

Putting the Holy Spirit in a Box  
Brandon Pierce

I spent last week at Pepperdine's annual lectureship called 'Harbor'. These conferences consist of a host of classes throughout the week on a variety of topics—one of which I taught. Each morning and evening there is a time for worship and a speaker. I want to reflect on one of the evening sermons that keeps bothering me.

The first evening's sermon was by Rick Atchley. Rick is the senior pastor at 'The Hills' church in Ft. Worth, TX—one of the largest churches still somewhat associated with Churches of Christ. He's been a well-known and popular speaker for a long time now. He is probably most notorious for being among the first in Churches of Christ, or at least one of the most high-profile Churches of Christ, to integrate instruments into their worship service.

If you're unfamiliar with the ins and outs of Churches of Christ that is a big deal. Although many today do not use instruments out of preference or tradition, that is a relatively new way of thinking about the place of instruments in our worship settings. I don't have the time (or the energy) to recount the story of why our churches do not use instruments, or why people were condemned simply because they used a guitar or piano in worship. Suffice it to say, we took texts like Ephesians 5:19 "speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord" as purposefully omitting any reference to instruments and insisting on the vocal aspect of our worship. We were probably the only ones who saw it that way, but the practice of acapella singing has become a mainstay in our churches for almost two hundred years. So, for a high-profile preacher and a large church to abandon this practice required a good deal of revolutionary thinking and thick skin.

In that light I don't think anyone was surprised when for the first evening keynote of Pepperdine's lectures Rick Atchley spoke adamantly and passionately about the dangers of putting the Holy Spirit in a box. The guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit, Rick said, was not something we control, nor is it something that always lands on the side of tradition and convention. If anything, the Holy Spirit in Acts demonstrates over and over again a pattern of breaking down conventions and traditions. If, as we believe, the Holy Spirit is God, one of the persons of the Trinity, then where the Spirit leads is where the will of God is found. If we put the Holy Spirit in a box and disallow any sense of development or innovation or intellectual maturation in the church, then we are rejecting the will of God.

I suspected part of the subtext of this speech were those battles that Rick fought several decades ago about the place of instruments in worship. Undoubtedly through study and prayer Rick and his church felt the Spirit moving beyond these strict, dogmatic boundaries. And that is exactly the kind of thing the Spirit tends to do. But I wondered if there was not something more underneath the surface. Rick never explained exactly what kinds of things we do that put the Holy Spirit in the box, but he made it clear it was about religious beliefs and practices. Was he really still hung up on this question of instruments? I doubted it. I've met Rick personally and he doesn't seem like someone to hold a grudge or fight the ghosts of the past. So I wondered what he was talking about. How does the church today tend to restrict the Spirit?

I could not help but wonder if we were talking about the new controversial issues in the church, which, at least in the southern part of the country (where Churches of Christ are far more common), are about beliefs regarding women and sexuality. Specifically, many churches still prohibit women from any part of the worship or leadership team, and many more churches condemn every form of same-sex attraction and/or sexual activity. Is that what Rick meant? Was he being vague on purpose because these issues are still so volatile?

I came away hoping to be pleasantly surprised. Perhaps Rick wants to lead his church into a more egalitarian and accepting place, and perhaps he sees the Spirit guiding us all there. I know that is how I see it. The Stamford Church of Christ is an extraordinary place where people serve together in the life of the church according to their gifts, not their biology. And it is a place that is open and affirming to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and others. I think this reflects the Kingdom of God by the leading of the Spirit, who we will not put in a box even if it makes us uncomfortable or grinds against “the way we have always done things.”

At the same time, knowing The Hills Church and its feet-dragging in regards to full female inclusion, and its adamant stance against the acceptability of same-sex sexual activity, I was more confused and confounded than anything. What do we mean by not putting the Spirit in a box? What kinds of beliefs and practices should we change even if it makes us uncomfortable? Are we still really talking about instruments in 2018? To be honest I’m sometimes a bit shocked that we’re still really talking about women and the acceptance of LGBTQ persons in the church in 2018.

My takeaway was this, I think Rick was right even if I don’t understand what specifically he was talking about. The same way he refused to put the Spirit in a box decades ago regarding instruments, I think we should refuse to put the Spirit in a box regarding who does and does not get to be a part of the church based on how God made them.

But I also think we need to be careful about this language of the Spirit. Just as we should refuse to put it in a box, it is also easy to say that the Spirit is leading us to the place we want to go in the first place. Forgive me if I doubt the Spirit will be leading the church to sanctify murder or exploitation or any other injustice. Perhaps at the end of the day we would do well to put the responsibility on ourselves as opposed to trying to claim divine sanction for our beliefs and practices.

We should look to where God is leading us, and not be afraid if it makes us uncomfortable. But we do not have direct, unfiltered access to that direction. We have study, prayer, good works, experiences that shape us, circumstances that orient us, and relationships that transform us. The Spirit is to be found between the lines of all of these factors and more. And in that respect I believe the Spirit is leading the Stamford Church of Christ.

— Brandon Pierce