

## 6:1 THE GENUINE ARTICLE

**It is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.**

*Philippians 3:3*

**These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.**

*Isaiah 66:2*

How do you know if a passport is genuine? This is a headache for security officers, not for the average member of the public; but there is undoubtedly a roaring trade in fake passports, which enable people who aren't qualified for citizenship to look as if they are.

Paul was concerned about the character of genuine faith. 'A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God' (Romans 2:29).

Who are the true people of God? Those who have been baptised, or circumcised, who wear a badge, speak in tongues, quote Bible verses, attend prayer meetings, give to the poor? All these are outward signs which may be evidence of genuine belief, but unless there is also a real knowledge of God in a person's heart (Jeremiah 9:24), their credentials for membership of the kingdom of heaven are counterfeit.

What does it mean to serve God in the Spirit? To 'boast' in Jesus Christ? To be completely humble and devoid of personal pride? Isn't this setting the bar rather high? Isn't it (the big no-no) to make spiritual achievement the criterion of whether one is a true Christian or not? Or is Paul simply saying 'By their fruits you will know them'?

*God doesn't want outward conformity or adherence to the letter of the law – he wants me to take his word seriously enough to give up my efforts at self-qualification. He doesn't want me to tick boxes; rather to depend upon his Spirit completely in any service I do for him, and to find my joy and fulfilment in knowing Jesus as my Lord.*

## 6:2 PRAYING FOR OTHERS

**Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.**

*Ephesians 6:18*

**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message.**

*Colossians 4:2-3*

**Pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.**

*James 5:16*

One day we may discover how much we owed to our fellow-believers who took the time to bring our names before the Lord and asked him to bless and strengthen us. We can do the same for them. Prayer makes all the difference, not because of any magic in our often haphazard naming of people before the throne of grace, but because of who sits on that throne and his promises (Hebrews 4:16).

In the film 'War Room' Miss Clara sets aside a place in her house devoted to prayer, which radically alters the prospects of a couple whose marriage seems likely to fall apart. Paul quotes the example of Epaphras as someone who habitually 'wrestled' in prayer for his fellow-Christians to be fully aligned with God's will (Colossians 4:13-14). This doesn't require exceptional spirituality or personality, but it does require time, determination and perseverance.

When Paul says 'pray in the Spirit,' he isn't requiring that we use a special prayer-language given to some and not others (1 Cor 12:30), because he is talking about 'all occasions' and 'all kinds of requests.' The Spirit is our go-between, like the electricity that runs along our telephone landlines and makes sure that we get through to the other end (Romans 8:26-27). James uses the word 'effective' which conveys the sense of energy and practical results. Prayer works because the Spirit makes it work.

*I don't have to copy others' exact style of praying, but do I have my own style? Do I regard prayer as a strategic weapon for Christ's kingdom? May the Spirit stir me to pray more effectively whenever I can. And may I be thankful, even if the answers aren't always known.*

## 6:3 ENCOURAGEMENT

**Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.**

*Acts 9:31*

**May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.**

*2 Thessalonians 2:16-17*

In Acts 8 and 9 we are given the astonishing story of Paul's conversion from savaging monster to committed disciple of Christ. It starts with the thoroughgoing persecution of the homeland churches and ends with their universal encouragement.

Our experience may or may not be similar, but there is no doubt that persecution exists in many areas of the world today where Christians are being attacked and even tortured to death for their faith. We who live in relative peace and prosperity ought to be praying regularly for them to be comforted and strengthened.

From these two passages we see that the whole Godhead is involved in encouraging those who are determined to 'live in the fear of the Lord.' God the Father is the source of all love and grace (1 Peter 5:10); the cross of Christ is the focus and symbol of our hope; the Holy Spirit resides in our hearts to communicate strength and the practical outworking of our faith.

This faith is a combination of 'deed' and 'word'. Our practising and our preaching should be woven from the same cloth. There is such suspicion of the church today that the slightest lapse from integrity or transparency is met with cynicism and rejection. The only churches that will see consistent growth are those in which the work of the Spirit is creating disciples who know and love the Lord.

*I owe so much to those who have encouraged and challenged me to sort out what I believe and how I'm going to express it in my daily life and work. May I in turn be used to encourage others by my example.*

## 6:4 SINGING SONGS

**Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.**

*Ephesians 5:18-19*

**About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.**

*Acts 16:25*

They had been stripped, severely beaten with Roman rods, and their feet fastened in the stocks so they couldn't shift their position to ease their pain – yet Paul and Silas were able to raise their voices in songs they presumably knew and loved.

The Spirit is nothing if not resilient, refusing to let us be overcome by misery and resentment when we have been roughly treated. The Christians herded into the Colosseum at Rome are said to have gone to their deaths singing. The book of Revelation is studded with little fragments of verse declaring the glory of the God of the martyred hosts. If these are songs sung in heaven, we can still hold a choir practice down here on earth.

'Our God is greater.' We don't have to wait until we feel full of the Spirit before we can open our mouths in praise and thanksgiving. Many of David's psalms are laments or bitter complaints; their harmony is in the minor key; yet they lift the human spirit into communion with God.

'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' We are called to make the streets of Babylon ring with the songs of Jerusalem. The Spirit promises to clothe us in 'a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair' (Isaiah 61:1, 3).

*Am I always complaining that we're not singing the right hymns in church? I need to shed a few inhibitions, sing songs in the night when I lie awake (under my breath if necessary), stock my mind with the rich heritage of Christian words and music. Give the Spirit some material to work with.*

## 6:5 HEALING

**Heal me, Lord, and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved, for you are the one I praise.** *Jeremiah 17:14*

**To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers.** *1 Corinthians 12:7-10 (sel)*

Very few of us have perfect health, and some of us have severe impediments to cope with. We accept this as the way life is, and we avail ourselves gratefully of whatever remedies are to hand. To be ill or incapacitated is not a symptom of spiritual disease or lack of faith, just as to be healthy and well is not a sign of superior holiness. But to what extent can I expect God's help in terms of physical or mental healing? Is it something that went out with the first Christians?

We should be very cautious about claiming either that miraculous healing is no longer on offer these days, or that we should expect it to happen as a matter of course. Surely for many Christians it is part of their experience of answered prayer, for themselves or another. In going about doing good and healing (Acts 10:38), Jesus showed us a loving God and Father who is the source of forgiveness and health and whom we ought to be praising for all his benefits (Psalm 103:2-3).

The Spirit who is Jesus living and moving among his people is engaged in a whole range of saving work, in conversion, restoration, teaching, gifting and growing healthy and active disciples. He works in the whole church, through all the members of the church, for the good of the church. It is as true now as it was in the days of the New Testament. Saving and healing aren't two different levels of God's activity – they are what he loves to do and will do if we ask him.

*'Jesus welcomed the crowds and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing' (Luke 9:11). Thank God we have this God, and not some other sort. If my faith is too complicated to ask for your promised gifts, then please simplify my faith.*

## 6:6 RESISTANCE TO THE SPIRIT

**All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.** *Luke 4:28-29*

**You always resist the Holy Spirit.** *Acts 7:31*

Jesus 'came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (John 1:11). He and Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died similar deaths because they had become deeply unpopular – but why was their message so abhorrent to their hearers?

The reason why the good people of Nazareth so nearly lynched Jesus was that he implied that God was more interested in complete outsiders than in regular worshippers. On another occasion he said there was more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 right-living godly folk (Luke 15:7). Stephen's sermon punchline exposed the hypocrisy of a 'chosen people' who so often killed their prophets rather than listen to what they said.

Supposing Jesus visited a cathedral city like York or Exeter, but ignored the cathedral congregation and headed straight for a doubtful pub in the poorest part of town. Local pride would be mortally offended.

But there's a more fundamental factor. Human nature's default mode is to be anti-Holy Spirit (Romans 8:7). This is true even of religious-minded people, or particularly of such people. We are not happy with a God who invades our comfort zones and challenges our cherished assumptions. Nor are we happy if someone tries to show us how God's word is aiming to do this in our own day.

*Am I upset by something God's word is trying to tell me? Have I replaced the God of the Bible with a culturally-shaped divinity who won't lever away at my ingrained superiority or insider status? Does even my choice of church or fellowship avoid uncomfortable association with people I simply don't like? Am I resisting the Holy Spirit?*