“No Spirit Left Behind” Donald J. Sevetson September 25, 2011

I Thess. 5: 16-21
Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

I John 3:23 – 4:1 (NRVS)
And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

(ILB)
"The commandments are these: that we believe in the name of God's Own, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another as we were told to do. Those who keep these commandments live in God and God lives in them. We know that God lives in us by the Spirit given to us. Dear friends, it is not every spirit you can trust. Test them to see if they come from God. There are many false prophets in the world." A little more than twenty years ago our marriage reached the “empty nest” phase. We had a son and two daughters. The son and the older daughter were out of school and (Thank God) gainfully employed. The younger daughter was away at college.

Having no children at home is a mixed blessing.

On the one hand, our schedule opened up, our shopping bills decreased, our telephone was available for our own use. On the other, there were loan payments generated by ten years of college expenses, and there was an absence of technological expertise.

The three kids (all young adults) got together and got us a VCR for a Christmas present. The package arrived a few days before the holiday, and we opened it. The VCR had been made in Japan, and the manual seems to have been written there. Nevertheless, I plunged in.

After a while I had worked out everything and seemed to have it connected properly. I turned on the power. Lights came on. I turned on the TV – having apparently mastered the cable/VCR/TV interweaving of wires. I took the remote and pressed “Play”.

Nothing happened.

I took stuff apart, reconnected everything, tried again.

Same result.

Fortunately, our older daughter, working in Berkeley, was driving home that day for the holiday, and she would be picking up our younger daughter, who was in Eugene for the semester. They would be home in a couple of hours.

We waited. They arrived. We told them about the VCR.

They checked everything over, picked up the Remote, turned it on, pushed the switch that said “TV/VCR”, hit “Play” – and everything worked. I went back to the manual. Read it slowly and carefully. It said nothing about any “TV/VCR” switch on the Remote.

Anything like that ever happen to you? You’ve got the manual, studied it, followed it to the letter. A problem comes up, and the manual is no help.

Manuals are important. Engineers love them! But engineers are well aware that manuals don’t always answer the questions they find themselves dealing with. The value of the manual is limited by the data on which it is based, not to mention the language and communication skills of the one writing the manual.

And – of course – there are some things can’t be reduced to manuals – despite the fact that people keep trying: family life, competitive sports, crime investigations, teaching seventh graders. Church life.

The early Christians didn’t have a manual. They were using one collection of scriptures – the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. While they did that they were writing what eventually became another collection – our New Testament.

But that’s not exactly true, either. For one thing, they didn’t have books. They relied on scrolls, plus – occasionally - something called a codex, pages laced together. Their “Bible” was probably a box full of scrolls.

It’s highly unlikely that all the new congregations had the same collection of scrolls. Copies of some of Paul’s letters were growing in number and expanding in distribution. And there were other writings – several gospels, and the letters we now call Jude, James, Hebrews, first & second Peter, and first, second and third John. One scholar who has looked at this thinks that there were some fifty-five documents in circulation, including seven gospels. Eventually the church chose about half of those, twenty-seven, for the New Testament.

So there were a lot of bits and pieces of advice and information, but no standard, no Manual. And they kept running into issues. They needed guidance about procedures and policies. Sometimes it was hard to get, because there was disagreement about what the guidance ought to be.

Paul wrote a bunch of letters, and he covered a lot of subjects. None of them, of course, tells us about the “TV/VCR” switch. Or a whole lot of other things, some of which would have been very important.

Three weeks ago Alan preached on a text from the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. The primary focus was on the steps to be taken in a church when one of the members is straying from the path, causing a problem. I’d heard sermons on that passage, Matthew 18: 15-20, before. I preached a couple myself. I think that Alan’s was the clearest, most helpful interpretation that I have heard.

But if you’re like me when you leave church after a good sermon you start thinking about a question that it raised for you. Sermons are really just a part of an ongoing dialogue within a congregation. Yes, they are at the center of the dialogue, but what’s really important is the dialogue itself. That way we all continue to grow, and we continue to dig into the riches of the scriptures, the tradition, and our own experience and accumulated wisdom.

Since that sermon I have focused on one verse, Matthew 18:20. It comes at the end of the passage: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Most of us know that verse. It gets used a lot. From one angle it may be the most important verse in the 4 Gospels, perhaps the Bible itself.

It is about direct revelation. The Risen Christ, right here, right there. Where two or three are gathered in his name. Not in the Vatican, or the local cathedral. It doesn’t even say “where two or three are gathered IN CHURCH). Anywhere. Any place. Any time.

There is no intermediary, no entry fee, no permit required.

It is revolutionary. It subverts generals, kings, emperors & bishops.

It says that any two or three of us, gathered in Jesus’ name, can expect, can count on, his presence. And history is full of examples of small groups, gathered in Jesus’ name, who found the courage to stand up against the corruption and arrogance, lies and distortions, fear fanned and violence used by their oppressors. The verse calls to mind saints and martyrs who overturned the mighty. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

And yet. And yet. It really isn’t that simple, is it?

Think about it.

What if the two or three, gathered in Jesus’ name, are NOT two or three of US, but two or three of THEM? And that group says and does stuff that abuses the innocent and horrifies us. And they justify it because they are gathered in Jesus’ name.

When we run into that, what are we supposed to think? What are we supposed to do?

Well - what does the manual say? I suppose you could draw on the third commandment – you shall not take the Lord’s name in vain, but that only gets you so far.

Don’t think the early churches didn’t know about this problem. They had to deal with exactly those issues. There were people who thought that their freedom in Christ entitled and empowered them, and they came up with beliefs and behavior that got pretty strange, pretty odd, even disgusting – pretty far from the Jesus we hear about in the gospels.

Most of what we know we find in Paul’s letters, because that’s what most of his letters are – responses to issues arising in the actual life of specific congregations.

You probably know First Corinthians, chapter 13. It ends with these words: “And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” Those are wonderful, beloved words. And Paul begins the passage this way: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Why does it start that way?

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels” … is sort of an odd way to start talking about love – or lack of love. .

If we skip ahead one chapter – to 14 – we see the reason for beginning with noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. Turns out there were some Pentecostals in the Corinthian church. They had begun to “speak in tongues”. And Paul had heard that it had become a divisive issue. Those who had “the gift of tongues” looked down on those who didn’t.

The fourteenth chapter is a pretty long chapter, which may be the main reason you never hear it read in church. So your assignment for this is to read First Corinthians 14. I won’t be here to give you the test, so you will have to quiz each other, check each other out. It’s a very interesting bit of writing. We won’t be able to be here, because we’ll be celebrating my birthday at the Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce.

In that chapter 14 Paul presents a careful, rational analysis. He goes into a lot of detail about the “time and place” for speaking in tongues. He includes it among God’s spiritual gifts – but makes it clear that it is not among the most important ones.

Paul, of course, can’t ever get through an entire letter without letting out his true feelings. At one point he asks: “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders and unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

And he goes beyond that: “in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

But he had summed up his point back at the beginning of the previous chapter: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

By bringing love (or its absence) into it, Paul gives us something that we can use - a standard, a criterion, that we can apply in our own setting. And two more: is it welcoming (to unbelievers and strangers) and does it make sense?

That’s the kind of manual he gave people. Criteria, standards. They would have to apply it. They would have to do the hard work of thinking about this situation, in which some people exercised their “spiritual gift”, and there was division between them and others.

That’s the kind of manual we have. Principles – and we have to do the hard mental, moral and spiritual work of applying them in our own situation.

Which brings us to the scriptures that we read a few minutes ago.

New Testament scholars tell us that First Thessalonians, Paul’s first letter to the church at Salonika, is his earliest letter. That makes it the earliest completed document in the New Testament. Part of today’s reading says “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

It sounds like the Thessalonians were having some difficulties, sorting out who was to be believed and followed.

Paul says: “test everything”. Check stuff out. And it might not be easy. It will take work.

Do not quench the spirit, but test everything. Leave no spirit behind.

What, though, is the test? His letter to the Corinthians tells us to ask: Where is love present? Where is it absent?

Our second scripture, from the first letter of John, goes a step further.

The three letters of John are among the later documents to be included in our New Testament. The John who wrote it may have been the same one who wrote the Gospel of John, but it may not have been. We’re told, though, that it comes a couple of generations after Jesus, giving churches more time to deal with the issues of church life.

It, too, gives instructions. In the Inclusive Bible version we read:
“We know that God lives in us by the Spirit given to us. Dear friends, it is not every spirit you can trust. Test them to see if they come from God. There are many false prophets in the world."

The New Revised Standard Version is slightly different:
“And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

The situation it describes rings a bell.

We talk about spirit all the time – school spirit, team spirit, a welcoming spirit, a spiritual void, a mean spirit – just listing the adjectives that are used to modify ‘spirit’ could take us all day. Even the French get into it, with espirit de corps.

These two translations of first John raise the testing stakes:

Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God
It is not every spirit you can trust. Test them to see if they come from God.

First John tells us to use testing to determine spiritual authenticity. So if we are to do our job, we need to be testing the spirits –

So in a few minutes we've come a long way from “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” to “test the spirits to see if they come from God

We're back to the real world, where there are false prophets, who do false advertising. They claim to be from God, but will they pass the test?

Yesterday's Oregonian, reporting on the Oregon City trial of the couple whose baby lived only nine hours, quoted the church midwife: “It wasn't God's will for David to live.” The church calls itself the Followers of Christ Church, but what spirit is it that is speaking?

We have to test things. Daily. The false prophets are incredibly persuasive, often slickly packaged and well funded. They claim to be from God. But what spirit is it that is speaking?

It's awfully easy to follow them, and tune out the words and presence and love of the risen Christ, who promises to be with any two or three who meet in his name.

Or, sadly enough, we hear these false prophets, these ungodly spirits, and say “If that's what the church is, if that's what Christianity is, I want nothing to do with it.”

What the two scriptures really do is clarify that first one: “Where two or three are gathered in my name”.

You see, Jesus promises to be there with the two or three,

but he never has a clear field.

There are other spirits on hand, competing, seeking to cloud his presence, drown out his voice and distort his message.

And it's our challenge, and our responsibility, and our privilege to test the spirits to see to it that it is Jesus' loving presence and true teaching that we hear, and proclaim, and live out – both while we are here in church and when we are scattered among God's children in God's world.

The challenge never ends, because those other spirits don't quit. It's a lifelong thing, because new days bring new possibilities of both good and evil.

Those spirits don't give up.
Neither does God.
And neither should we.

So let's conclude with the Scotsman Edwin Muir's somewhat mysterious “other reading”, The Way.
It doesn't have all the answers, but it talks about life as it is, and tells us that we are on a journey –

Friend, I have lost the way.
The way leads on.
Is there another way?
The way is one.
I must retrace the track.

It's lost and gone.
Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.
Then I'll make here my place,
(The road leads on),
Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
Stay here, for ever stay.
None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.