

## Focus on the Spirit - John 16v5-15 - Burton Baptist Church - 12/07/09

*"Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*

*When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*

*"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.*

*(John 16v5-15 NIV)*

This section of St. John's gospel breaks into three sections:

1. The Necessity of the Spirit.
2. The Activity of the Spirit in the World - Birthing the Church.
3. The Activity of the Spirit in the Church - Sustaining the Church.

### **1 The Necessity of the Spirit** - Why is it better for the disciples that Jesus goes away and the Spirit comes?

In his incarnation Jesus emptied himself of some of the attributes of godhead. For example, in his earthly existence Jesus could not be omnipresent. Jesus could teach and lead a small group of people - an inner circle of 3, an apostolic group of 12, a discipling group of 72 and perhaps a hundred or so around the periphery.

For the Christian Church to succeed, this limitation must be removed. Whilst the apostles might have preferred their physical access to Jesus, the Church needs the wider ministry only made possible by the Spirit.

Not only will the Spirit be available to Churches and Christians universally without geographical limitation, he will also have the capacity to indwell them - opening up a new depth of intimacy with God. In a real sense the disciples could be closer to Jesus in his absence than in his presence, for the Spirit of Jesus would then be inside them.

### **2 The Activity of the Spirit in the World - Birthing the Church**

So the Spirit is going to open up new possibilities for the Church, but that comes later, Jesus has first to explain how the Spirit is going to bring into existence the Church.

Jesus is about to be arrested, tried by a religious court and by secular authority. He will be found guilty and condemned to death and the sentence will be executed.

Jesus explains that the Spirit's activity in the World will be to turn upside down this evaluation of Jesus. The Spirit's rôle will be to convince men and women that Jesus' accusation, condemnation and punishment have been a complete travesty of justice. This understanding and **ONLY** this understanding of Jesus, enables men and women **to become members of the Church**.

We need to emphasise an important point here: The ministry of the Holy Spirit is **ALWAYS** about Jesus. The ministry of the Spirit in relation to the world is always to show the world that they are **crucially, dreadfully, tragically wrong in their estimation of Jesus**.

So when the Spirit brings gifts of healing to men and women, these gifts are primarily acts that are to glorify the risen Jesus and to convince men and women to believe in him. When the

Spirit delivers people from the power of sin and Satan these acts are primarily designed to testify to the victory of Jesus over the Prince of this world. When the Spirit guides and teaches the Church through prophetic teaching and words of knowledge, these acts of the Spirit are primarily intended that the Church might be a stronger, better worshipper and witness to the risen Lord Jesus. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is ALWAYS about Jesus.

If ever someone comes to you with something they believe is from the Holy Spirit and it is not essentially centred on Jesus, be very, very careful about accepting it.

The Spirit will convince the world about the truth of Jesus in three ways - about sin, righteousness and judgement.

**(a) In regard to sin, because men do not believe in me**

I don't know about you, but I struggled to understand this section. But then I realised that when Jesus died on the cross he died for the sins of the world:

*The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1v29, NIV).*

So now there is only one kind of sin that exists in the universe - forgiven sin.

*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit. (1 Peter 3v18).*

How is it we move into the experience of this forgiveness? Through acknowledging Jesus as God, the Lord and Saviour of the world. If we don't believe Jesus was God then his death can't have any significance for us. He was simply a good man, a prophet who's death was a tragedy maybe, but certainly not the crucial, key event in human history.

Only the intimate conviction that Jesus was God himself, sacrificial dying for the sins of the world, makes his death a significant event for my life.

That is why believing in Jesus is the absolute essential element of Christian salvation.

*That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

*For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

*(Romans 10vv9-10, NIV)*

Catholic spirituality expresses this truth in the sign of the cross, you cross your mouth, your forehead and your heart, to express the three elements of confession, intellectual belief and heartfelt faith. Without this conviction about the person of Jesus, we cannot believe that his death is of salvific significance for all mankind.

Thus in a true sense there is now only one sin that human beings can be found guilty of - not believing in Jesus. Without this we cannot move into the experience of the forgiveness that Jesus' death brings.

The ministry of the Spirit will be to reverse the judgement of the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman secular authorities. They refused to believe that Jesus was God, but the Spirit will work in men and women's hearts to reverse this judgement, to convince them of the divinity of Jesus that they might respond to him and walk in the experience of forgiveness.

**(b) In regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer;**

The purpose of Jesus' trial was to show that he was not God's son. It was to make evident to all concerned his blasphemy. God is however going to show his complete vindication of Jesus through raising him from the dead and exalting him into glory in his ascension.

The Holy Spirit will convince people of the righteousness of Jesus as they come to understand what his resurrection and ascension mean. He was who he said he was, God himself proves that Jesus spoke the truth when he identified himself as co-equal with God.

*Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*  
(John 14v9, NIV)

*I and the Father are one. (John 10v30, NIV)*

**(c) In regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.**

Jesus' trial, conviction and execution were meant to prove his guilt and sin. What they actually reveal is the power of Satan at work in the world. A power which can work through the leaders of the people of God, as easily as through the secular, pagan power structures of the Roman empire.

The Holy Spirit reveals to the world that their opposition to Jesus is nothing less than demonic. He brings the conviction that to refuse to accept Jesus is to stand with Satan against God.

Jesus accusation, conviction and execution reveal the dreadful reality of a world opposed to God and to good. We still experience this today, our friends, colleagues and neighbours will often say things to us like, "How can you believe in God when he allows children to suffer, earthquakes to destroy whole regions, horrible diseases to bring suffering etc.?" They bring false accusations against God - just like the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman secular powers did against Jesus. It reveals a world order that still remains essentially opposed to God.

The Spirit brings conviction of this in order that people can re-orient their lives to God.

Only the supernatural activity of the Spirit can bring men and women to this a new understanding of Jesus that will enable them to become the Church.

### **3 The Activity of the Spirit in the Church - Sustaining the Church**

So Jesus has explained how the Spirit will birth the Church, he now addresses how the Spirit will work to sustain the Church.

**(a) he will guide you into all truth**

We need to think very carefully about this statement. Who is Jesus making this promise to? What is Jesus actually promising?

Firstly, we need to note that the "you" here is plural. This is a big problem for us English readers, it gets us into a load of trouble. We cannot differentiate in English between the singular and the plural of second person pronouns. It is particularly an issue for us as we live in a highly

individualistic culture. So we read scripture and it makes a promise or a statement concerning "you" and we automatically assume that it is addressed to individual Christians. For example:

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29v11, NIV)*

*"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace." (Numbers 6vv24-26, NIV)*

In their primary application and significance these verses refer to the **people** of God, **not individuals**. They are promises made to the redeemed **community**.

Now you can infer that they have some application towards individuals as they make up the people of God, but their primary significance and intent is to say something about how God acts towards his people in community.

Please whenever you read scripture and you come across a promise of God, please check the context, or look at the footnotes in your Bible (sometimes they highlight the plurality of pronouns in key verses), but whatever you do just be aware that it is usually **not** talking about individuals, it is usually about communities.

So what we **don't** have here is Jesus promising that no Christian will ever make a mistake in their actions or beliefs about God. In fact our reading of the New Testament shows us that Jesus can't have been referring to individual churches either, as half the N.T. is taken up with the apostles writing to the churches under their jurisdiction to correct them in their understanding or practice of the Christian faith.

So who is Jesus making this promise to? Well he is talking to the Apostolic group - they represent the seed of the Church. It is their ministry and witness that will create and establish the Church. Therefore Jesus is making this promise to the universal Church that they represent.

Our second question is what is Jesus actually promising? He is promising that the Spirit will be intimately active and present in the universal Church and lead her to a deeper understanding of the truth about Jesus.

Now can we look back down the 2,000 years and say that this has been the experience of the Church?

(a) *Scripture:*

How did we get the writings that we call the New Testament? Individual congregations wrote down records of the oral teaching which they have received directly from, or could trace back to, the 12 Apostles. These writings were copied and circulated and it is by their **acceptance by the universal Church** that the canon of the N.T. was formed. Congregations read these writings and said, "Yes, we recognise in these texts an authentic expression of the faith that we received from the apostles".

The Holy Spirit worked to lead the universal Church to recognise some writings as true and inspired, others were rejected and this process led to the Scriptures we have in our hands today. We only have a New Testament today because Jesus' promise has been fulfilled.

(b) *Theology:*

If we think about theology, ask yourself what did the Apostles understand about Jesus, about his incarnation, about the trinity, about the nature of the Church, about how the Church relates to the people of Israel and their experience in the Old Covenant? The answer is almost nothing!

How have we come to have a deeper knowledge of these crucial aspects of the Christian

faith? Through the work of the Spirit guiding the Church. A particular example of that was the Ecumenical Councils held in the first centuries of the Church. Bishops gathered from all over the Christian world to discuss issues that were dividing the Church - the nature of Jesus and how we understand the interrelationship of Father, Son and Spirit. There was confusion, the Church was struggling, they came together and the Spirit led them into the truth about Jesus.

*"At each true council, in the Orthodox understanding, the miracle of Pentecost is renewed, the many become one in mind and heart, and the truth is revealed."*

*Barlaam the Calabrian, 1339 AD*

In fact what legitimised the declarations of the Ecumenical Councils was their reception by the Church. As is the case with the New Testament Scriptures, the universal Church recognised in the conciliar statements the faith that they had received from the apostles. Catholics talk about the *Sensus Fidelium*, (the sense of the faithful) a supernatural, Spirit-empowered capacity of the world-wide Church to recognise the truth of the faith when they hear it. The Holy Spirit guarantees that the world-wide Church of Christ cannot be led into error, she will be preserved in the truth. Whilst individual Christians may make mistakes, whilst local congregations or even denominations can get things wrong, the world-wide Church can never be. A Frenchman from the fourth century coined a phrase that succinctly expresses this truth:

*"What all men have at all times and everywhere believed must be regarded as true."*

*St Vincent of Lérins, 434 AD*

In other words **catholicity guarantees authenticity**. If a belief has not been shared by all Christians, at all times in all places, then it cannot be guaranteed to be the truth. Certainly our understanding about aspects of the Christian faith deepens over time. For example the trinitarian doctrine of the apostolic creed is very basic, whilst that of the Nicene creed is much more defined - but both creeds clearly contain a trinitarian element. Any belief that cannot be traced right back through the centuries down to the earliest days of the Church, must immediately be held to be highly suspect.

It was very reassuring last year to see a new book written by J. I. Packer called "Affirming the Apostles' Creed". Packer, an author of impeccable evangelical credentials, wrote this book because he felt that the evangelical presentation of the gospel was dangerously oversimplified, something which he saw often leading to pastoral problems further down the line. He writes calling Evangelicals to return to the practice of the Church of the earliest centuries, to affirm the creeds as statements of Christian belief, to use these creeds in our teaching and presentation of the gospel.

The creeds are the shared foundation and inheritance of the Church, our affirmation of these statements of belief authenticate our faith as truly Christian. We see in the formulation and universal acceptance of these creedal statements, the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that the Spirit would guide the universal Church into the truth. As the world-wide Church accepted certain writings as a true expression of the apostolic faith that they had received and we receive them as the New Testament, so also they accepted the creedal statements of the ecumenical councils as true reflections of that same faith. Thus both the New Testament scriptures and the creedal statements of the ecumenical councils have universal validity as being recognised as being in conformity to the original message of Jesus as preached by the Apostles. As such they are a shared foundation and inheritance for the whole Christian movement.

The Holy Spirit's ministry to the Church is never a matter of simple intellectual development, it is always about empowering and instructing the Church that she might ever more fully embrace her calling to worship and witness to Jesus in the world.

**(b) he will tell you what is yet to come**

The Holy Spirit will lead and guide the Church as she goes. The Spirit will help the Church to understand the spiritual significance of the times. The Spirit will interpret for each generation the contemporary significance of Jesus and his ministry.

We remember that Jesus made certain prophetic statements to the disciples, about the destruction of the Temple, about their persecution by the Jewish religious authorities (Mark 13, Luke 21). Now most of these prophecies could not be understood until **after the event**. The best preparation for the future is not exact foreknowledge of coming events but a deep understanding of what Jesus means in relation to these events. It is this type of spiritual discernment and understanding that the Holy Spirit will bring to the Church.

**(c) He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you**

Again, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is always about Jesus. What is the primary reason for all this activity of the Spirit within the Church - that Jesus might be glorified.

As the Spirit works the Church grows in her understanding of Jesus, his identity, his significance and his message. As she responds to this, she brings glory to Jesus by fulfilling her calling to be a pure and holy bride.

*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*

*(Ephesians 5vv25-27, NIV)*

It is by the Spirit that this "washing through the word" takes place. As the Spirit teaches us and we respond in obedience, then we become transformed giving glory to Jesus.

**Conclusion:**

So how do we respond to this passage?

Firstly in praise and thanks to God:

1. That he has continued his work of bringing conviction to the hearts and minds of men and women causing the Church to continue to grow and expand over two millennia. Every convert is a miraculous action of God's Spirit in the heart of a man or woman. Each one of us here today who believes in Jesus only does so because the Holy Spirit is still active in the world, birthing the Church.
2. That he has kept and guided his Church, through the activity of the Spirit for the glory of Jesus these past 2,000 years. Though the Holy Spirit's ministry we have the New Testament to nourish and inform our faith. We have as a world-wide Church come to an ever deeper understanding of the Christian faith. We have the creedal statements of the Ecumenical Councils as a common basis of belief for all Christians.

Secondly, we respond in confident faith: The Holy Spirit will not fail in his mission. Whatever the weaknesses and failings of denominations, local congregations, individual believers, the world-wide Church of Jesus Christ will never stop advancing. We know how it ends, we've read the end of

the story:

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*

*(Revelation 21:1-3, NIV)*

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