**Awakened Senses**

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Our spiritual ancestors are at times incomprehensible to us, even when they speak the same language as we do, because they see themselves and their world with different eyes than us.

A good example of this is the opening verse of Paul Gerhardt’s lovely, meditative hymn: ‘Now Rest Beneath Night’s Shadow.’ There he paints a vivid contrast between the world that has fallen asleep around him and a rather striking call for spiritual awakening as he gets ready for bed. It is even more striking in German where he sings: ‘But you my senses, up, get up; you shall begin to do what is well-pleasing to your Maker!’ This does not just refer to saying a bedtime prayer before he settles down for the night; it implies that he would continue to serve God throughout the night.

On the face of it this word of self-encouragement makes no sense at all, because as soon as we go to sleep, our five senses also fall asleep. Yet here he assumes that when we sleep our senses can wake up and become more alert than when we are awake. Our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching can be just as sharp, if not sharper, than when we are fully awake.

In this verse Gerhardt presupposes a view of the human soul that we no longer share in the west since the Enlightenment. Like his contemporaries, Gerhardt holds that just as we have five physical-mental senses, so we also possess five spiritual senses that correspond with them. While the five natural senses are given to all human beings in the order of creation, the five spiritual senses have, since the fall, been lost. They are asleep and dead until they are awoken and animated by God’s Spirit. God’s voice, His spoken word, quickens them and the understanding that comes through them.

This largely forgotten teaching recalls Hebrews 5:14 with its explanation of our nourishment by God’s word. That passage asserts: ‘But solid food is for the mature, for those who have had their senses trained in their receptive disposition to distinguish what is good from what is evil.’ The solid food of God’s word is received and enjoyed by those senses have been educated by it for reception of good gifts from it and through it.

The ancient Israelites never had ears to hear, eyes to see, or minds to understand what God was doing for them (Dt 29:4; Is 6:9-10). But in the new age Jesus rectifies this by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those who are his disciples see and hear what no one had previously seen and heard (Matt 13:16-17; Lk 10:23-24). They have the hearing of faith that is given through the proclamation of the gospel (Rom 10:17). They have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to know what God has in store for them (Eph 1:17). They have tasted God’s heavenly gift, the goodness of His word, and the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:4, 5; 1 Pet 2:2). They smell the sweet fragrance of Christ as he makes himself known to them in the gospel (2 Cor 2:14-16; Eph 5:2). Like the risen Lord with his disciples, he lets them touch him (Lk 24:39; 1 Jn 1:1). So by his incarnation God’s Son makes himself available to them in their five natural senses, so that they can perceive him with our five spiritual senses. By his Spirit God reveals what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived, what he has prepared for those who love him, so that they understand what God has given them (1 Cor 2:8-16).

This teaching is not meant to stimulate theoretical speculation but to provide practical help for us liturgically and devotionally. In Holy Communion Christ interacts with us by the combination of our natural senses with our spiritual senses. There we hear him speaking God’s grace to us in human words; there we see him offering himself to us with human hands; there we taste his goodness and smell his fragrance in the bread and wine; there we receive and touch him with human hands. There he engages our five natural senses to awaken our five spiritual senses. Meditation on God’s word also engages our five senses. As we ponder it we hear what it says to us, see what it gives to us, smell and taste what it provides for our nourishment and enjoyment, and take hold of it, so that it touches us.

By singing his evening song Gerhardt rouses his spiritual senses to present them to God as a well-pleasing spiritual offering of meditation and praise during his sleeping hours, an offering that anticipates the perfect cooperation of his natural senses with his spiritual senses at his bodily resurrection.

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