

“Introducing the Holy Spirit”

John 14:15-31

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Text Comment

- v.15 In the Upper Room Jesus has already demonstrated his love for his disciples and commanded them to love one another. Now he speaks for the first time of their love for him (a point to which he will return in 15:14).
- v.16 There are five passages, or four, in the Upper Room Discourse, that is, in chapters 14, 15, and 16, that speak of the Holy Spirit: 14:16-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-11; 16:12-15. In all but the last, the term “counselor”, the Greek word “paraclete” is used to refer to the Holy Spirit. That word is used only one other time in the NT, 1 John 2:1, and, there, in reference not to the Holy Spirit but to Jesus Christ. As you may know from your reading of the Bible, different translations render the Greek word “paraclete” with different English equivalents: the KJV has “Comforter,” the NASB has “helper”, and the NEB “advocate.”

The Greek word in common usage meant “legal assistant” or “advocate”, someone who helps another in court, whether as an advocate or a witness. As one commentator puts it, “[The] NIV’s ‘Counsellor’ is not wrong, so long as ‘legal counsellor’ is understood, not ‘camp counsellor’ or ‘marriage counsellor’ and, even so, the Paraclete’s ministry extends beyond the legal sphere.” [Carson, 499] “To strengthen, to encourage, to aid” all belongs to the sense of the word. In 1 John 2:1 the NIV translates the same word “one who speaks in our defense.”

In any case, you’ll notice that the Lord promises *another* Counselor. He was their Counselor and, upon his departure, the Holy Spirit will come in his place.

- v.17 “the Spirit of Truth” a title given the Holy Spirit also in 15:26 and 16:13. He, as we will see throughout the discourse, is the Spirit of Truth because he communicates and bears witness to the truth of Jesus Christ.

Remember, we said the word, *kosmos* or “world” was an important word in the Upper Room discourse, occurring some 40x in chapters 13-17. It stands for that unbelieving and sinful mass of humanity to which the gospel will come, among whom the followers of Christ must live and work, and out of which the Lord will call his own.

- v.20 All in all it seems best to take vv. 18-20 as a reference to the Lord’s appearance to his disciples after his resurrection.
- v.21 “To have” the commandments of God means to understand them, to agree with them, to have a firm intellectual grasp of their meaning. But true love for God and Christ is not simply that understanding, but actual *living* according to these commandments. Then, for

that one who loves Christ, Christ's relationship with him or her, will mirror the relationship he has with his Father, a point that will be developed in chapter 17.

- v.22 Like the rest of the disciples, who still so dimly grasp what is being told to them, Judas expected that the Messiah would appear in glory before the world for all to see. So he wonders about this distinction the Lord is introducing when he says he will show himself to those who love him but not to the world.
- v.24 Now the Lord is speaking here not of his post-resurrection appearances to his disciples, nor of the second coming, but of his coming to dwell with the believer *while he lives in this world*, the Christian's immediate experience of the presence of God. This will be given to those who love Christ and demonstrate that love by their obedience. It will not be given to those who do not love God.
- v.26 Here for the first time in John is the full title, "the Holy Spirit." It does appear to me that the specific reference of his remark, "will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you," must be the apostles and their apostolic ministry in laying down the foundation of the church and providing us with the last 27 books of the Bible. But that the Spirit is the teacher of the church and of all Christians we know from many other texts.

By the way, sometimes it is claimed that the Spirit is not a person in the sense of the Father and the Son and the fact that the Greek word *pneuma* is a neuter noun is offered as proof. But here masculine pronouns are used to speak of the Spirit, not neuter pronouns. He is a person! Images used for the Holy Spirit in the Bible – fire and water, for example – are things one can have more or less of. But the Holy Spirit is a person, he is either with you or he is not!

- v.27 The Lord is leaving them, but leaving his peace, his *shalom* behind with them. This peace is a much deeper, richer thing than the world knows. It is not the absence of war and it is not won by the sword. It is the deep serenity that comes from the knowledge of God's love, Christ's victory, and the believer's ultimate inheritance in heaven. The world can talk of peace but it cannot give it. As an older man, John Newton, the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace," wrote, "I am now in my seventy-second year. I know what the world can do and cannot do. It can neither give nor take away the peace of God which passeth all understanding; it cannot soothe the wounded conscience, nor enable us to meet death with contempt. One only can do this."
- v.28 "The Father is greater than I" must be held in tension with "I and the Father are One" which we heard in chapter 10. It is a statement that concerns the Lord Jesus as *the incarnate Son of God*, as the man Jesus. For him to go to his Father was joy itself and true love, on the part of his disciples, would recognize this and rejoice with him. For the Father is greater than the incarnate Son and so for the Son to return to the Father is for him to return to the glory he had with his Father before he came into the world. How often, by the way, do we think of this? That we should be happy for the Lord Jesus that he is not here, but is with his Father in heaven! Love wishes the best for others and

especially for those who have loved us so magnificently! I have been struck by how little of that kind of love I have. I remember Rabbi Duncan's question: "have you ever given thanks for Abel's [thousands of] years in heaven?" It never occurred to me to rejoice with Abel who has been in heaven longer than any other human being.

- v.31 References, of course, to the events about to unfold: Judas' betrayal, the arrest, the crucifixion, and the Lord's death.

The "Come now; let us leave" raises a question because it does not appear that they do leave. The discourse continues, it is then followed by the Lord's great prayer in chapter 17, and then in 18:1 there is another reference to the Lord "leaving" with his disciples. All sorts of suggestions have been made. Some have thought they did leave at this point and chapters 15-17 were spoken on the road to the Mount of Olives. But, then, what does the mention of their leaving in 18:1 mean? Another suggestion is that Jesus did make motion to leave, but that the conversation continued for some time before they actually did leave. Don Carson, in his commentary, writes, "Anyone who has frequently invited home ten to twenty graduate students (as has the present writer) knows how common it is, after someone has announced it is time to go, for another half hour to slip past before anyone makes a serious move to leave." [479] Alternatively, perhaps they did leave, walk together through the streets of the old city, perhaps pausing in the temple, from which they left again later. Perhaps vines along the way prompted the reference to the "true vine" in the opening verses of chapter 15. It is impossible to know for sure.

Now, I took a great deal of time to comment on the text because it is so full of interesting and important material, only some of which we can pick up now for further consideration. This is not, to be sure, the first mention of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John. He was said to descend upon Jesus at the Lord's baptism. The Lord spoke to Nicodemus in chapter 3 about the necessity of being born again by the power of the Spirit. In chapter 7, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus spoke of living water flowing from those who believe in him and John explained that this was a reference to the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. But, without doubt, we move into much more expansive teaching concerning the Holy Spirit here in the Upper Room discourse.

Now, in many ways, the situation for believers in that day was the same in regard to the Holy Spirit as it had been for the Son of God. You remember Augustine's famous dictum, "The New is in the Old concealed, and in the New, the Old is revealed." In other words, there is quite a bit about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, indeed we encounter him first in only the second verse of the Bible, Gen. 1:2. And, looking back on the various references to the Holy Spirit and his work as we find them in the OT, it is all quite clear and familiar *from the vantage point of the New Testament* and its fuller revelation of the Holy Spirit. But it is doubtful that the believer in the ancient epoch really understood that the Holy Spirit was another person within a Trinitarian divine being. That understanding awaited the fuller disclosure that came from the Lord Jesus and his disciples after the incarnation, after God the Son became a man. The OT believer was more likely to have thought of the Spirit of God as the "spirit" – lower case "s" – of the one and only God.

But, the same would be said of the Son. We have already noticed that John, with the rest of the NT, seems to assume that the Yahweh, the Jehovah with whom God's people had to do in the ancient epoch was none other than, or, at least, was primarily, God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, whom we know now in his incarnate life as Jesus Christ. We know, from the express teaching of the New Testament, that it was the Son at the Red Sea, at Sinai, in the wilderness; it was the Son whose glory Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple. But the believing Israelite did not yet know to distinguish the persons of the Godhead. They were all alike God to him – as indeed they are – but they were not yet distinct in his mind as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as we now know them to be. Indeed, there is really very little distinct revelation of God the Father in the OT for that matter. There seems to be more revelation of God the Son and God the Spirit, but without the personal distinctions that become clear when the Son comes into the world and distinguishes himself personally and so clearly from the Father and the Holy Spirit.

This point is made in a way in these verses we have read. The Holy Spirit is by no means a new factor in the lives of believers. We already learned in chapter 3 that new life in Christ requires the recreating power and work of the Holy Spirit and that this doctrine was the teaching of the OT. Nicodemus should have known it, Jesus said; after all, he was a Bible teacher! No one can come to faith without the Spirit working within him or her. That is, Jesus said, a truism of the ancient Scripture. That has been true since Genesis 3 and is no different now.

But, the Lord makes a point of this in another way here in v. 17, where he speaks of the Holy Spirit as One who is *already living* with the disciples. It is not that the disciples will not experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit until the day of Pentecost. Not at all. He has already worked in them true faith in Jesus Christ, he is already accompanying them in their pilgrimage of faith. We know of no other salvation than that which is communicated to our hearts and worked into our lives by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In that sense the Holy Spirit's ministry is no different today than in Abel's day or Abraham's.

But, it is often said that v. 17 teaches that there is deeper, richer ministry of the Holy Spirit to the individual believer in the new dispensation. We have more of the Holy Spirit today, or we have a richer ministry of the Holy Spirit than did the saints in the ancient epoch. Does not Jesus say here that the Holy Spirit *will be* in them? Well, that is actually a good question. As your NIV footnote indicates to you, there are early Greek manuscripts that read "is" instead of "will be." In that case the Lord said of the Holy Spirit, "he lives with you and *is* in you." Actually "is" is the stronger, the more likely, original reading. But, in any case, the use of "in" does not here suggest some deeper, fuller, richer ministry than is suggested by the "with you" just before it. The Lord is not saying that while the Spirit is with them now, soon he will be *in* them, which is much better. For, as you see in v. 16, the Lord promises the Spirit to be *with* the disciples forever. In v. 23, later in this same context, the Lord promises that he and the Father will be *with* or *beside* us and make their home with us. Surely there is no suggestion here in John 14 that *with* is inferior to *in*. They both refer to the personal presence of the Spirit with the children of God. There is no distinction being made between "with" and "in." When you say today to a friend who is leaving, "God be with you," you don't expect them to wonder why you wished for them an inferior blessing, a lesser measure of God's presence. To be with us and in us amount to the same thing.

What is more, already in the OT the Spirit was said both to be with and in the people of God. The presence of God with his people *through the Holy Spirit* has always been the case, though, in the ancient epoch, they did not know how to describe it in the same personal and Trinitarian terms that we know to use today.

What is being described here is the active presence of God, both the Father and the Son, *by means of the Holy Spirit's presence with them*. To the unbeliever life is defined by the absence of God or, at least, the distance of God. He or she does not think of the living God, the Almighty, being near, available, a present Father, Friend, Provider, Defender. But now for the Disciples, there was suddenly a similar question. They had spent three years with the Son of God. He talked to them, cared for them, performed unbelievable works of power before their eyes. He showed them his love. But suddenly he told them he was leaving them. Were they too now to live a life defined by the absence or distance of God? And Christ's answer is no! God *will* be with you, *I* will be with you, in the way I was before I came among you as a man – in the way of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus says in v. 16 that, though he is departing, the Holy Spirit will come in his place; when he says in v. 20 that he will be *in* those who love him; when he says in v. 23 that both he and his Father will come and make their home with each one who trusts and obeys him, when he speaks of his truth and his peace being communicated to his followers in vv. 26 and 27, I say, in all these ways the Lord is speaking of the Holy Spirit as the executive of the Godhead, the one who brings the reality and the presence of Christ home to the heart and the life of each and every believer.

The Spirit is God's gift and Christ's gift to us as the means by which we come to know God and walk with God, as the One who changes our lives so that we *can* know God, and as the one who empowers us to live with God. And so, in v. 26, the Lord speaks of the Father sending the Holy Spirit, *in Jesus' name*, that is for his sake, to bring Christ to us.

Christ won the Holy Spirit for us on the cross. He won that gift and that grace for all his people, including those who lived before the incarnation. Just as the forgiveness of sins was given to Abraham and David and Hannah in the prospect of Christ's death on the cross for them, so the Holy Spirit was given to them as well. There is, as we will see, another ministry of the Holy Spirit that *will be* new, that will not begin until Pentecost. That is the equipment of the church to take the Gospel to the entire world. That is the great theme of the Holy Spirit passages that remain in the Upper Room discourse. That is what Jesus was talking about when he said that, when the Spirit came, out of our bellies would flow rivers of living water. That is new. But the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the heart, applying to the lives of believers the benefits of Christ's salvation – the truth of God, the power to believe in God, the sense of God's presence and Christ's presence, the peace of God, the hope of eternal life to come –, that Abel, Abraham, and Sarah received as we do today. From the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus his salvation spreads outward in every direction, both to the past and to the future.

This is a the reason the Lord will continue to stress the Holy Spirit's relation *to Him* as he speaks still more about the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room discourse. In 15:26 he tells us that the Holy Spirit will "testify about me." In 16:14 the Lord says, "He will bring glory to me..."

Remember now, from the very beginning we noticed that John in his Gospel summons one *witness* after another on behalf of Jesus Christ. John brings forward in his narrative various people who encountered Jesus and can tell what they have learned about him from their own experience. Andrew and Peter and Nathaniel, the woman at the well, the man born blind, are examples of such witnesses. The various miracles which he performed are "signs" that bear witness to him. And throughout the Gospel the reader is being invited to come to his own verdict on the strength of the witness that has been given. But the Holy Spirit will be the greatest witness of all, One who will come from the father and tell the world who Jesus Christ is and what his life and death means. *This is the great meaning of the term "paraclete" in John. The Spirit is the chief and greatest witness or advocate in the trial that is being made of Jesus Christ as men judge the claims that are being made about and for him.*

Now, in those days, they didn't run trials the way we do today. Trials were not conducted with a prosecutor and a defense attorney. Rather witnesses were brought forward by a judge to elicit the truth about particular claims that were being made by one party or another. In that context, a *paraclete* was not a hired professional lawyer but someone who could vindicate a person in court, someone who had been an eyewitness of what had happened, or someone who could vouch for a person's character.

Ideally a character witness would be someone who had a longstanding relationship with the person on trial, an intimate friend. Well the Holy Spirit is the Lord Jesus' very best friend. And, as the Gospels tell us, he was with the Lord Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. Look at 15:27. The apostles are being told that they will be required to give their witness to Jesus *precisely because they have been with him from the beginning*. Well, in the same way, and much more, the Holy Spirit gives his witness to Jesus as one who has been with him from the very beginning. Indeed, the *very* beginning. Jesus was conceived *by the Holy Spirit* in the womb of the Virgin Mary! As the church father, Basil of Caesarea wrote, the Holy Spirit was Christ's "inseparable companion...all the activity of Christ was unfolded in the presence of the Holy Spirit...."[*On the Holy Spirit*, 16.39 cited in S. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 37] Remember, as far back as the prophecies of the Messiah in Isaiah, we learned that he would be a man upon whom the Spirit of God was and remained. And so it was. And for that reason there can be no more potent witness to Jesus Christ than the Holy Spirit. From "womb to tomb to throne" the Spirit was the Son's constant companion. And, of course, being the third person of the Triune God he brings perfect truth and absolute power to his witness on Christ's behalf. He comes from the Father, and is the Spirit of Truth, as the Lord will say in 15:26, so, when he speaks to the soul, he speaks with irresistible authority. The trial at which the Holy Spirit speaks on Jesus' behalf takes place in your heart if you are a child of God. So, as Jesus suggests here, when you have the Holy Spirit with you, bearing his witness to Christ, you have Christ with you, when he possesses you, Christ possesses you in that way. For the Holy Spirit is proving Christ to you, pointing you to Christ, convincing you of Christ.

This is what Paul will later say in Romans 8, where the Spirit and Christ become virtually interchangeable in Paul's account of the Christian life.

"You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the *Spirit of God lives in you*. And if anyone does not have the *Spirit of Christ*, he does not belong to Christ. But if *Christ is in you*, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness." Romans 8:9-10

You, see, to have the Spirit of God or Christ in you and to have Christ in you amounts to the same thing, because the Spirit's great ministry is to communicate Christ, to bear witness to Christ, to convict and convince us of what is in Christ for us – his truth, his word, his love, his grace, his peace, his power – to communicate all this to the souls of those who love the Lord. As we will read in 16:14, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit *to take what is Christ's and make it known to us!* There is, throughout the NT this profound identification of the ministries of Christ and the Holy Spirit, so much that he is called on a number of occasions *the Spirit of Christ*.

Christianity is, at bottom, a love affair. Men and women come to love Jesus Christ and his heavenly Father, because they experience the Father and the Son's love for them. But the one who makes us know and feel God's love, the one who works true love for God and Christ in us, the one who preserves that love through the rough and tumble of life in this sinful world, that one is the Holy Spirit.

This was not a brand new reality when Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the personal link between Jesus Christ and the souls of his people. It has always been true. God did not begin to be triune when God the Son came into the world, even if the church began at that time to understand God's triune life. Nor did the Spirit begin to communicate the presence and love and blessing of Christ to those who loved God. He had always done that. But now we are given to see much more clearly and to appreciate more wonderfully *how* the Holy Spirit ministers Christ to us and how it is that though Christ was once in the world but is not any longer – he is just as truly, really with us, his people.

These are extraordinary things we are talking about. The entire Godhead at work in loving us and the Holy Spirit, so selflessly giving himself to us that we might give ourselves to Jesus Christ and through him to the Father.

To have Father, Son and Holy Spirit loving you, caring about you, working for you and in you for your salvation, enabling you to participate in God's great work in the world – no one is ever going to pay you an honor that comes remotely near to this honor! Nothing more remarkable will ever be said about you.

"I will not leave you orphans," Jesus said. And he never said a truer word!