

1-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Love, D'Esta (2008) "Does All Flesh Mean Me?," *Leaven*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss1/7>

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Does All Flesh Mean Me?

D'ESTA LOVE

D'Esta Love is co-editor of Leaven Journal, a Chaplain at Pepperdine University and has an M.Div. from Pepperdine University. As a participant in the Stone-Campbell Symposium at Northwest Christian College, she preached this sermon (edited for publication) at the First Christian Church (Disciples) in Eugene, Oregon, March 20, 2007.

From the ancient world of the Old Testament, a prophet's voice is heard, proclaiming the word of the Lord. He speaks to the ethical present of his world with oracles of judgment, lamenting the calamity and devastation that has fallen upon the land and its people, followed by an oracle of hope in which he proclaims renewal and provision, joy and gladness. Then the prophet raises his eyes to the horizon and envisions a meaningful future in which all flesh will experience the outpouring of God's Spirit. It is God's vision for something entirely new. Hear the word of the Lord that came to Joel son of Pethuel:

After all this it will happen that . . .
I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions,
Even on your male and female slaves,
In those days, I will pour out my spirit (Joel 2.28–29).

With prophetic imagination, Joel looks beyond the world as it is to the world as it could or should or will be. His vision embodies God's own vision of a world where God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh without distinction. The prophet's words are spoken out of and to a world in which social relationships were marked by pairs of unequal status (dyads of power), each pair with a superior and an inferior member. We know them well from our reading of scripture: free/slave; male/female; Jew/Gentile; old/young.

But God envisions something utterly new for God's people—no longer separated, but united, and the unifying, empowering, liberating force is the Spirit of God poured out on all flesh. Notice the extent to which the prophet clarifies all flesh: male and female, young and old—even male and female slaves. Perhaps there were those in his world who had been excluded for so long that we might hear them ask, "Does all flesh really mean me?"

It is a logical question in their social world where exclusion was the expected norm for most, and all flesh would have most likely meant the Jews. But prophecies such as Joel's carry the promise of God's newness and leave the prophetic enterprise open to what God envisions, not what culture demands. The writers of the New Testament saw the fulfillment of these promises in their witness to Jesus who comes, as Luke tells us, as the prophet of God, filled with the Holy Spirit and bringing God's new day, not in some distant time and place but in the present tense.

All we need do is read the birth narratives of Luke's Gospel to observe the outpouring of God's Spirit upon all flesh. Luke presents Mary and Elizabeth, Zachariah, Simeon, and Anna as filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor and prophesying of God's deliverance as the mighty are brought down and the lowly lifted up so they together—on a level plane—might receive God's mercy.

In fact, in Joel's prophesy no one is lower in status or more powerless than a female slave. Yet Mary chooses this image for herself when she says, "He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1.48–49). It is our God who is at work here. So in Luke's Gospel we see men and women together—Zachariah and Elizabeth both righteous before God, and

Simeon and Anna full of the Holy Spirit, prophesying of God's salvation.

And we see Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, crossing the boundaries of his social world and in so doing pronouncing judgment on the ethical present of his world. His mission stretches across boundaries to include all humankind, even to the margins of society—to those who languish in invisible and silent worlds, made whole—forgiven because God's promises are being fulfilled. Filled with the Spirit of God, Jesus cuts across all divides of male and female, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, diseased and whole, clean and unclean, righteous and sinner, Jew and Gentile. Can you hear the woman at Simon's feast or the Gerasene demoniac or the ten lepers or the Samaritan village or Zacchaeus asking, "Does all flesh really mean me?" Luke pushes the boundaries to present God's vision fulfilled in Jesus. In so doing he prepares his readers—he prepares us—for the opening of the Book of Acts—for Pentecost, when God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh.

We should not be surprised when Peter stands at the dawn of God's bright new future and recalls Joel's vision. The setting of Pentecost itself evokes the fulfillment of Joel 2.28, as suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind and it filled the entire house and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter claims the promise of Joel and interprets these events as the inauguration of the last days. The word of the Lord spoken to and by Joel is proclaimed anew—proclaimed afresh—by Peter. Hear it again!

In the last days it will be, God declares,
That I will pour out my Spirit
Upon all flesh,
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,
And your old men shall dream dreams,
Even upon your slaves, both men and women,
In those days I will pour out my Spirit;
And they shall prophesy (Acts 2.17–18).

From Pentecost God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh in the earliest expansion of the church from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of Earth. We hear echoes of Joel's prophecy from Paul as he envisions a new humanity where there is "no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3.28). In the social world of the first century, characterized by rigid divides, the prophet's call was to full participation in the life of God, even though the cultural structures of hierarchy and dyads of power in their social world remained.

Am I making myself clear? As the Spirit of God moves across all the divides of human experience and the power structures of the ancient world, we see men and women of every strata of society praying and prophesying, breaking bread together—co-laborers together in the great expansion of the early church. In that social world men and women did not come to the table together—so divided was their world. Even their religious life was segregated, and women were excluded from the places of prayer and the study of Torah. They too might well have asked, "Does all flesh really mean me?" Yet something has happened so that those who had been excluded are now included, those who were far off are brought near. I hope you are capturing this vision. It is not societal change that breaks the divides and includes and empowers people for God—it is the outpouring of God's Spirit.

Can we envision a world in which our sons and our daughters will prophesy? We live in a social world influenced and transformed by democratic ideology. The constraints and social structures that divided the agrarian social world of scripture are not ours any more. And yet we still hold on to the vestiges of our cultural past. While our social world does not separate and divide men and women, too often our churches still do. It is out of that reality that I often ask, "Does all flesh mean me?"

Let me make this point again. It is not the process of industrialization or democratic ideology or social change that transforms us for God's purposes in the world—it is the power of God's Holy Spirit in any age, in any social world. It is the Spirit of God that equips men and women for ministry for God. Today we claim the promise of the Holy Spirit poured out upon us, but we have not fully received and embraced the gifts of the Spirit as given to men and women without distinction. In far too many of our churches women still sit in their silent worlds, unable to find their voices—even to speak God's name in prayer in the assembly of the saints.

I can only speak to my own experience in a *cappella* Churches of Christ. As a daughter of the Stone-Campbell heritage I could never have envisioned that my voice would be heard in this beautiful and historic church building. Even now, I often hear the invitation that “anyone who wants to may pray,” and I know that “anyone” does not mean me. The promise of God is so far-reaching and incredulous that I have to ask, “Does all flesh really mean me?” And I hear the angel say to Mary and to me, “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1.37).

We are raising up sons and daughters with hearts for God and hearts for ministry. Are we providing opportunities for both our sons and our daughters to use their gifts of prophesy? I am most privileged to be preaching to you tonight. But in Malibu, California, I would not be invited to preach in my own home congregation. We have work to do to fully embrace the gifts of our women in our churches. So I ask us again, can we envision a world in which the Spirit of God is poured out upon all flesh and our sons' and our daughters' voices are heard proclaiming the word of the Lord?

Perhaps the more burning question is, will we raise up prophets from among our sons and our daughters? Did you notice? The word of the Lord came to Joel, Son of Pethuel. We live in a noisy world and our children are distracted by so many things. Above the surface noise of their lives, can they hear the sacred voice that is calling? Can they, amid the distractions, see the world God envisions for them and hear the word God speaks to and through them. Our sons and daughters need places of prayer and meditation, places for reflection and inquiry and for the study of God's word so they might in turn speak into *our* ethical present and call *us* to the world envisioned for us by God. They need us to receive and honor their gifts, to receive and listen to the word the Lord speaks through them, so that neither our sons nor our daughters have to ask, “Does all flesh mean me?”

Can we hear the ancient prophesy afresh? Can we envision a world that freely receives the outpouring of God's Spirit? Can we envision God's future where we stand together as one new humanity (and this is particularly true of the divides that separate us in the Stone-Campbell Movement), no longer divided by our gender, our status, our place in the world, or our religious past, but empowered by the Spirit of God? Can we affirm tonight the promise that when God's Spirit is poured out on all flesh our sons and our daughters without distinction will prophesy, our old ones will dream dreams, and our young ones will see visions? Can we tonight hear and believe the word of the Lord?



The Beauty of Suffering

SARA BARTON AND JOSH GRAVES

This sermon was delivered by Sara Barton and Josh Graves at the Rochester Church of Christ, where Sara serves as the Minister for Small Groups and Josh serves as the Minister to Young Adults. In addition, Sara is the Campus Minister and Josh is an adjunct professor of religion at Rochester College.

Sara: A few years ago, I read an article titled, “The Foot is The New Hand.” The article stated that the industry that cares for feet is now as lucrative as the industry that cares for hands. Today we may purchase scrubs, lotions, and pedicure sets to pamper our toes and feet. Some customers now go into the salon just for a pedicure and are more concerned with how beautiful their feet are than their hands.