

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Pentecost

Primary Text: Acts chapter 2

Picture a road that you are traveling down. On both sides of this road are precarious ditches that you want to avoid...but you're perfectly safe as long as you stay on the road. In the realm of faith, theology, spirituality this is a helpful picture. If we go too far to one side or the other we can get ourselves into trouble. Perhaps some of the best examples of this is how we view and interact with, and relate to, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and the Church.

Let's look at each of these, their respective "ditches", and the healthy middle. (While we'll be looking at these individually, please keep in mind that they interact with one another in a dynamic way...they are not in isolation from one another.)

Let's start with the Church, the community of Christ-followers. One extreme, or ditch, is to think, "I don't need them." The result of this type of thinking is a life of trying to live the Christian life on your own...which will be short-lived. It is just too hard to do by yourself. Plus, it's hard to truly, rightly, connect with Christ outside of relationship with others. So there is a natural inaccuracy in this view. The opposite extreme is being plugged into the Church, but not ever cultivating a relationship, personally, with Jesus. It is easy to be converted to the community without actually being converted to Christ. Additionally, another danger in this extreme is letting others do our thinking for us...blindly following the crowd (or even church leaders) and mistaking that for "faith". So what does the healthy middle look like? Perhaps a good word to describe a healthy relationship with the Church (and I'm speaking of a relationship with fellow believers more so than an organization/institution) is "interdependent" (as opposed to dependent or independent). We were created to be in connection with other people. Our utmost calling is to LOVE...which can't be done outside of relationship. It is not weakness to say that we need others; it is arrogance to say we don't need others.

Consider some of the ways Scripture describes our relationship with one another:

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."—Ephesians 5:21

"May they [believers] be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me..."—John 17:23 (part of Jesus' prayer)

"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other..."—1 Thessalonians 3:12

"...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."—Ephesians 4:1-3

This is just a small sampling of passages...but you get the idea that the Christian life simply can't be done on our own, yet at the same time, a need for a personal connection with Christ is needed too, not just a communal one.

Now let's turn our attention to the Bible. What dangers/ditches come with Scripture? On one side is the danger of completely ignoring it, devaluing it, not understanding or appreciating the treasured resource that it is. The opposite danger/ditch is to make an idol out of it (and that would include making an idol out of our interpretation of it). This would include the mistaken notion of thinking that knowing it is the same as living/obeying it. The healthy middle ground is knowing and understanding the Scriptures, allowing the story of Scripture to be our story, forming/shaping our identity and our understanding of the world/life, over and above the competing stories which try to form us. And the reality is we need the help of the Spirit and the Church to do that well.

And now for the Holy Spirit. What possible dangers could there be in our understanding and interaction with the Spirit? On one side/ditch is a two-fold issue: either completely ignoring the Holy Spirit's voice and action in our lives, or trying to control, tame, or domesticate the Holy Spirit's role in our lives...which essentially leads to ignoring Him. On the other end/ditch is misinterpreting everything (every feeling, sense, thought, whim, desire, etc.) as the Holy Spirit with zero discernment. So where does healthy discernment come from? That requires a proper balance of Scripture, Community, and the cultivated sensitivity of perceiving His voice in our lives.

So we see that these 3 primary gifts (the indwelling Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ, and the Scriptures) interplay and intertwine in a forming and informing way in the life of the believer and in the life of the believing community. The image of the triquetra (often used as a symbol of the Trinity) can also be helpful for us as we think about these 3 gifts.



Now let's think about Pentecost. Pentecost was a festival commanded and outlined in the Old Testament Law. It recognized/remembered/commemorated the giving of the Law as well as celebrated the first fruits of the harvest. It was observed 50 days after Passover. The original Passover was the night when the Israelites were rescued from Egypt (see Exodus 12). It marked a new life for the Israelites, out of bondage and slavery and heading toward the Promised Land. So significant of an event that it became the first month of the Jewish calendar, and the Passover was celebrated/observed on the 10th day of the month...to this day. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai, and received the Law 50 days after that original Passover.

Fast forward several centuries to Acts chapter 2. Jesus had been crucified on Passover (not a coincidence). Post resurrection He hung around for 40 days, telling His followers to wait in Jerusalem until that had received the Holy Spirit. A little over a week after Jesus ascended was the day of Pentecost.

Notice what is going on here: *"They all joined together constantly in prayer..."* (Acts 1:14). So the believers were together praying, and obeying the Law (Scripture) by observing Pentecost,

when suddenly the Holy Spirit shows up, baptizing them and indwelling them. The church is born and the Kingdom of God takes a mighty step forward. All 3 gifts are at play: the Presence of Jesus by His Spirit, among His people who were connected through a common relationship with Jesus finding their place in the Scriptural story, which turned a new chapter on that day. But make no mistake, those 3 gifts are still in effect today, and we need to know how to engage and interact with them. It should be noticed that the fact that the Spirit came on Pentecost, coinciding with the remembrance of giving the Law, is meant to be understood as the Spirit now replacing/superseding the Law. What we need to be careful of, however, is that we can easily treat the Bible similarly to the way religious leaders in Jesus' day treated the Law. And, quite frankly, that is a way of misusing the Bible, and an attempt to domesticate the Holy Spirit. The Bible points us to Jesus (and really the entire Trinity), but we only rightly understand Scripture with the Spirit's help. But let's never forget, final authority belongs to God, not to the Bible. Yet the Bible is nevertheless incredibly important in learning to live WITH GOD.

To be sure, interacting with the Spirit, the Body, and Scripture is an acquired skill, and frankly, and acquired taste. (Think of something that you enjoy today that took you a while to get to the point of enjoying.) The Christian life (or life in the Kingdom) is a life WITH GOD...a life of actively interacting with His Spirit, His People, and His Story...a story that is still being written as His people participate and cooperate with Him.

But why is the Christian life so difficult/challenging? It sounds rather straight forward, doesn't it? Well, the fact is that we have acquired tastes for something else and have been formed by different stories. Change (the Biblical word is "repentance") is hard. It requires trust, I would go as far as to say "surrender". For modern day Americans, we have a story that stresses independence, control, and autonomy...and have very much acquired a taste for them. The tendency, then, is to take the 3 wonderful gifts from God and distort them, twist them, domesticate them, or ignore and neglect them.

So how do we acquire the taste and skill of living the WITH GOD life? The short answer is by consistent/constant contact and exposure and practice...lots of practice. (Don't let the word "practice" throw you. Yes, practice implies effort. But effort does not mean a works-based theology. Again, we've been given Gifts (i.e. grace, not works), but that doesn't mean that effort and labor isn't required to embrace these Gifts and live into this Life.)

- Q. In your experience, which of the 3 Gifts mentioned (Spirit, Church, Scripture) have you seen be distorted, abused, neglected, domesticated, etc.? How so?**
- Q. Describe your personal history with the 3 Gifts, and perhaps your current interaction with them. (Or to ask it differently, how do you interact with the Spirit, the Body, and Scripture? How have you experienced the interplay of the 3?)**
- Q. Currently in your life, which of the 3 Gifts do you most enjoy and are comfortable with? Which are you less comfortable with, or perhaps fearful of?**

- Q. Using the image of a road with ditches on either side, and considering one ditch as an over-reliance upon feeling/emotion and experience, and the other ditch as an over-reliance upon reason/logic and “doctrine”, which side of the road do you tend to lean toward? How has that been a help to you? How has that been a hindrance to you? (There is a strong likelihood that you don’t recognize the hindrance and may need to have others speak into that.)**
- Q. Describe something you had to acquire a taste for. Describe your experience of acquiring a taste for the things of God and His Kingdom?**
- Q. We are told in Scripture to not grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), not to quench the Spirit (I Thessalonians 5:19), but rather to keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). If you’re willing, share some ways you tend to grieve/quench the Spirit (either in the past, or presently) and also how you go about keeping in step with the Spirit. What does that look like for you?**
- Q. In Scripture we are told that the Spirit (specifically, the Spirit indwelling us) is a deposit, a first fruit, a foretaste of what is to come (see Romans 8:22-23, II Corinthians 1:21-22, Ephesians 1:13-14). How does this give you hope and encouragement? As you allow your imagination to run a bit, what might this mean regarding the future? At the same time, what does it mean for the present?**
- Q. What is God, through His Spirit and His people, wanting to accomplish in the world? How are you/we cooperating/participating with Him in that?**