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A WILD GOOSE CHASE: FOLLOWING THE SPIRIT

As a people of God, we are invited to rest in the fact that the Spirit is at work – to submit to the authority of the Spirit as we seek to join with God in that work.

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KEEPING UP WITH THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In his commentary on Acts, F. F. Bruce writes, "…in all the book there is nothing which is unrelated to the Holy Spirit." Other scholars have noted that the book of Acts could have been titled, The Acts of the Holy Spirit or even The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.

In preparation for writing this piece, we reread the book of Acts with an eye toward the work of the Spirit. There are 56 references to the Holy Spirit in the 28 chapters of Acts. It is staggering to see how the Spirit is moving and giving life to the early church. We see the Spirit at work at Pentecost, among the Gentiles, and at the Jerusalem Council. The Spirit is the driving force behind Paul's missionary journeys, and it is the Spirit who sets people apart for particular ministry. The Spirit is at work. The early church is just trying to keep up!

As we were growing up, the most common image of the Holy Spirit we encountered was that of a dove or perhaps a flame. That makes sense given the references to the Spirit during the story of Jesus' baptism and Pentecost. More recently, however, we have been drawn to the ancient Celtic tradition in which the Holy Spirit was often depicted as a wild goose. While this may seem silly or out of place or even irreverent to some, we think it accurately describes the courageous, untamed nature of the Spirit. It is not something that can be controlled.

As we read through Scripture, especially the book of Acts, the Spirit is moving. The Spirit is leading Jesus, empowering the disciples, going before and behind those who call Jesus Lord. This reference to the Spirit continues throughout the early church. In fact, in some research he and his co-authors did for their book The Council, Greg Henson discovered that first ecumenical church councils continued to reference the Spirit in the same way the apostles did at the Jerusalem council. At the conclusion of their discernment process, we see those councils say, "It seemed good to the Spirit and to us…" It is the Spirit who does the work. We have the blessing of discerning and participating in that work. The wild goose is leading the way, and we have the privilege of chasing after it!

If we are honest with ourselves, this truth can be life-giving and yet seem exhausting, encouraging and yet cause concern, exciting and yet anxiety inducing. When we embrace the fact that the Spirit is at work, we can rejoice and celebrate the fact that "all things are possible." At the same time, however, if "all things are possible" it means we are not in control. As a result, we may have this growing or unnerving sense of concern that always seems to rest under the surface of our excitement. What do we do when the goose decides to run down the "wrong" street or fly into the "wrong" neighborhoods? What do we do if it goes somewhere we don't want to go? What if it leads us down a path we were once told not to go! What if it asks us to walk boldly into an unknown and uncertain future?

Obviously, those are rhetorical questions. The answer is we go where it leads. However, knowing that to be true doesn't always make it easier! In the case of Kairos, when the Spirit says, "Hey, reduce tuition and make theological education affordable because I am doing something over here with those who can't afford it." Following that lead isn't easy if it means losing $500,000 dollars. When the Spirit says, "I am doing a new thing, but you need to give away your power and influence to join me", we don't tend to jump right in and say "sign me up!"

That is exactly what we see happening in Scripture, however, when the people of God listen and follow the leading of the Spirit. When that happens, God does amazing things. Thousands of people claim Jesus as Lord. New communities of faith burst forth around the world. The shackles of debt, power, and money fall away.

As a people of God, we are invited to rest in the fact that the Spirit is at work – to submit to the authority of the Spirit as we seek to join with God in that work. Next, we will take a look at how Stan Grenz and John Franke invite us to consider the authority of the Spirit. Back to top.

AUTHORITY

In the previous section, we called attention to the fact that the ancient Celtic tradition often depicted the Holy Spirit as a wild goose and how this seems to accurately describe the courageous, untamed nature of the Spirit who provides life, vitality, and movement in the Body of Christ. We also noted it can sometimes be a little difficult to reconcile the idea of "submitting to the authority of the Holy Spirit" and "discerning the movements of a wild goose." We may suggest, however, our struggle to reconcile these two realities might stem from how we think about the authority of the Spirit in relation to things like Scripture or tradition and how we understand the movement of the Spirit.

Have you ever watched geese in flight? Many of us are familiar with the V shape they make when they fly in a group. Have you watched them long enough to see what happens in that process? They are constantly in communication with each other, flying with purpose in a particular direction, taking turns breaking the wind, and doing so with pace. It is not haphazard and thoughtless.

Following the Spirit, in our opinion, looks similar. It is intentional movement in a particular direction, serving each other along the way, and being in constant communication with the Triune God as we collectively discern how to participate in the work God is doing. It is this point about "discerning of direction" that we want to begin unpacking. We will consider how that reality informs our understanding of the authority of Scripture and how we organize ourselves as followers of Jesus. Let's begin with authority.

In their book, Beyond Foundationalism, Stan Grenz, former professor of theology at what is now Kairos

University, and John Franke, wrote,

> *"The Christian tradition is comprised of the historical attempts by the Christian community to explicate and translate faithfully the first order language, symbols, and practices of the Christian faith, arising from the interaction among community, text, and culture, into the various social and cultural contexts in which that community has been situated."*

This quote comes after a series of pages where they are working through the authority of Scripture and tradition in the work of the Church. Perhaps the most eye-catching statement they make in this section of their book is,

> *"Neither scripture nor tradition is inherently authoritative in the foundationalist sense of providing self-evident nondifferential, incorrigible grounds for constructing theological assertions. The authority of each – tradition as well as scripture – is contingent on the work of the Spirit and both are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith."*

To put that more plainly, Grenz and Franke are inviting us to embrace the idea that both Scripture and tradition are instruments of the Holy Spirit. Their authority rests in the authority of the Spirit. They go on to say, "It is the Spirit who stands behind both the development and formation of the community as well as the production of the biblical documents and the coming together of the Bible into a single canon as that community's authoritative texts."

These statements can be disconcerting for some because they may come across as relativistic or even heretical. What do you mean the Bible isn't inherently authoritative! We understand and felt the same way the first time we read them. It sounds dangerous to seemingly promote the idea that Scripture is not authoritative. Fortunately, we didn't stop at the first reading. Grenz and Franke (and we) are not saying Scripture is not authoritative.

The unshakeable truth of God's Word, of Scripture, carries weight, authority, and power. It should be embraced and revered as such. Stan and John are not suggesting Scripture lacks authority but rather that its authority is driven by the work of the Spirit. This resonates with what we see Jesus say in Scripture. He says things like, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" and "All authority on Heaven and Earth has been given to me." As N.T. Wright suggests, Jesus didn't say, "All authority is given to all of those books you are going to write about me." Grenz and Franke are simply inviting us to recognize that the "unshakeable truth" of Scripture is not the same as the Truth of Jesus. The Way of Jesus, which is made known through the power of the Spirit and brings glory to God the Father, is the Truth. We are called followers of Jesus because we are following the Way. To encourage, guide, and give strength to the disciples in the upper room, Jesus invites them to receive the Spirit. The Bible, the communal process of creating the Canon, Paul's missionary journeys, the work of the early church, the history of the Church are instruments the Spirit has and continues to use to shape the people of God.

The Spirit is actively working in, through, and for the Body of Christ as we discern what it means to people of the Way. In this work, we must routinely submit to the leading of the Spirit. This reality doesn't mean we cast aside Scripture or the tradition of the Church. Rather, it invites us to be continually shaped by Scripture as we read it together; to be students of the story, the tradition of the Church as we act out this chapter of that story. In doing so, the Spirit is opening our eyes, forming the Body of Christ, and inviting us to participate in the Gospel.

Fortunately, we don't have to do this blindly. The earliest disciples had to do the same thing. Next, we will take a look at one such example. Along the way, we might talk a bit about improv theater, as well. Let's see what happens. Back to top.

THE FORBIDDEN PATH

Let's continue thinking out loud about the exciting privilege we have to discern and follow the Holy Spirit. We began by reflecting on the idea that, as the people of God, we are invited to rest in the fact that the Spirit is at work – to submit to the authority of the Spirit as we join with God in that work.

That led us to consider Scripture and tradition as instruments of the Spirit. We ended that section by writing:

> *The Spirit is actively working in, through, and for the Body of Christ as we discern what it means to be people of the Way. In this work, we must routinely submit to the leading of the Spirit. This reality doesn't mean we cast aside Scripture or the tradition of the Church. Rather, it invites us to be continually shaped by Scripture as we read it together; to be students of the story, the tradition, of the Church as we act out this chapter of that story. In doing so, the Spirit is opening our eyes, forming the Body of Christ, and inviting us to participate in the Gospel.*

Fortunately, we see this happening in the early church. The Spirit is actively working in, through, and for the earliest disciples as they discern what it means to follow Jesus in their context. They submit themselves to the leading of the Spirit, even when it means going against something they previously agreed upon. To put a finer point on that, they end up going down a path that they previously forbade others to trod…or did they?

Let's take a look at Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8. In Acts 15, we see the Jerusalem council say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things." In 1 Corinthians 8, however, Paul issues what seems to be a

direct contradiction saying, “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” Later, in Romans 14, Paul even goes so far as to tell the Gentile Christians to stop looking down on the Jews who don’t eat such meat. The early church’s discernment as it related to eating food sacrificed to idols went from, “It seems good to the Holy Spirit that you should abstain from it,” to “It’s okay to eat food sacrificed to idols so long as you are thoughtful about it.” That’s quite the journey of discernment. The church was working out what it meant to follow the Way and the Spirit was helping them do so. And that means things can change.

On the surface, this example can seem to suggest the early followers of Jesus simply didn’t understand. One might think, “Of course, they were still working out the faith. Jesus only spent a few years with them. They still had much to learn! We have the benefit of 2,000+ years of followership, scholarship, discipleship, etc. We know better. It has been settled.” But, if we take a closer look, there seems to be a consistent theme that suggests the early church wasn’t being “wishy-washy” on its convictions and decisions at all. Rather, they had a clear direction – they knew where the “flying v” of the wild goose was headed (i.e., the direction). They were simply learning more about the obstacles they were flying past along the way.

In Acts 15, 1 Corinthians 8, and Romans 14 (and other passages in the Old and New Testament, as well, obviously) what remains constant is concern for “the other.” In his book, Resurrecting Justice, Douglas Harink says one way to reconcile the dining issues being addressed in Romans 14 would have been for the Jews or Gentiles to impose their convictions on the others, particularly the socially dominant Romans. He writes,

> *That would be one way to resolve the dining-table tensions; it would also be another colonizing victory for Romans, even in the messianic assembly. But it would be a contradiction of the good news, which is not about assimilation in either direction but about respect and reconciliation in the midst of real differences. The point of the good news is not that the “conservative” Judeans should make a “progressive” journey toward the “liberal” convictions and practices of the Roman messianics. Rather, the good news is that both groups are at the table only because it is God’s table, and because God welcomes both Judeans and Gentiles to the table through the Messiah’s reconciling death.*

While at first glance Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8 seem to contradict each other in their ethical demands, a closer examination suggests they are glimpses into what it looked like for the earliest disciples to discern the movement of the Spirit. They knew they needed to head in the direction of loving the other. By staying attentive to the Spirit, however, they continued to learn what God had in store for them.

We started this foray into the idea of following a wild goose with a quote from F.F. Bruce. In his commentary on Acts, he remarked “…in all the book there is nothing which is unrelated to the Holy Spirit.” We are saying that continues to be true. Mission, ministry, transformed lives, the power of the Gospel – all of it is related to the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit is still moving.

That begs the question, then, if we are joining with God as the Author of the Story and the Spirit is still moving, what role are we to play? Is there a script to follow? Lines to recite? I think that is where our comment about improv theater comes into view. Back to top.

A FIVE ACT PLAY

We have been exploring how the Spirit led the early church in Acts. What we have seen is that the Spirit led these Jewish believers into new ways of displaying faithfulness to God. What these early believers found was that following the Spirit was disruptive to their old patterns of engagement with the Gentiles. Although we are aware of the struggle, we often underestimate just how disruptive this journey was for these early Jewish believers, particularly as the Spirit upended what they had previously been taught to do, teachings found directly in the Scriptures. Of course, this raises huge issues for us, as we know it did for them. But it invites us to explore the question of authority and what it looks like when we follow the Spirit.

One helpful way we have found to think about this issue was first articulated by NT Wright in his 1989 Laing Lectures and his Griffith Thomas Lecture (published in 1991 in Vox Evangelica) entitled "How can the Bible be Authoritative." In his lecture, he argues that the Western church, including Evangelicals, need a more dynamic understanding of authority centered on "what God is doing." In his lecture, he reminds us of the importance of narrative to understanding what God is doing and suggests another way to think about it which better incorporates how we are folded into the story of God.

We could not agree more! Enlightenment philosophical commitments have taught us to see the Bible primarily as the source of "timeless truths" and "objective moral absolutes" that we then apply to any and all contexts. While the Bible does share truth and direction on moral issues, when we apply the philosophical commitments of the Enlightenment to it, we end up with a "one size fits all" response to complicated and nuanced questions. Such a reductionist approach to Scripture distorts the way we connect the truth we have been given to the actual story that is being told in Scripture. Ultimately, it disconnects us from Scripture in that Scripture itself is made into a "mere receptacle" of these truths that are all too easily discarded once we've gotten "the good stuff." Once that happens, the teachings we have discovered are then unwittingly inserted into alien narratives which transform their meaning in ways destructive to the life and witness of the Church. In short, our thinking about the authority of Scripture hasn't sufficiently taken into account the actual story being told in Scripture nor does it take into account Scripture's narrative structure and function. But how do we remedy this?

Rather than thinking of authority in terms of the applications of abstracted "truths," Wright suggests we think

of how authority might function if we were finishing the writing of a play whose final act had been lost or destroyed.

> *Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly-trained, sensitive, and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves (p. 19).*

Wright explains that the "authority" for the performance of the final act would be the first four acts. To be a credible final act the resulting performance would have to resolve the themes and storylines created by the earlier acts, but it would do so not by re-enacting previous scenes of the play over and over again or simply reciting lines cropped together to make new scenes. Rather, the final act would be judged as to whether it was consistent with the previous acts while also keeping the story moving toward its end. If we are successful, it would keep the story going through "innovation and consistency." Such an endeavor would be a kind of "improvisation" where different "final acts" could be performed by different groups of actors but nevertheless assessed for faithful performances of the play as well.

Samuel Wells, in his book Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics (Brazos Press, 2004) picks up and extends the metaphor in some very helpful ways. Wells points out that, in contrast to Wright's account of the first five acts (Wright names the first five acts as Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, and Church), that one should recognize that the Church is not the final act of the play. Rather, the final act has also already been given. That act is Eschaton. Wells' variation on Wright's metaphor centers the story on Jesus and outlines the five acts as Creation, Israel, Jesus, Church, and Eschaton. There is an end that the Church's improvisation is headed toward.

In the writing of both Wright and Wells, the Bible functions in a similar way. Wells adds some useful nuance. For Wells,

> *"The Bible is not so much a script that the church learns and performs as it is a training school that shapes the habits and practices of a community. This community learns to take the right things for granted, and on the basis of this faithfulness, it trusts itself to improvise within its tradition" (p. 12).*

Wells is aware that talking about "improvisation" raises issues and concerns for many. It did the same for us. One particular issue is that it could imply "uninhibited freedom" or it could be perceived to be centered on being whimsical, overly clever or just trying to be witty. Wells addresses these issues and our own research

revealed some of the same details. Contrary to the impressions of "uninhibited freedom" or "whimsical wit," good theatrical improvisation requires deep trust, significant discipline, and extensive training to keep the act going forward. To put that more plainly, the only way to artfully engage in theatrical improvisation is to invest time, energy, and study into the practice. It is both an art and a craft.

Successful improv, Wells goes on to say, relies on a few specific practices. Even some cursory research on theatrical improv will reveal that most voices agree on a few guiding rules. Wells borrows and adapts a few of these to provide some insight into what it might look like for followers of Jesus to faithfully play their role in The Eschaton. Obviously, we can't describe all of them in detail here. You can read his book and Wright's, as well, to gain a deeper understanding.

The key thing to note is that the actors putting on a theatrical improvisation production must be adept at these practices – it is not simply unfiltered or unmitigated chaos. The actors must build on what has been given (i.e., they need to accept what has been presented), which means there is a narrative in which the entire production must make sense. At the same time, however, some circumstances will require them to block what has been presented or to reincorporate some aspect of the story which has been lost through the improvisational dialogue. The only way to be successful in this kind of work is to practice, to be shaped by the work, and to do it with others who know how it works. Having learned to recognize these practices, Wells argues that this sort of improvisation best accounts for the faithful innovations within the church since its beginning.

The phrase "faithful innovations" is important. If you've ever watched really good theatrical improvisation, you will know that "faithful innovations" in the storyline are significantly more impactful than one-off statements that don't seem to fit. We contend the same is true in the work of the church. "Innovation" in the Church for the sake of innovation is doomed to fail. Faithful innovation or what Doug Paul refers to as "Kingdom Innovation" requires continuity between the first five acts of the play described by Wells and the improvisation to which we are called.

While we could expound on the ideas presented by Wright and Wells, we will spare you the challenge of hearing it from us. Their books are much better. We will, however, invite you to consider the impact their writing has on what it means to follow Jesus in community. In simple terms, we might suggest following Jesus is not something that happens in a nice straight line. If following the Spirit is one part "wild goose chase" and one part "theatrical improvisation" then it must also be (at least!) one part "discernment." As a result, we should expect some curves along the way. Back to top.