

Feckless Churches

Paul, like Jesus, believed that the end of the world and the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth was imminent. Jesus said very explicitly and emphatically that this dramatic event would take place before his generation of followers had died. Paul, faced with the reality that Jesus was off on his timing, did the best he could to reassure his converts that everything was still on track, and the apocalypse (revelation) was just around the corner.

In fact, Paul was so sure that it would happen soon that he didn't see any need to spend a lot of time on church organization and hierarchy issues. The congregations he established in various communities had no established structure, and there was no need for special buildings. That would have been a waste of time, in Paul's thinking. Instead, the group of local believers met (usually in someone's house) for education, edification, fellowship, encouragement, support, and worship, with no particular person(s) taking charge of the proceedings. Instead, the Holy Spirit was in charge, endowing each believer with whatever special gift(s) was God's will for that person. For some that gift was knowledge, for others the ability to teach, for others it was prophesying, for others it was speaking in tongues (revelations given in angelic languages not understood by the people around them). At least, that was Paul's paradigm, and his hope for each congregation.

It didn't quite work out that way, however. The church in Corinth, for example, was really messed up. Various members considered themselves leaders on the basis of superior endowment of the Holy Spirit and its gifts. Each had his followers, and the church was divided into competing factions. Some self-styled church leaders were determined to demonstrate their superior speaking-in-tongue talents, competing to do so louder and more often than anyone else. Some members took others to court, suing them for Holy Spirit infringement or spiritual leading without a license. Or

something. Some of the guys enjoyed spending time with prostitutes, and they also enjoyed bragging about it in church. One guy was making time with his stepmother. At the weekly communion meal (real food, not just a wafer and a sip of cheap wine), some guys got there early, stuffed themselves, got drunk, and left nothing to eat for those who arrived later. Those latecomers were probably the most needy of the community, including lower-class workers and slaves.

Paul didn't write to the bishop because there was no bishop. There was no official leader, so Paul had to address his scolding to the community at large. Eventually, as it became painfully obvious that this was not a viable arrangement, churches did become more organized and structured. But Paul was dead by then. That gives us a clue about the authorship of three NT books traditionally ascribed to Paul: 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, known as the pastoral epistles because they offer advice to the pastors, Timothy and Titus. That advice shows the kind of advanced church structure that did not exist in Paul's lifetime. Furthermore, the writing style and vocabulary are not compatible with Paul's known writings. Paul did not write those books, and the vast majority of scholars agree on that.

There should also be widespread agreement that Paul's chimerical concept of the Holy Spirit providing all the church leadership that would be necessary was disastrous and unworkable. It didn't work in Paul's day, and it hasn't worked since. During the Middle Ages, the Church behaved more like the Italian mafia than God's representatives. In the late Middle Ages, the Church made the life of the believer a living hell with its gestapo tactics.

There is no evidence at all that the Holy Spirit improved the conduct of believers. In fact, it seems to have brought out the worst in men, adding arrogance, a sense of entitlement, and legal immunity to their already impressive cache of personality defects and abused privileges. The Church was not a place where people could get help in dealing with their troubles. The Church was their biggest trouble – exploiting, oppressing, terrorizing, tormenting, and killing them in large numbers for centuries. The Inquisitions and the Crusades

are not products of the Holy Spirit, unless the Holy Spirit is pure evil.

Later, the Europeans who went to the New World, in large part to spread Christianity, spread disease, terror, oppression, enslavement, and death among the Native Americans who preceded them. Later, it was Christians who made American slavery possible and prolonged the practice until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, after the Civil War, and after the death of Lincoln. Was that the Holy Spirit at work? Is it the Holy Spirit that motivates pedophile priests to molest Catholic children and corrupt bishops to protect and enable them? When have we ever in the history of Christianity seen any reliable evidence that the Holy Spirit is a force for good in a person's life, or that it exists at all? There are most certainly good people who are Christians, but there are also good people who want nothing to do with Christianity. So, there is no rational basis for concluding that the Holy Spirit is responsible for good behavior. All the historical evidence points to Christianity as an evil, fraudulent institution, based on lies, greed, and lust for power – not a force for good in the ancient or modern world.