

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

The Person and work of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Church

So far, in this series on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, we have thought about the Holy Spirit in Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the Christian. Today, our topic is the Holy Spirit in the Church. Since the church is made up of individual Christians, there is quite a lot of overlap between the Spirit's work in the Christian and His work in the church. However, I will try and focus on the collective aspects of His work that have particular reference to the church as a whole. I am going to do this under five major headings: four positive and one negative. They are:

The Holy Spirit:

1. Uniting
2. Directing
3. Empowering, and
4. Focusing, and
5. Obstructing the work of the Spirit

1. The Holy Spirit Uniting the Church

If we were to look backwards into history, we would talk about the Holy Spirit **forming** the church. Let's read from the beginning of Acts 2, *"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance"*, Acts 2:1-4.

Up until this day, the disciples were united by the fact that they had followed Jesus in His ministry throughout Israel. They had been united in grief at His death, and then again in astonishment, at reports of His resurrection. They had met together after His resurrection and experienced the risen Christ appearing amongst them, and watched together as He ascended into heaven. But despite having all this, as well as their Jewish heritage, in common, they were still essentially individual followers of Jesus. It was the coming of the Spirit, at Pentecost, to indwell all believers in Jesus that marked the creation of the church; the body and the bride of Christ.

If the Holy Spirit formed, or united, the church at Pentecost, He continues to maintain that unity today. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul speaks about maintaining that unity in these words, *"Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all."* Ephesians 4:1b-6. This passage rather beautifully presents to us two aspects of the unity of the church that the Spirit creates and maintains. There is the indissoluble unity that the Spirit created at Pentecost, and every believer since then has been included in, at the moment of their salvation, then there is the practical expression of that unity that **we** are responsible for keeping, by the strength and direction that the Holy Spirit supplies.

2. The Holy Spirit Directing the Church

I rather struggled to decide on the right verb to describe the work of the Spirit for this section. I could have spoken about the Spirit sending, guiding, conducting or controlling the church, and all would have been valid. You can probably think of other words as well that could be properly applied to this work of the Spirit.

But before I begin on this section, I want to just talk for a little while about a lovely picture of the Holy Spirit at work, from the Old Testament, that I think gives us some useful insights into His work today.

Many of us know the beautiful story of how Rebekah became the bride of Isaac, that is recounted in Genesis 24. It was read at my wedding 22 years ago, and is a story I love very much. We usually focus our attention on Rebekah and Isaac, but I want us to think this morning about the unnamed servant that Abraham sent to find a suitable bride for his son. The reason I want to do this, is because that anonymous servant is a lovely picture of the Holy Spirit, and His

work relating to the church. Two chapters previously we have the account of the offering of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) and, according to Hebrews 11:17-19, Abraham received Isaac as “*raised from the dead*”, in a figurative sense. So we have the permission of scripture to think about Abraham representing God the Father, and Isaac representing Christ, God’s Son. It is not difficult to see how Rebekah, Isaac’s bride, represents the church as the bride of Christ, but have you ever seen how Abraham’s servant represents the Holy Spirit?

The servant was sent by Abraham to find a bride for his son (Genesis 24:1-9), just as the Spirit is at work in the world today, leading people to faith in Christ and uniting them into the church, the bride of Christ. The servant had all the power and wealth he needed to complete his task (Genesis 24:10), but he draws no attention to himself at all, being instead, the perfect messenger. He speaks about Isaac and Abraham and seeks to attract Rebekah to them (Genesis 24:34-41). In the same way the Spirit always directs our attention towards Christ and the Father, never drawing attention to Himself. Abraham’s servant brought Rebekah gifts from his master (Genesis 24:53), and the Spirit brings gifts to the church today. Rebekah was urged by the servant to come straight away to meet Isaac (Genesis 24:54-60), and not to linger in Haran. Now the Spirit urges believers towards Christ, and away from the lives they lived previously in this world. Finally, the servant accompanies Rebekah all the way back to Isaac, and presents her to him (Genesis 24:61-66). In the same way, the Spirit is the One who conducts the church, and the believers it is composed of, safely to the Father’s home where we will be with Christ forever. What a beautiful picture of the work of the Holy Spirit today!

a. Sending Missionaries

Let’s read a few verses at the start of Acts 13. “*As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus*”, Acts 13:2-4. It would be hard to miss, from these verses, how the selection and direction of the early missionaries was the work of the Spirit. Doubtless, Barnabas and Paul demonstrated their suitability by their behaviour and service. Clearly, the church elders prayed about the topic and sought God’s will. But it was the Spirit Himself who led the elders to select these two, and then the Spirit who chose where to send them.

b. Restraining Missionaries

Now some verses from Acts 16. “*Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bythinia, but the Spirit did not permit them*”, Acts 16:6-7. Just as the Spirit decided where the missionaries should go, He also determined where they should **not** go for the time being. It is clear that the Spirit had complete control of when and where the missionaries operated.

c. Sending Preachers

But it wasn’t just missionaries who were directed in this way. We can read about a journey the evangelist Philip made in Acts 8. “*Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, ‘Arise and go toward the south...’ So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia... [who] had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning... Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go near and overtake this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him.*” A little later on, when the Ethiopian had believed on Christ and been baptised, “*The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away*” (Acts 8:26-39, excerpts.)

There are some very unusual elements to this event, with Philip being addressed by an angel, and physically transported by the Spirit, but the key thing I want to note this morning is, that the Spirit directs where this preacher should go, and who he should speak to.

I think these are enough examples to show how the servants of Christ were chosen and directed, by the Spirit in the early days of the church, and it should be just the same today. The Spirit should determine who serves Christ, in what capacity, where and what they should say. That doesn’t mean this will always be done in obviously supernatural ways. The directing of the Spirit may well be quietly internal, and servants should still be approved or commended by the local church today, as they were in New Testament times. But Christian work can never be decided by individuals or committees, acting on their own judgement, or rule books, or by any other, purely human process.

This principle of direction doesn’t just apply to preachers and teachers. 1 Corinthians 12, the chapter that tells us about spiritual gifts and their exercise, makes clear that the Spirit must direct all the operations of the church of God. The worship of God in our church services must be directed by the Spirit as well. The two great metaphors that the Bible uses for the church are the body and the bride of Christ. The body is to be controlled by Christ the Head. This is effected through the Spirit. As we noticed in the story of Rebekah, the Spirit is the Comforter or Helper, who directs the bride towards her Bridegroom and conducts her safely to Him.

3. The Holy Spirit Empowering the Church

From the beginning, the promise of the Spirit was connected with power. Listen to the risen Christ addressing the disciples in Acts 1:8, shortly before His return to heaven, *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me.”* This verse spells out two very important points: that the power in the church is to come from God, and that the power is to be used for God’s own purposes. Whenever the church loses sight of these facts it gets into difficulties.

Sometimes the church forgets where her real power comes from. When the work of God in our church grows weak, it is tempting to energise it with extra human efforts. This might take the form of more eloquent speakers, improved organisation, more exuberance and enthusiasm, borrowing some techniques from psychology and management studies, or importing some philosophy. In fact, it might be done in a vast number of ways. Now, some of the things I’ve just mentioned are not bad in themselves. Few of us would want boring speakers or less enthusiasm! They become a problem when they are used to replace the power of the Spirit. We will come back a little later to some of the things that can hinder the power of the Spirit, for now, let us note that nothing else is ever a suitable motivating energy for the work of the church of Christ.

At other times the church is very enthusiastic about the power of the Spirit, but wants to use it for the wrong ends. To remind ourselves from Acts 1:8, the power of the Spirit was to enable the church to be witnesses for Christ. I really am convinced that there is no other power like that of the Spirit of God! Just look at how it turned cowering fishermen into bold and eloquent witnesses to Christ. In a few years, it took the number of believers from around a hundred, to hundreds of thousands, and the gospel from Israel, to the limits of the known world. Those believers stood up to fierce persecution, defied the proscriptions of the Jewish leaders and a hostile Roman empire. They were rightly described as, *“These who have turned the world upside down”*, Acts 17:6.

So, the power the Spirit brings is immense, but it cannot be harnessed by us to serve our purposes. Any attempt to use the power of the Spirit to make ourselves eminent and powerful, to serve political ends, to support a military cause, or even to enhance our own denomination, is doomed to ultimate failure. All of these have been tried, and most of them within the time of the New Testament, but since the Holy Spirit is God, He is not about to let us abuse His power to suit ourselves.

4. The Holy Spirit Focusing the Church

It is very helpful to see how Jesus Himself described the work that the Spirit would do in the church. To this end, I will read a series of verses from John’s gospel. *“I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth”*, John 14:16-17. *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things”*, John 14:26. *“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me”*, John 15:26. *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”*, John 16:12-14.

From these verses, we can see that the Spirit’s work has two significant themes: the truth of God, and Christ Himself.

a. The Spirit of truth

As the Spirit of truth, the Spirit not only always speaks the truth, but He has access to the whole truth of God, and is able to make it known to the church. In the first instance, this involved bringing everything that Jesus had taught to the disciples to their remembrance, so that it could be recorded and passed on. It then embraced leading the writers of the epistles into the full truth of the church, which was not opened out by Jesus in His earthly ministry. The church is not much more than hinted at in the gospels. Finally, the prophecy of the future that the book of Revelation contains, was inspired by the Spirit. At this point the revelatory work was concluded. Everything that God has determined we need to know to live for Him on this earth, has now been revealed by the Spirit of truth. There is nothing more to come. However, the work of the Spirit of truth is not concluded, because He still leads each generation of believers into the understanding and acceptance of those truths.

b. Glorifying Christ

This is something we noticed earlier, in the picture of Abraham’s servant. Jesus said of the Spirit, *“He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”* The Holy Spirit does not put Himself in the middle of the picture, He puts Christ there. It is His chief purpose in the church, to focus us on Christ.

Linking us with the Father

Ephesians 2:18 says, *“For through [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”* Ephesians 2 is describing how Jews and Gentiles now stand in the same position before God. Both parties have access to the same Father. That access is through the Lord Jesus, who has died and risen again, and it is by the one Spirit. So, it is by the Spirit that the church, formed of both Jews and Gentiles, has access to the Father, through the Son. By the way, this is one of the very few verses in the Bible that refers to all three persons of the Godhead.

A little further down the same chapter, in Ephesians 2:22, Paul says, *“In [Christ] you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”* Paul is still talking about how the Jews and gentiles have been made into one new body, the church, but now he is expounding the amazing truth that this church is the dwelling place of God. God spoke about dwelling among Israel in the Old Testament, but that was largely symbolic, and the reality was prevented by their sinfulness. Today, God really does dwell among His church, and this is something He does “in the Spirit”!

5. Obstructing the work of the Spirit

Sadly, it is possible for human beings to obstruct the work of the Holy Spirit, and this happens all too often. The New Testament uses three different words for this obstruction and they refer to different ways in which the Spirit's work is opposed:

- a. Resisting;
- b. Grieving;
- c. Quenching.

a. Resisting the Spirit

In Acts 7, Stephen addresses the Jewish council and recounts the history of the Jewish nation's relationship with God. At the end of that narrative, in Acts 7:51, he says to the council, *“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”* Resisting the Spirit, refers to the way unbelievers reject the promptings of the Spirit, and continue to act according to their own will. It is more properly part of the subject of next week's talk on 'The Holy Spirit in the world'!

b. Grieving the Spirit

Ephesians 4:30-32 contains the exhortation, *“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”* It is possible for the individual believer to grieve the Spirit by his actions, or attitudes of heart. Since the church is composed of believers, the grieving of the Spirit by individual Christians will have an impact on the health of the whole church, but this is perhaps more the topic of last week's talk on 'The Holy Spirit in the Christian'.

c. Quenching the Spirit

The final expression comes from 1 Thessalonians 5, and I am going to read the wider context from 1 Thessalonians 5:14-21: *“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”*

These exhortations to the church at Thessalonica are addressed to the church collectively, rather than just the individuals within it, and the quenching of the Spirit needs to be understood in that context. If the grieving of the Spirit refers to the restraining of the Spirit's work within one individual; quenching the Spirit refers to the restraining, or obstructing, of the Spirit's work in **another** person. It is me preventing the Spirit working through another believer. This is a serious matter when we remember what the Spirit is seeking to do through the church. As the body of Christ in this world, the church is intended to be the means by which Christ's work of testimony, and good works are done, and to display Christ's glory. That is a pretty tall order! And the Holy Spirit works tirelessly, in the church, to accomplish this.

When we quench the Spirit, we hinder Him accomplishing these objectives. We might do so in many ways. We might deliberately oppose another person's service; or organise the church in ways that allow human management to exclude the Spirit from directing believers. We could so discourage and undermine another believer that the Spirit

cannot use them in active service; or we could spread bitterness and division, and so ensure that our church does not display the glory of Christ in the way the Spirit intends.

Let us be very careful that we are not grieving the Spirit in our own lives, or quenching His work in others.

In Conclusion

Let's finish with a prayer.

God and Father, we give thanks that You sent Your Holy Spirit to indwell each believer in Christ and to bring them together into His church. Lead us, through Your Spirit, to maintain that unity He has created, and accept His wise direction. May we experience the empowering that He gives, collectively as well as personally, and may we always respond positively to Your Spirit's constant work of refocussing us on Your Son, Christ Jesus. Amen.

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