

The Holy Spirit

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From time to time, brethren or others who attend here will ask me to preach a sermon on a particular topic. Whenever someone first makes such a request, I invariably reply, “Keep reminding me about it! I want to preach that for you, but I am terrible at remembering to actually write the sermon.” Sometimes people forget their desired topic too, but sometimes they remember and persist until I remember. This sermon, for instance, arose at the instigation of our own Colin Andrews, who has been faithfully reminding me that I am supposed to preach it for a couple of months now.

The topic that Colin requested is nothing less than the Holy Spirit. In truth, part of the reason why it’s taken me so long to get around to it is that I had trouble figuring out how to boil down such a massive subject to one single sermon. This morning’s effort, then, is only the barest of bare overviews of the topic, but hopefully it will help Colin and others in his position to develop an initial understanding of it. Let’s consider, then, the Holy Spirit.

The Nature of the Holy Spirit

Logically, we ought to begin by examining the nature of the Holy Spirit. First, we should note that the Holy Spirit is **PART OF THE GODHEAD**. This is apparent from texts like Matthew 28:19. Here, as in so many other places in Scripture, “name” means “authority”. We are therefore baptized by the authority of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this series, the Holy Spirit is dealt with separately from the Father and the Son, yet is worthy to appear in the same list with them. This tells us first of all that the Holy Spirit is a being. Indeed, as far as I can figure, it’s impossible for a non-being, something without a personality, to have authority. Second, if the Holy Spirit has equal authority with the Father and the Son, then it too must be deity. No non-deity could claim to have that kind of authority.

However, as is also true of the Father and the Son, the Spirit does not lead a completely separate existence either. Even though it has its own personality, there are many passages that make clear that it shares in the one-ness of God. I’m not going to delve too deeply into all of that, though, because, as always, the nature of God defies our comprehension, and really, why should it not? Why should we, the creature, expect to fully understand the Creator? When it comes to the nature of God, we are generally better off resisting the temptation to make everything make perfect sense to us.

Before we go on, note that the pronoun I’m using to describe the Holy Spirit is “it”. I do this not because I believe that the Holy Spirit is some kind of diffuse spiritual force, but because I don’t see anything in the Bible that would lead me to assign a gender to it. Because God is the Father and Jesus is the Son, they are both necessarily male. It is true that our translations helpfully assign a “He” to the Holy Spirit, but the Greek pronouns there actually give no indication that the Spirit is male, or female for that matter. I am most happy, then, using “it” to describe the Spirit.

Second, the Holy Spirit is **RESPONSIBLE FOR SPIRITUAL GIFTS**. Paul is quite clear on this in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. The Bible is full of stories of people doing incredible things, everything from outrunning a chariot at full gallop to raising the dead. I enjoy reading about things like that in fantasy novels, but if I encountered similar stories in any other history book, I would laugh with disbelief. Nonetheless, we should accept these accounts when we find them in Scripture because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Moses, Elijah, and Paul couldn’t work those wonders on their own. Instead, they used powers that were given to them by the Spirit to fulfill God’s purposes.

Indeed, the record of these miraculous events is still crucial to our faith today. On one level, the things we believe are unbelievable. Who of us could imagine that God would put on human flesh, only to die a brutal death so that our souls could be cleansed of our sins? For that matter, who could imagine that we have souls or sins in the first place? However, because the Bible so accurately presents a record of supernatural intervention in the natural world, we have good reason to believe that the supernatural world exists too, and that in it, we have no greater friend than Jesus. If Peter could heal the sicknesses of the flesh by the power of the Spirit, then Jesus can heal our spirits too.

Third, the Holy Spirit is the **SOURCE OF INSPIRATION**. Paul makes this quite clear in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13. In a very real sense, this is why we are all here this morning. Mankind has written millions of different books, but I see no reason to assemble several times a week, and indeed to dedicate my life, to figuring out any single book that man has written. The Bible, though, claims to be more than that. It claims to be the only book written by God, and within its pages, it contains the evidence to support that claim. The agent of the creation of the Bible was none other than the Holy Spirit. It stirred up the authors of the Bible to record God’s will for mankind, not merely on the level of vague generalities, but on the level of the very words of the text. Each one of those words conveys the intent of the Spirit.

This is crucial for the way we study the Bible. Sometimes, we take a broad overall view of the Scripture in our reading of it. At other times, though, we zoom in on its tiniest details, considering elements as comparatively subtle as the tenses of verbs as we search for the meaning of the text. That kind of study of a human text would be pointless. I’m an experienced writer and speaker, and yet I know that such scrutiny of my words wouldn’t yield anything fruitful. I’m not that precise. However, because the words of the Bible are chosen by the Holy Spirit, they are the product of superhuman precision. Every word of the Bible can bear up under the weight we put on it, because each one is inspired.

Finally, the Holy Spirit **INDWELLS EVERY CHRISTIAN**. Take, for instance, Paul's testimony in Romans 8:9. Some people take this very Biblical concept and run with it to very un-Biblical extremes. They claim not merely an indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but a personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit speaks to them in the silence of their hearts and guides them to make good decisions. There is enough meat in this subject to make for a sermon all its own, but let me briefly point out two problems with belief in a personal indwelling. First, such belief inevitably makes our faith subjective. If we become convinced that the Holy Spirit has led us, say, to a particular understanding of a passage, we make it impossible for anyone else to reason with us about the text. After all, what kind of logical argument can trump the Spirit of God? This one gets really sticky when "the Holy Spirit" leads two people to two different understandings.

Likewise, if we are convinced that the Spirit speaks to us within our hearts, we are likely to interpret our own positive feelings as evidence of God's approval of our choices. There is no extreme to which people will not take this. For instance, I know a man whose ex-wife claimed that she was led by the Holy Spirit to cheat on Him. God's word is trustworthy and provides an objective standard. However, our feelings do not, no matter what we claim about the Spirit.

Instead, here as elsewhere in Scripture, we need to understand the concept of indwelling not as personal and literal, but in terms of influence or control. The Holy Spirit indwells us when we listen to its teaching in the word and allow that teaching to guide our course of conduct. Just as in Romans 7, sin indwells the wicked, in Romans 8, the Holy Spirit indwells the righteous. People should be able to look at our lives and see that we are spiritual people.

Jesus and the Spirit

During the second portion of our study this morning, before the Lord's Supper, let's turn our attention to the topic of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The interaction between the two is of extreme importance. First, Jesus **WAS PREDICTED BY** the Spirit. Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:10-11. At times, we fall into the trap of thinking of spiritual gifts as something that began on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, but that's hardly the case. All of the prophets of the Old Testament received that gift from the Holy Spirit too. They prophesied all kinds of things of varying importance, but the most important subject that any of them addressed was the coming Messiah. At the time of Jesus, readers of the Hebrew Scriptures probably thought that the prophets were talking about two different men. One of them was a descendant of David who would take the throne of His father and reign forever. The other was a humble man who would be abused and ultimately killed by His enemies. The great mystery of the gospel is that these two seemingly incompatible threads of prophecy actually lead to the same person, Jesus, who is both King of kings and suffering Servant. Everything that was predicted concerning Him, Jesus fulfilled, from having His enemies cast lots for His garments to being exalted to the right hand of God. This fulfillment, which seemed impossible to His contemporaries, seems inevitable to us.

This too is a cornerstone of our faith. It is humanly impossible for men like David and Isaiah, men who lived centuries before Jesus drew His first breath, to predict what would happen in the life of Christ in such detail. And yet, that's exactly what they did, and it's evident everywhere in the Bible. We are logically compelled to accept the Bible's own explanation for this. God may do what man cannot, and these prophecies are evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Jesus **WAS ANOINTED BY** the Holy Spirit. This too is something that Peter confirms, this time in his words to Cornelius in Acts 10:37-38. The time at which this anointing took place must have been when Jesus was baptized by John and the Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. Even before then, Jesus knew that He was the Son of God, as revealed by His words to His earthly father and mother in Luke 2 when they discovered Him teaching in the temple at age 12. However, only after the Spirit came upon Him did He have the power He needed to begin His ministry. We've already talked about how the spiritual gifts of Peter, Paul, and other early Christians enabled them to confirm the word. This was equally important during the work of Jesus Himself. In John 3, Jesus notes that He has received the Spirit without measure, and indeed, no one before or since has displayed the same range of supernatural abilities that Jesus did. Peter's gifts provided the necessary evidence that he spoke for God. The gifts of our Lord provided the evidence needed to persuade an honest man that He was God Himself.

Third, Jesus **SENT** the Holy Spirit **AS HELPER** to the apostles. He makes this promise on the very night of His betrayal, in John 14:25-26. As you may have noticed, throughout this lesson, we've been developing a general theme. Generally speaking, the Holy Spirit operates in one of two ways, either by revealing the word of God, or by confirming that word through signs and wonders. Here, we are certainly dealing with the process of revelation. Jesus promises two things. First, the apostles through the Holy Spirit would be able to remember everything that Jesus said to them. This perfect recollection is probably the same thing as the spiritual gift of knowledge. Second, the Spirit would teach the apostles all things, presumably so that they could pass them along to others. This, we can understand as the spiritual gift of prophecy. It is significant because it shows that while He was on the earth, Jesus did not reveal the entire will of God, so if we concern ourselves only with the red letters in our Bibles, we're going to miss out on a full understanding of it.

The fulfillment of this promise probably takes place in John 20, when Jesus breathes on the apostles and commands them to receive the Holy Spirit. At that point, even though the apostles didn't have the power to confirm the word yet, they had the potential to reveal every aspect of the will of God. The way that they used this potential is evident

in our New Testaments even today. For instance, the way that John is able to recount lengthy dialogues between Jesus and the Jews that read like real conversation shows how thoroughly those events were brought to his remembrance. Likewise, Peter claims in 2 Peter 1 to have received all things pertaining to life and godliness. It is no exaggeration to say that we owe our faith itself to Jesus' promise here in John 14 and the way that it was fulfilled by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Jesus **BAPTIZED IN** the Holy Spirit. He promises such a baptism to the apostles in Acts 1:4-5. Note the difference in language between what we see here and what we saw in John 14. There, Jesus said the Holy Spirit would help them remember and learn. Here, the Holy Spirit will clothe them with power. This promise, then, appears to concern itself not with inspiration but with the spectacular miracles that did so much to aid the spread of the early church.

We can probably assign the fulfillment of the John 14 promise to John 20, but we can pinpoint the fulfillment of this one with much greater certainty. It is a prediction of what would happen to the apostles only 10 days from this point on the day of Pentecost, when Jesus began the process of pouring forth His Spirit on all mankind. That process would be completed a few years later, in Acts 10, when the Gentiles in the form of the household of Cornelius also received this outpouring. It's unclear and unlikely that the household of Cornelius could pass their spiritual gifts on like the apostles could, but their baptism in the Holy Spirit signified that Gentiles, including us, could receive the gift of salvation.

This gives us much to reflect on before the Lord's Supper. Today, as with every first day of the week, we are going to partake of a memorial meal to remember the sacrifice of Christ. However, that sacrifice cannot be separated from the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit predicted it, thereby giving meaning to the event when it occurred. The Spirit gave Jesus the power that He used to establish His divinity. The Spirit taught the apostles everything they used to proclaim the gospel of Christ, the same gospel that 2000 years later has reached us. Finally, the Spirit bestowed the power to work the wonders that bolstered faith then and now, as we read about the record of those miracles in the word. Let's be thankful, then, not just for what Jesus did for us, but for what the Holy Spirit has done in bequeathing that story to us.

The Spirit Today

Finally this morning, we are going to address the topic of the work of the Holy Spirit today. We're going to begin this discussion, though, by pointing out something it does not do. The Spirit **DOES NOT GRANT SPIRITUAL GIFTS**. This can be a complicated study, but we're going to pare it down to its essentials by considering only 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. The passage is too long to put on the screen in its entirety, so I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles so that we can read it together. In the larger context of 1 Corinthians, Paul is addressing the subject of spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 12 concerns the use of different gifts in the body of Christ; 1 Corinthians 14 concerns the problem of their abuse in the assembly. In the middle of this discussion, Paul introduces the topic of love to argue that love is more important than any spiritual gift can be. Right here, particularly in v. 8, he identifies one of the characteristics that makes love superior. The spiritual gifts that the Corinthians cherished would pass away, but love would not.

To say that the meaning of this text is hotly contested is to put things lightly! Although there are doubtless many different approaches to the meaning of the text, two in particular commend themselves to our attention. Some people, generally those who believe that they have miraculous spiritual gifts today, argue that "the perfect" in this passage is heaven. In support of this, they point to v. 12 and say that the only time when we will see God face to face is in heaven.

By contrast, the position usually taken in churches of Christ is that "the partial" and "the perfect" refer to states of revelation. Spiritual gifts like prophecy and knowledge existed only so long as some of God's will remained to be revealed. Once the revelation was completed, though, the gifts that accompanied it faded away. In support of this, we typically point to the discussion of partial and full knowledge in v. 12 and regard the "face to face" language as figurative.

The resolution of this debate is not immediately obvious, but it can be found in v. 13. Here, we learn that love is not going to be the only thing that remains after the spiritual gifts depart. Instead, along with love, faith and hope are also going to endure. This poses a serious problem for the modern-day-spiritual-gifts people. Love will certainly exist in heaven, it is true. However, how can we possibly have faith in heaven when everything we have ever believed will be plain before us? How can we possibly have hope in heaven when we have already received everything we hoped for? There has to be some point at which we will have faith and hope but not the gifts, and that can't be heaven.

This brings us to the conclusion, then, that "the perfect" is most logically understood as God's completed revelation, which we have in His word. The Spirit still works powerfully through that word, but we should not look any more for any miraculous spiritual gifts. They belong to the time of the apostles, not to our day.

Now that we've settled that issue, let's consider the way that the Spirit **INTERCEDES**. Consider Romans 8:26-27. This is outside the norm of what we've already seen is the work of the Spirit, but we should be glad it's there regardless. This text applies to a place where many of us have found ourselves, a situation in which we desire desperately to make some appeal to God, but we are so distraught that we can't even put the words together. We wouldn't be able to communicate effectively with another human being in that circumstance, but we can communicate effectively with God. Just as the Spirit reveals the will of God to us, in that situation, it reveals our will to God. We never need to be concerned that the incoherence of our thoughts will become a barrier for our prayers. The Holy Spirit will intercede for us instead.

Third, the Holy Spirit **TESTIFIES** to our salvation. John raises this point in 1 John 5:6. Before we go constructing wild theories about what this might mean, we need to pay attention to the words of the text. John tells us that the Spirit testifies because the Spirit is the truth. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is embodied in the word of God, merely that it is through the word that the Spirit speaks. After we have obeyed the gospel, the blood of Jesus testifies to our salvation because our hearts have been sprinkled with it, the water of baptism testifies that we have been immersed in it, and the word of God testifies that we have fulfilled the requirements for becoming a disciple of Christ. Remember: the Greek word *paracletos*, which is usually translated “comforter” when it is applied to the Holy Spirit, can also be translated “advocate”, someone who will speak for us in court. From this, we should understand that when we stand before God on the Day of Judgment, the Spirit, the water, and the blood will all testify in our favor.

Finally, the Holy Spirit **GUIDES** us today. This process is well described in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Whenever we are talking about inspiration, we are always talking about the Spirit. Just as we expire when we breathe out our last breath, God inspired the apostles and prophets by breathing His Spirit into them. Through the Spirit, the righteous men of old recorded God’s will, and through it today, the Spirit continues to teach, reprove, correct, and train us.

Among brethren, there is a great deal of discussion about whether the Spirit works in our lives through other means than the word. It is true that we see men guided by the voice of the Spirit in the New Testament, as when it told Paul where to preach and where not to preach, but all of the men with whom the Spirit interacted in that way had miraculous spiritual gifts. We never see the Spirit speaking directly to a non-prophet. Second, when we go through the Scripture and list out all the things that it says the Spirit does for us: convict us, guide us, glorify God, and so on, all of those things can be accomplished through the word. God typically does not provide what is not needed. If the Holy Spirit can fully accomplish its work through the word, we should not look for it to act outside of the word.