

BIBLE STUDY AT THE SALEM METHODIST CHURCH

I reached Salem at 6:20. Everything looked closed. There was a small sign on the Lenox side grill saying that "AA meeting tonight." I walked down the stairs in the community room. Completely empty. As I walked across, somebody came out from the gym; I asked about Bible Study; she didn't know "we are having another meeting back there." I meandered looking for the steps to the sanctuary; {this is really a very run down plant!} knocked at a door, and finally found the room by the sanctuary with the pictures of the pastors.

166P

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It was about 6:25. AP and four women were rearranging chairs to face a table and lectern so that the room took the shape of a lecture hall. One woman appeared to recognize me and all greeted warmly. Three were of them are the late middle aged women I have come to expect and one was an elegantly dressed woman in her 40s (?) whom I thought for a while might be Pinckney's wife. She appears to be invoved in the Sunday School and was giving a hopeful report to one other woman "we have 15 registrants, 5 come regularly."

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6:30

another woman comes in as AP starts. He is standing behind the lectern at the front of the room, looking serious, if not dour, as he most often looks. We turn to a page in the hymnal for the "Order for Evening Praise." He improvised an opening prayer, asked us to sing one verse of an hymn, and then to offer prayer petitions. After a silence, he started with one, and then 5 or 6 were offered by the people. The themes were "for the sick and shut-in," "for the youth who are tempted by the world and their peers," "for war around the world."

{these prayers and petitions are directly of interest for us. They are "ritual" in the full sense of the term: important, carefully scripted, each time improvised in different ways, and an expression of both real and cliched concerns. They are performances of course but the modes of control and evaluation differ enough from the other settings to become worth investigating more carefully}

During the petition Wendell Harris (board of trustees) and the young man (Steven [no last name yet]) in. The two men are in suits and ties (as well as AP). Half the women are in business attire while the rest are in less formal dress.

{there had been a discussion about the timing of the event as it relates to work lives}

We recite the Our Father. AP then welcomed us "Thank you for coming."

{(=Bible study has really started=)}

For the next half-hour the format is essentially that of a lecture with AP summarizing what he intends to do and then developing one of the points. During the whole session almost everyone takes notes on yellow pads, or notebooks. Wendell Harris highlights his Bible.

AP: I intend to do two things.

First we are not as scripturally literate as we should be. Some of us do not know how many books there are in the Bible. We cannot cross-reference passages. “When I talk to Jehovah Witnesses—and I always let them into my house, though I do not say I am a pastor—I am struck by how much they know because they are specifically trained to relate scripture to life experiences. It is very important to me as pastor that you be scripturally literate.

{the educational point here is as close to the surface as it can be! But no way to fail students!}

Second, it is important that we understand how we are to be Church together. The Bible gives us the blue print.

Acts 1. We will continue with Acts as we have done since October. We were up to chapter 16. Acts tell us how the church was birthed; the struggles the disciples went through; and how it relates to our own church. Everyone is called to ministry. As pastor, I must give you the tools through preaching, teaching, administrating. Three key words: Word (teaching) Order (administration) and the only 2 Sacraments of the Church (baptism and communion). What is your calling? We must discern what it is. I did my dissertation on Acts. It was titled “Unity in the midst of diversity.”

{AP had been quite clear at the retreat that he would not do Bible Study if people did not show up. I thought that he had not done any since he came. But this clearly is not the case. So there must have been a series of meetings, and then they stopped: lack of interest/attendance? Are these things cyclical?}

6:56

AP: “I want you to feel free to ask questions”

{this is when I really felt in a lecture since so far no questions had been asked and noone picked up on this (counterfactual?) offer}

Let’s turn to Acts 1. J.C. has finished his task and he is setting up his disciples for theirs but he offers them a last gift to help them. Let’s check what it is: Luke He does not offer a place, there is a long silence as all leaf through their Bibles until AP says “Sorry, I meant John 14 v. 15.” He reads “I will leave you an Advocate ... the Spirit” Back to Acts.

AP: Question to audience: “What is the promise of the Father?” low mumble from some “the

Holy Spirit” AP repeats the questions and the mumble is a little bit louder.

{this is as close as we got to classroom mode}

AP tells the story of John Wesley going to “where?” Woman in the audience says “Savannah, Georgia.” AP “right!” Wesley was an Anglican priest, working with American Indians, feeling that he was failing, returning to England. And then he happened to attend a service in a Moravian church “and was happened there?” The same woman who has spoken before give the full story. AP repeats it JW and the phrase “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” AP: “we need to know our Methodist history.” What does this mean for us? As your pastor I am upset when I see the congregation on Sunday not demonstrating that they are anointed by the Holy Spirit, when the choir does not move, when people just sit there ...

Please talk about the Holy Spirit means to you as I go out to look for a book by Dr. Forbes that I meant to bring in tonight.

AP leaves the room and the people look at each other, laugh, and then break into two or three temporary and shifting groupings. One or two person ask for the spelling of Aldersgate when Wesley had his conversion moment. One person asks about the Moravian church. No one seem able to say who they were. Someone, in joking tones, “google it!”

{note that this was a (non-)not race moment: “we” descend from an Anglican minister who was inspired by Germans revolting against the Catholic Church in the name of true Christianity. Note that this was a kind of moment for the recital of an origin myth. What is unclear to me is whether the audience did NOT know the history or mostly did not display it, particularly since it was obvious AP knew it and at least one of the women. On the Moravian issue it would seem that noone could actually answer the question—though they now know how to get the answer!}

Wendell asks people in general how to talk about the Holy Spirit “‘it’ is not right, is it? So is it ‘he’ or is there no gender involved?’ Noone could quite answer and it was the first question asked when AP returned. AP answered that the Holy Spirit was a force or power. He took the question at least one level of abstraction and never actually answered the question.

Question: “Is the ‘Spirit’ from the ‘Holy Spirit’?” AP answers by asking people to look at Corinthians 1 13. He reads aloud. “You look puzzled” The question is asked again. The simple answer “they are synonymous.”

{by now the event has shifted out of the lecture mode to a kind of seminar mode with people asking questions of AP, answering some of them themselves, returning to him,

etc. He remains the authority. He has also started to laugh and to be more animated. His answers remains always quite abstract, in high theological mode. He also can keep silences of up to one minute (I timed one) as he appears to look for passages to read}

AP to a question about not always being able to do what one ought “we can’t work this out ourselves.... discernment is the key ... I understand what you are trying to say”

Turn to Romans 8 ... reads

Turn to John 1 4 ... reads

He reads another abstract passage from the book by Forbes that he gone to fetch.

AP: Is this clear?

{actually, I find these passages incredibly abstract [LINDA: what do you make of them?}

**: “some things are fuzzy”

woman: “you had said ... there are folks, they say the Holy Spirit tells them what to do; I don’t want to be facetious: what if they have heard incorrectly?” Others restate the question. AP: you can ask God for clarification. ... of course there are doctrinal differences ... For example, the Pentecostals refer to Acts 2 and 2nd Corinthians to say that one is not a Christian is one is not visibly moved by the Spirit. ... I would never say it that way.

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Woman presses on: “let me clarify for myself... ministers for pentecostals say they were called by God. When you visit their churches you sit and you listen to then and then it does not ring true but they say they are called to do this or that ... I don’t know.

AP, in explicit response, gives the story of his becoming a minister and how he was rejected twice by those in authority because they said he was not ready. “I was hurt, I examined myself, I persevered.... The rejection was an occasion for growth.” Someone asked him whether he considered that the rejection, being the work of men, might not have been legitimate and he should have gone out to another church. He says this is not the way he interpreted it: “it was the working of the Holy Spirit that I should go through this. ... discernment”

{this is another instance of deliberation about religious faith with direct implication about practice. All the people have experienced other forms of Christianity and/or religiosity and they have “chosen” Salem (?) Methodism (?) But they could shift again.

Note again that this is education about one's future life and that there was no hint of race/ethnicity/gender, etc. as issues.

Question: "Sometimes in church I see others swaying, clapping their hands, raising their hands up and I do not feel like doing it: is it really the case that I am not in the Spirit?"

Someone answers: "As a child I used to go to a sanctified church. If you did not wave your arms you were not in the Spirit"

AP: "now I follow you ... how you behave is not the issue ... people are different and the Spirit manifests itself in different ways."

*** comments about arriving late, not being prepared, not singing, flipping through our books rather than paying attention, being distracted by gossip one hears when walking into the church and then spending the whole service trying to sort out

{at some point AP sat on the table behind the lectern. He remains the focus to whom everyone returns and he continues to take the discourse back to theological abstractness even when the audience reaches for more concrete examples.}

8:00 Closing

One person says she is new and do not most people's name. Several tell her. She turns to me and say "Herve" she smiles. {no hint of racial identification}

People live. Two of them say they are going to the finance committee meeting. I go to greet AP who is very pleasant. I mention Linda's planned visit to the senior event. He is enthusiastic {in his understated fashion, of course}.

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