was also known before 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 (John 3:8; Ps 139:7) and as living water is freely given (John 7:37-38)¹.

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 their 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. Stanley Samartha once wrote that the claim that the Spirit is with us is not ours to make; it is for our neighbours to recognise (1981: 670; cf. 1Cor 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 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 (Mark 3:29; Matt 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 (1Cor 12:3; 1John 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 (Matt 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. 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.² The third criterion is charismatic: the practice of the gifts of the Spirit (1Cor 12:4-11).³ 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 (1Cor 13:1-3). The final criterion is liberational: being on the side of the poor.⁴ The effect of the Spirit's anointing on Jesus Christ was that he announced good news to the poor (Luke 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?

"Discernment of spirits" is listed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12:10). The use of the plural "spirits" here raises a question: Are we seeking to 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 (Kim 2004). However, it may be useful to think that, in the course of

¹ I am indebted to the work of Vandana (1989) for her stimulating reflections on water as a symbol of the Spirit in John's Gospel.

² The first two criteria were recognised in the reports of the Canberra Assembly in 1991 (see Kinnaman: 256).

³ This suggestion from the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has been made by Amos Yong (2000).

⁴ This is suggested by the work of liberation theologian Samuel Rayan (1998: 132).

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 (Ukpong 1990: 81). 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 (Mark 9:40). At the very least, we may need 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 (Phil 4:8).

In this conference we are focussing 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 (John 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 together (cf. Taylor 1972: 25-41) 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. Come, Holy Spirit!

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