

AFTER THE NOISE

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard E. Bieber:

Two Stages

The embarrassing question is sometimes asked, "If it's really the Holy Spirit who inspires all these groups around the city, why is there so little unity? So little concern for each other? So few kind words? "If it is the one Holy Spirit of God at work in us, are we not going to be drawn together in his love? Isn't he going to bring us into harmony within our fellowships and across the town?"

The power of the Holy Spirit was obviously moving in the church at Corinth. People were getting healed. Miracles were almost commonplace. Supernatural utterance was breaking out in their meetings with great force. Yet this very church was divided into factions, torn apart by strife, polluted by believers living immoral lives. The result was that, while the power of the Spirit of God was indeed there, the ministry which the Spirit gave that church was not getting done. The energy of God pouring into that fellowship was being dissipated by the uncrucified human ego. They were making a lot of noise, but they weren't bearing much fruit.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul doesn't deny that the Spirit is moving among them. In fact he thanks God for the gifts of the Spirit they have. But Paul makes clear that for all these things the Corinthian church is in a carnal state.

"For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving like ordinary men?"

Until that church in Corinth comes into genuine unity with divisions healed and strife brought to an end, the redemptive work that church was created to accomplish will not be done. The believers at Corinth have to be brought from the stage where they are noisy spiritual children to the point where they are solid, steadfast, unified, Spirit led men and women of God.

Contrast with this the picture that emerges when you read Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In this letter are no references to miracles or prophetic utterances or gifts of discernment. Yet this letter is obviously addressed, not to children but to mature men and women.

"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you.... "

The walls of division have come down. The childish ways have been put aside. Here is a Body of saints which has come into the unity of Jesus Christ so that the power of God in their midst is able to bear fruit and get things done.

When we read Corinthians and then Ephesians, it is like looking at two stages. The first is childhood, noisy and weak. The second is adulthood, much stronger, but considerably more quiet. These two stages appear many times in scripture. When Peter first meets Jesus and until Calvary, he makes lots of noise but shows very little real strength. After the resurrection Peter begins to quiet down, but displays a strength he never had before.

When the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision came together there was a noise, a rattling. They formed bodies but still had no life. Ezekiel prophesied a second time, this time to the wind. Now the only sound that could be heard, if any, was the rushing of the Spirit into these lifeless bodies. And they lived, stood upon their feet, a great army. Or when Elijah fled to Mount Horeb to escape Jezebel and have things out with God, there was noise that was doubtless an echo of the noise within his own soul. A tremendous wind tore the mountains and broke rocks to pieces. But God was not in the wind. There was an earth-quake. But God was not in the earthquake. There was a roaring fire. But God was not in the fire. Then came the voice of a gentle stillness. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, for he knew that this was God.

We have in our fellowships these days a certain amount of noise. Praise God for it! Praise God when a newborn infant begins to cry. Praise God for the shouts of joy that rise from the lips of a man who has been healed or from a woman who has found the Lord or been filled with the Holy Spirit. Praise God even when the joyful noise of his children becomes a bit excessive or disorderly. How much better this than the death that was there before! But the power that is needed for the work God has given us to do is not in the noise we make. It is in the unity that comes over the Body when we really begin to submit to the Holy Spirit. And it is that unity that the Spirit is calling for at this hour.

"...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood to the

measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by the craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and up-builds itself in love."

Unity

Each of us needs to understand that unity in the Body begins with himself. Not with that brother over there or this sister over here or those slobs who never fit in, but with me. Am I an agent of unity in the Body of Christ or am I an agent of division? Where is my heart when it comes to unity in the Body? Where is my tongue? Do I bring peace to brothers and sisters, or does my raging, disquieted, glory-hungry spirit leave a trail of strife everywhere I go? Do I draw near to brothers and sisters in love, or do I remain aloof from all except those from whom I want something?

The Spirit of the Lord is calling us to practice unity in the local assembly. These people with whom we are in closest contact are the most likely to annoy us, irritate us, disappoint, slight, hurt or misunderstand us. But now we are to have the mind of Christ toward them. Everyone of them. We are to do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than ourselves. If my brother doesn't live this way, before I murmur against him in my heart, or talk about him or rebuke him to his face; what about me? What about my attitude toward him? Is he really in my prayers? God set us in the family of the local congregation to teach us to forgive. How can we tell the world with any authority about the forgiveness of Jesus Christ on the cross if we are loaded with hard thoughts toward brothers and sisters? What healing will flood our fellowships when we yield to the urging of the Spirit to forgive our brothers and really be one!

We are being called to practice unity with brothers and sisters across the city whatever city we live in.

The church, praise God, does not begin and end with our fellowship. If our only concern is with our own fellowship and perhaps a few others that belong to our chain, then it is very likely that we are caught up in a religious kingdom of our own rather than the kingdom of God. Do I see believers on the other side of town as others, or as "half-brothers"? Do I really weep when they weep and rejoice when they rejoice, or is there a secret tinge of envy in my heart toward them? The Spirit is becoming exacting with us when he finds attitudes in our hearts toward other fellowships. Or when he finds us raising walls, and sowing seeds of mistrust. Or when he uncovers jealousy or sees us despising them in our hearts. If there is a problem with brothers on the south side of town, let's solve it. If there is a misunderstanding, let's get it right. If there is a need to be reconciled, let's do it. There is only one Body in our city and it extends far beyond our own little circle.

We are to practice unity with brothers and sisters across the earth. Believers in Macedonia sent help to believers in Judea. When we hear about needs in Cleveland or Nairobi or Santiago our natural tendency is to ignore them. "Man, we have enough problems around here!" But if we're listening to the Spirit, he wipes away the miles and tells us, "Send them help; they are your brothers." This is going to be happening more and more as the age draws to a close. Brothers and sisters in China need our prayers; and we need theirs. Brothers and sisters in Bolivia may need some material help. And we, for our own good as well as theirs, need to fit in with them.

There has not been a time since the Day of Pentecost when the power of the Spirit was more evident in the church than it is now. But for that power to accomplish what it is being sent to do, the saints of God must be in unity. If we want him to, the Spirit of the Lord will show us what this means for each of us.