

God's Personal Presence

The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience (John 14:15-31)

Three Pictures

Our talks for the next three weeks in the evening service are going to be on the subject of the Holy Spirit.

Tonight I'll be speaking about the Holy Spirit and Christian Experience. The second week of the series will be about the Holy Spirit and Christian Lifestyle, and the final week the Holy Spirit and Christian Community.

It's a big subject, and there's a lot that we're going to have to leave out - I hope that somewhere along the way the questions that you have will be addressed; if they're not, please do catch up with us after the service, or email us a question during the week.

I want to start tonight with three visual aids - three little objects that I think represent different ways that many of us think about the Holy Spirit.

The first is the biggest and longest one: it's a power lead - an extension cord. And I think for many people, this is how they picture the Holy Spirit. God is up there in heaven, and we are down here on earth, but he gives us a kind of spiritual extension lead, so that we can plug into God and get access to his power to overcome all the obstacles and barriers that we face in life. That's the first picture.

The second one is a soccer ball – this one is a pretty lousy example, but that's not the reason I brought it along. The reason I brought it along is to evoke the World Cup going on over in Germany at the moment, and all the hype and the excitement and sense of occasion associated with it. Because I think for a lot of us, that is the second main association that we have in our minds when we think about the Holy Spirit. We talk about the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, and what we have in mind is kind of like the hype that you experience when a big crowd are together and really excited, and you feel that rush of emotion and you lose yourself in the passion of the crowd; and so if you go to church, and the numbers are big, and the music is good, and you feel the hype, you go home and you feel like the Holy Spirit was really there at church tonight. And if the numbers are a bit smaller, and the music is a bit flat, and you don't get the tingles up and down your spine, you think - well, I guess the Holy Spirit didn't show up tonight.

The third little object that I brought along is a bottle of pills. Now these ones are just echinacea, but the kind of ones I have in mind are the sort that are a bit more potent and unpredictable in their effects. Because for many people, I think, we tend to think about the Holy Spirit as being kind of like a drug, or a pill that you can pop, that alters your mood, or maybe causes you to behave in strange and unpredictable ways. And depending on our personality type we're either into that or a bit nervous of it.

Have you ever found yourself thinking about the Holy Spirit in one of those ways?

In fairness, I'd have to say there is a little bit of truth in all of them – a little bit! The Bible does say that the Holy Spirit gives us power to serve God and to witness to Jesus Christ. And sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit can definitely be accompanied by a sense of excitement, and the presence of a big crowd, and so on. And sometimes the work of the Holy Spirit does have the effect of altering our minds and our moods. And so I guess what we do is we start with those kind of images of what the Holy Spirit sometimes **does**, and we work our way back to who or what the Holy Spirit **is**. That is to say, we build up our understanding of the Holy Spirit from some of the descriptions that the Bible gives for what the **work** of the Holy Spirit sometimes is, and we neglect what the Bible tells us about the **person** of the Holy Spirit.

The Who and the How

Another way of putting it is that we get confused between the 'who' and the 'how', so that we reverse their importance - it's a kind of spiritual dyslexia. That is to say, we keep wanting to know *how* we can have a more powerful experience of church; how we can feel better about ourselves; how we can catch the fire; how we can plug into God; when the Bible keeps speaking to us about *who* God is - what his character is, about his love and his holiness and his grace and his righteousness - and about the way he has revealed himself to us in Jesus.

So when we talk about the Holy Spirit, we tend to focus in on the 'how' stuff, and miss out on what is much more basic and much more important. And so we have all kinds of debates and arguments and concerns about how and when and how much of the Holy Spirit you can get, and what you can get the Holy Spirit to do for you,

and how you can tell if the Holy Spirit is in some experience you've had, and yet in the midst of all that, the **person** of the Holy Spirit remains a kind of vague, grey blur.

If we could only listen to what the **Bible** says about who the Holy Spirit is, and about **whose** Spirit he is, and what **his** priorities and concerns are, then maybe some of the other debates we have about what is and isn't the work of the Holy Spirit would come into a clearer perspective. So let's turn to the Bible, and to one of the key passages about the Holy Spirit, in John chapter 14.

The Promise of Jesus

The shadow of departure

It's a passage that comes at a point in John's gospel where the shadow of Jesus' departure is hanging very heavily over his disciples. Jesus is sharing a meal with his disciples. John tells us in chapter 13 v. 2: "The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God." That is to say, he knew that the hour of his death and resurrection was approaching. And so, in chapter 13 v. 33 he says to the disciples: "My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going you cannot come."

There is a mood of real heaviness and sadness amongst the disciples, because they are coming to realise that he is going away from them. Their time with him is coming to an end. And in that context, in that context of Jesus last meal with his disciples, under the shadow of his departure, he gives them a promise. He says to them, verse 18: "I will not leave you as orphans." I am going away. The time of my physical, earthly presence amongst you is coming to an end. But I am not going to leave you alone and destitute.

A double promise:

When you read it carefully, from our perspective on this side of the resurrection and Pentecost, you see that it's actually a double promise.

- Resurrection

"I will come to you... you will see me.. on that day" (vv.18-20)

In the first place, especially in verses 18-20, it's a promise that is fulfilled in the resurrection. Jesus says to his disciples: "I will come to you" - as in fact he does in John 20. "Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day" - that is, the day of the resurrection - "you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

- Holy Spirit

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever." (v.16)

But it's not just a promise of the resurrection. It's a promise that also spills over into one of the main consequences of the resurrection, and that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, verse 15: "If you love me, you will obey what I command, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of Truth. The World cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you, and will be in you."

That word "Counsellor" in the NIV is a difficult one to translate into English. The Greek word is παρακλητος, which means someone you call out to to come to you and help you. In secular Greek it's a word that is generally used for a barrister who comes to help you in court, and in at least one place it can have that meaning in the Bible. But here in John's gospel it seems to have that broader meaning of someone who comes to you to help you - someone who comes to be with the disciples just as Jesus was with the disciples - except this time he won't just be with them; he will be in them.

It's important to grasp the fact that Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit as a person, not just a power. In a lot of places, in the Old Testament especially, the Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit exercising the power of God in the world and in people's lives, and you get metaphors like being filled with the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit being poured out, that might make it sound as if the Holy Spirit was just an impersonal force, like water or electricity.

But there are also many places in the Bible that make it quite clear that that is a completely inadequate understanding of the Holy Spirit. According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is a person, not just a power. The word 'spirit' itself is a neuter word in Greek, but a number of times in these chapters of John's gospel he goes out of

his way to use a masculine pronoun for the Holy Spirit, in order to emphasise the point that the Holy Spirit is a person, and should be spoken of as a person.

That is the promise that Jesus give to his disciples. He will go away in his death, but he will come back to them in his resurrection. He will go away in his ascension to heaven, and he will come back again, verse 3, to take them to be with him; and in the mean-time he will not leave them alone and destitute. He will send the Holy Spirit to be with them.

Living in the Promise

If that is the promise of Jesus, what does it mean to live in that promise? What does it mean to live out the reality of what he has promised in our experience? What exactly is it that Jesus has promised us?

Loving and being loved

The first thing to grasp is that the heart of what Jesus is speaking about is a relationship. He is speaking about loving and being loved by God. The presence of the Holy Spirit is experienced in the context of that kind of relationship with God. That is how the whole passage begins: “If you love me...”. Verse 17 elaborates on that: the world outside - the world that hates Jesus - does not receive the Holy Spirit because it cannot receive the Holy Spirit. This is a promise for those who love Jesus. If you have that relationship, you have the Holy Spirit. If you do not have that relationship, you do not have the Holy Spirit.

And the relationship is a two-way relationship. Verse 21: “He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” The presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is all about the outworking of that relationship with God. It’s about loving and being loved by the Lord Jesus; loving and being loved by God the Father. It’s not something separate and independent from that; it’s inseparable from it.

And the sort of love that Jesus is speaking about is a love that issues in obedience. Not the sort of grudging obedience that an employee might give to an employer because they’re afraid of getting sacked. Rather, the kind of obedience that comes from a willing heart. Jesus stresses that connection between love and obedience again

and again in these verses, because when it comes to our relationship with God, they belong together.

‘Obedience’ without love is legalism. ‘Love’ without obedience is emotionalism.

And the pattern for how we are to put them together is the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Did you notice how similar the last verse of the passage is to the first? Verse 15: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” Verse 31: “The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”

Jesus in us, us in Him

But the relationship is more than loving and being loved. It’s about Jesus dwelling in us, and us in him. Verse 20: “On that day, you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” Verse 23: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

Did you notice how the presence of the Holy Spirit also involves the presence of Jesus, which also involves the presence of God the Father. If the Holy Spirit is in you, then Christ is in you. And if you have him, then you have the Father. So many of the problems that we get into over the work of the Holy Spirit come from tearing apart the Trinity, as if the Holy Spirit had another agenda and another way of operating from Jesus. As John Stott writes in his book: “The Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit”: “Christian experience is experience of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There really is no such thing as ‘an experience of the Holy Spirit’ from which the Father and the Son are excluded.”

Jesus’ words

We’ve spoken about the Holy Spirit in terms of the presence of Jesus; in terms of God dwelling in us, making his home in us. Which forces us to ask the question: “What do we mean by that?” In what sense is Jesus inside us when we have the Holy Spirit? I wonder how many kids from Christian families grew up thinking that if you cut them open you’d find Jesus somewhere inside there, in their intestines.

Over time, of course, we learn that what we're talking about is not a physical presence. It's not something you can touch or feel or see. It doesn't mean there's some organ of the body that you can locate the presence of God in. The Bible talks about Christ dwelling in our hearts, but if you took me down to the anatomy lab and cut me open, and made an incision in my heart, you wouldn't find Jesus in there. None of us believes that!

But what do we mean, then, when we say that Jesus dwells in us by his Spirit? What we're talking about is not something not something natural but something supernatural. Not something physical but something spiritual. And it is something that involves Jesus' words. The presence of Jesus is the presence of his word. That's what he says in chapter 15 - in one breath he says: "Remain in me and I in you." In the next breath it is: "Remain in me, and my words in you." That's not to say that Jesus is just another dead man like Socrates or Plato or Karl Marx, who lives on in his teaching. But it does mean that the Jesus who is alive today chooses to do his work in us through his word, speaking to our hearts.

And so that is what he says the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, will do for us. Verse 26: "But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." The presence of the Holy Spirit is a speaking presence. That's why he is called the Spirit of truth. And his words are not his own words but the words of Jesus. The work of the Holy Spirit is not to whisper all kinds of new things into our ears, but to remind us of the words of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit worked in the hearts and minds of the apostles to inspire the New Testament Scriptures that they wrote, recording the words and works of Jesus. And the same Spirit continues to speak through those Scriptures to us, to our hearts, as we read them and hear his voice. The words of the Holy Spirit are not his own words, verse 26, but the words of Jesus. And the words of Jesus, verse 24, are not his own words either - they are the words of his Father. Once again, we are back to the Trinity, aren't we.

So when people try to separate those things and pull them apart, we have to resist them with all the strength that we've got. When people try to distinguish between Christians who are more into the Word and others who are more into the Spirit, we have to say to them: that is a nonsensical description, when you understand what the Scriptures say about Jesus and the Word of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Experiencing the first fruits

That, then, is what Jesus promises us is the experience of living the Christian life, of living as a disciple of Jesus between Pentecost and his return. It is the experience of loving and being loved by God. It is the experience of having God make his home in us by his Spirit. It is the experience of God speaking to us as the Holy Spirit speaks the Word of Christ to us in the Scriptures.

But what about when our experience seems to fall short of that? What about when we don't really feel love for God welling up inside us? What about when God seems distant from us, and we're not really confident deep down that he loves us at all? What about when the Scriptures seem hard to understand, and even harder to believe, and even harder to obey?

The first thing to remember if you're in that situation is that the reality of these things does not depend on how we feel about them. These are promises of Jesus. If we are truly his disciples; if we have put our trust in him; if we have given our lives to him, then these things that he promises are true for us no matter how we may feel on a particular day. If you've got a thousand essays due and you've got the flu and you didn't have your quiet time this morning, the chances are you probably won't feel all that close to God. But he still is close to you; his Spirit still is in you; he still does love you. And that is true no matter how you feel, if you are in Christ. If we rush off in a thousand directions looking for some experience that will take away our doubts about whether God really loves us, then we are saying that the promise of Jesus is not enough for us. He has given us his word; if we are people who love him and trust him and take him at his word, that is enough for us.

The second thing to remember is that our experience of the Holy Spirit is an experience of the first fruits - that is to say, it is not the finished product, but a taste of things to come. In this age, we have the promise of Jesus that when we trust in him, he comes to make his home in us, in our hearts. But that is only a dim shadow of what it will be for us in the future, when we die or when Jesus comes us again, and he takes us to make our home with him.

Here in this same chapter, in John 14, Jesus tells us in the opening verses: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

That is the ultimate experience of intimacy with God. That is the ultimate experience of being close to God and knowing his presence. And anything we experience this side of heaven is only ever going to be a kind a shadow, an appetiser, a foretaste of that. It’s like when you’re up at the supermarket, and they’re doing one of those product demonstrations, for smoked salmon, or a new kind of yoghurt, or something, and you get to taste a little bit. It’s the real thing, but it’s only a foretaste, it’s just the firstfruits. It’s like that with our experience of the Holy Spirit. It’s the real thing, but it’s always going to leave us hungry for more.

The third thing to remember is that this promise of Jesus about the presence and activity of God in our lives, even this side of heaven, this promise of Jesus is one that needs to be believed and grabbed onto and lived out from day to day. It’s a godly desire to long for a closer experience of our relationship with God, even this side of heaven; to long for a deeper love for him, and for a deeper awareness of his love for us.

And that is the prayer that Paul teaches us to pray in Ephesians. Paul writes, in Ephesians 1:17: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation [and he’s praying for Christians here], I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you - that is, that he make keep giving you - the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better...” And in chapter 3 verse 16: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts, through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God.”