
'What Manner of Spirit We Are'

An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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If you grew up like me, reading the King James Version of the Bible, you were haunted recently (June 30; Pentecost 3C) by some words left out of our gospel translation.

When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and *consume* them?" But he turned and rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55; NRSV; my emphasis).

Instead, the King James Version adds (in italics):

But He turned and rebuked them, *and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."* And they went to another village (Luke 9:55-56; NKJV).

Notice too that the epistle assigned to be read alongside that gospel uses that same word, 'consume.'

If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not *consumed* by one another. [Rather] Live by the Spirit, I say (Galatians 5:15-16; NRSV).

Thus the apostle Paul echoed Jesus' mission to 'save not destroy human lives' (cf. 'to save not condemn the world,' John 3:17). Recall, in that connection, the 'All Lives Matter' slogan that served, several years ago, as a reaction or push-back to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. For Jesus, indeed, *all lives matter*—but especially the lives of our opponents on every issue.

Why 'especially?' Because human zeal for any cause or issue so easily shifts into sacrificial zeal to consume and destroy our opponents (structurally related like all dualisms, some say). Notice, precisely in that connection, how the disciples' request to 'call down fire from heaven' invoked the signature act of the prophet, Elijah. Also featured in the assigned Old Testament reading that Sunday, it was Elijah who famously summoned fire from heaven to sanction mass execution of the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:38-40). May we not covet, with Elisha, that 'mantle of the prophet!'

Rather, we're called to a 'non-sacrificial' (cf. René Girard) perspective on 'what manner of spirit we are.' Consider in that regard David Livingstone's "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement," delivered to students at Cambridge University on December 4, 1857. (Acknowledgement: John Piper, 'Desiring God' <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/our-grand-obligation>)

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. . . . Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.

'What manner of spirit are we?' As typical sinners we inevitably continue forms of ritual sacrifice. But as Christ-like spirits we're called to 'desire mercy, not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.' To that prophetic text a more contemporary translation renders Jesus' addendum to Hosea: 'For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners' (Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 9:13; New International, New Living).

* "[Dr Livingstone's Cambridge lectures : together with a prefatory letter by the Rev. Professor Sedgwick](#)" Lecture I: Commerce and Christianity, p. 23: https://archive.org/stream/drlivingstonesca00livi/drlivingstonesca00livi_djvu.txt.

For salient video documentaries of Livingston's life and mission see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J6V1qXbc2Y#action=share> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5jbedFFErD4>