

# The Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture

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The Church Catechism, as well as the general tone of evangelical thinking and preaching, has taught us that we believe “in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me, and all the elect people of God”. That is to say, the Holy Spirit has been given an association with the holiness of the believer, or rather, with the believer’s experience of holiness, which has almost excluded other functions ascribed to Him, and which has certainly distorted the perspective of biblical teaching on the Third Person of the Trinity. For, while the function of sanctification has been well ascribed to the Holy Spirit, the notion of sanctification has often been left undefined, and the general suggestion has gone abroad that the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the individual is mysterious in what can only be called a wrong sense of the word. Careful as we may be to safeguard the personality of the Spirit, the “electric current” view of His working is often the only implication of what we say. And we need to be careful that the present phase of evangelical thought does not succeed in placing the matter of revival in the same predicament, so that we begin to revere the Holy Ghost “who revives me and all the elect people of God” but leave the intellectual and moral dimensions of revival and of the Spirit’s work undefined. We could conceivably find ourselves in the position where we earnestly long for “power from on high”, but are so far divorced in our thought from God’s truth and in our lives from God’s holy law that He is more likely to withdraw than to send forth His Spirit.

“The Spirit,” said John, “is the truth,”<sup>1</sup> and the purpose of this paper is to state and to apply the thesis that the primary task of the Spirit is to make the truth known, and that it is through the revelation and application of the truth to him that the believer experiences the Spirit: a very precise experience in the twin realms of knowing and obeying the truth of God. In order to try to make this position clear, we must explore briefly two aspects of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and then proceed to some conclusions based on them.

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If one aspect of the doctrine of Scripture more than another is in danger of being forgotten today, it is the completeness or finality of Scripture for the needs of the Church on earth. It is commonplace for most schools of thought to ascribe inspiration to Scripture, and a unique place in our knowledge of God, but it is equally common to assume that Scripture is still open at one end, that is to say, that the possibility of new truth, novel truth, additional revelation remains. The “Conversations” with the Methodist Church report that “this is in accordance with the will of the Lord of the Church who has promised that the Church shall learn new and other truths, and do greater deeds in the power and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit”<sup>2</sup>. To be sure, the “greater deeds” were promised,<sup>3</sup> but were the “new *and other* truths”, and is this a valid doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit?

The completeness of Holy Scripture is, first of all, a matter of exegesis. When we examine the design of Scripture, and try to explain or expound its message, we find that it comes out whole. “Both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man”.<sup>4</sup> This is what Scripture is about; its theme,

in order, is Christ, foretold, described, explained, and expected, and both statement and implication teach that with Christ the last word has been spoken and nothing more will ever be said. The statement comes in such a place as Hebrews 1: 1f., carefully balancing the “old time” with its sporadic revelation through the prophets, and, on the other hand, “the end of these days” and revelation in an entirely new category, revelation “in a Son”.

The biblical implication that this is to be taken seriously derives from the contrast of the two covenants. When we say that the theme of the Bible is Christ, we are saying that it is concerned with God’s work of redemption; when we say that this theme is displayed in the history of the two covenants we are bringing into contrast, on the one hand, a valid revelation of God which lacked the fulness of redemptive efficacy, and, on the other hand, a confirmatory revelation of God backed by complete redemptive efficacy. Jeremiah (31: 31ff.) looked forward to the New Covenant in which nothing of the Law of God would be lost. The people had of old broken the Law, but God would not on that account relax His standards. On the contrary, He would enforce those standards by writing them on the hearts of His people. The novelty of the New Covenant did not consist in a novelty of revealed truth. The newness which Jeremiah foresaw was that “their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more”; a complete and final dealing with sin. The people who came out of Egypt received a “change of address” which was not matched by a change of heart. The work of God in establishing the New Covenant would be just that: a new nature wrought in the sinner by a final act of redemption. In this sense, the New Testament is the fulfilment and completion of the Old: nothing need be added; nothing can be added. Certainly, the New Testament also has a forward look, but how does it express its expectations? “This *same* Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go.”<sup>5</sup> There is no new revelation to follow; only a reiteration in a new context of the “last word” which God has spoken in His Son.

This all too sketchy exegesis of the theme of the Bible as demonstrating its wholeness and completeness is confirmed by considering the example of Paul. In writing his second letter to Timothy, he was consciously preparing his second in command to become first in command.<sup>6</sup> The end of the apostolic age was well in sight, and he must set the Church’s course straight for the years to come. When we see that this forward look into the post-apostolic age is consistently matched by a backward look to a revelation of truth already given, we are not only confirmed in our view of the completeness of Scripture, but are warned away from at least two false trails to which considerable current popularity is attached.

Throughout the letter, Timothy is seen in a divided situation. Professed Christians are deserting the apostolic standard (1: 15), and denying cardinal Christian doctrines (2: 17f.). Moral standards are collapsing and opposition to the Church is on the increase (3: 1-13). Counterfeit gospels engage men’s attention and win adherents (4: 1-4). Surely, if the modern doctrine of the “Apostolic Succession” was ever to have biblical statement it must be here? Timothy’s “succession” was unimpeachable!<sup>7</sup> But there is no hint that this is the path ahead for the Church—a succession of duly authorized men who will be the focus of its unity and the guarantee of its doctrinal purity. But neither is there any reference to the Holy Spirit as the giver of fresh revelations to meet new situations. Such a thing is not in the least suggested. The forward look to new difficulties is balanced by the backward look to old truth: the need to “hold fast the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me” (1: 13); the requirement to find approval before God by “handling aright the word of truth” (2: 15); the provision of a safe shelter in “grievous times” (3: 1) by abiding in the apostolic teaching (3: 10) and in the older scriptures (3: 14)—surely an identification of the two as equally the

Word of God; and a clarion call to meet new heresy with old doctrine as Timothy “preaches the word” (4: 2) and does the work of an evangelist.

We may delay no longer on the establishment of the truth of the finality of Holy Scripture, but proceed to its relevance for our study, which is this: this complete Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit. When the New Testament looked back upon the Old it pronounced that “no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost”<sup>8</sup>. And let us not fail to note the mode of the Spirit’s operation in this matter. Where Peter could have spoken of the prophets being taught, or helped, or even (vaguely) inspired by the Spirit, he spoke of a work of God upon them that was compelling, and even violent: they were “carried along” by the Holy Ghost as surely as Paul’s ship was driven before the wind.<sup>9</sup> But the New Testament also was authenticated beforehand by the Lord Jesus Himself when He promised that “the Holy Spirit . . . shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said unto you”.<sup>10</sup> This was no general promise of the Spirit’s teaching function towards the Church for all time to come, but a specific promise to those who had *heard* from the lips of the Lord Jesus in person. Then “the Spirit of truth” would “guide into all the truth”.<sup>11</sup> There is thus an analogy between Moses and the prophets, on the one hand—the Old Covenant age of Inspiration—and, on the other hand, the Lord and the Apostles—the New Covenant age of Inspiration. Parity of reasoning suggests that the closure of the one period of Bible writing will be balanced by the closure of the other, giving us a complete and final Scripture. But over both alike there is the superintendence of the Spirit of Truth. This is His great title. Out of an approximate total of 304 references to Him in the Bible, no less than 148—nearly half—associate Him with teaching, inspiring, or applying the truth. But let us be both clear and emphatic. When the statement is made that “the Spirit is the truth”, the total evidence on this point leads to the conclusion that the Spirit of Truth has committed Himself to the Word of Truth.

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Turning now to the second aspect of the doctrine of the Spirit which will assist us to find practical conclusions for our study, we are able to fix our thoughts on one key passage in the New Testament. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus promised that: “He, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged.”<sup>12</sup>

The problems of interpretation which are found in these verses must not blind us to certain truths lying open upon their surface. The first is a truth for our encouragement, and may be stated briefly: that the Spirit has a mission to the world, and that it is a mission of certain victory. However much the world is a system of organized and ferocious opposition to the things of God and the Church of God, “*He will convict the world.*” The sovereign Spirit will not be beaten; He will conquer.

The second matter to be observed is that the mission of the Spirit to the world is accomplished by the truth. The world is convicted as the Spirit brings out into the light certain things that are true about the Lord Jesus. The power to conquer the world is the power of the truth. What is this truth? It is Jesus Christ displayed in a threefold manner: firstly, as the object of personal faith. He will convict the world of sin, “because they believe not on me”. The Spirit will declare the alternatives to the world: either to repose personal faith in Jesus Christ or to remain in sin. Secondly, the Lord Jesus must be declared to be the

accomplisher of full salvation. This is the righteousness of Jesus displayed in His going to the Father and His continuance in that unseen world so that “ye see me no more”. His going to the Father points to His utter completion of the work of salvation given to Him by the Father to do,<sup>13</sup> and His remaining there points to the Father’s abiding satisfaction with the redemptive work of the Son.<sup>14</sup> But, thirdly, in this delineation of the Lord Jesus, there is the judgment of the prince of this world. Eternal issues are at stake, and the Lord Jesus is the criterion of eternal judgment. Two princes call for the loyalty of mankind, but the victory of Calvary was with the Prince of Glory, and “the prince of this world” was cast out.<sup>15</sup> Jesus Christ is therefore an eternal point of division whereby those who have the Son have life, and those who have not the Son of God have not life.<sup>16</sup>

This, then, is the world-conquering truth which the Spirit declares: Jesus Christ as the Object of personal faith, the Accomplisher of full salvation, and the Guarantor of eternal security. But how does the testimony of this truth reach the world? The third fact emerging from the passage is this: the testimony of the Spirit to the world is to be spoken by the Church. Let us see the sequence of the verses. “If I go not away the Comforter will not *come unto you*; but if I go I will send him *unto you*. And he, when he is come. . . .” When He is come where? When He is *come unto you*. It is the Spirit given to the Church who bears the victorious testimony to the Lord Jesus; the Church is the bearer of the voice of the Spirit to the world, even as Jesus taught elsewhere, saying that “the Spirit of Truth . . . he shall bear witness of me: and ye also shall bear witness. . . .”<sup>17</sup>

A fourth truth remains to be discerned: the coming of the Spirit here promised has been secured for the Church by the finished work of Christ. It is His return to the Father which is productive of this sending of the testifying Spirit to the Church, and through the Church to the world. This can hardly be overemphasized. By His death, resurrection, and ascension, the Lord has purchased for His people this gift of the Spirit. It is not something we await, but something we possess. We may long for a greater awareness and a growing awareness of His presence, but we must no more doubt the fact of His presence than we doubt the finished work of Christ. To doubt the one is to doubt the other. The presence of the world-conquering Spirit with the Church is one of the *facts* of our situation. We must take the greatest care to acknowledge the fact, and also be equally careful to define the fact properly, recalling that “the Spirit is the truth”, and that His presence is declared in a vivid awareness of the saving message, and His power in the victorious declaration of it.

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We come, in the third place, to draw conclusions from this doctrinal basis. What follows if, indeed, the Holy Spirit has committed Himself to the word of Holy Scripture, and in particular to the saving message centred upon the Lord Jesus Christ?

First, there is the need, throughout all ministry, for utter and absolute reliance upon the Holy Spirit. We have seen that in the matter of testimony to the world, the word will be spoken by the Church but the conviction will be wrought by the Spirit. If anything is to be accomplished, then He is the doer of it. This is equally true of ministry within the congregation. In the saving purpose of God, there is a distinct pattern of working. To God the Father is ascribed the Authorship of Salvation. It is He who conceived the plan of salvation before the world was, appointed His Son to be the Lamb, and predestinated those who should be saved.<sup>18</sup> To God the Son is ascribed the Accomplishment of Salvation. It was by His blood-shedding that the plan of God took root in history.<sup>19</sup> And to God the Holy Ghost is

ascribed the Application of that saving work to the individual, sealing him unto the day of eternity,<sup>20</sup> bringing cleansing and renewal,<sup>21</sup> and introducing him to all the collateral blessings of the Gospel such as hope<sup>22</sup> and peace and joy.<sup>23</sup> Just as apart from the Father there is no plan of salvation, and apart from the Son no accomplishment, so apart from the Spirit there is no application. Remove the Holy Spirit and no impression whatsoever can be made upon the heart and mind of man; he remains dead in trespasses and sins, sunk in a total inability to comprehend the things of God.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, ministry must start from and proceed in company with utter and absolute reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

It is not out of place to observe that Scripture would teach two particular aspects of this reliance. It is expressed in urgent prayer for the giving of the Spirit, for we are advised that the Spirit is given to them that ask;<sup>25</sup> but also it is expressed by urgent moral concern on the part of the minister, for God gives His Spirit to “them that obey him”.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the reliance which we repose in the Spirit of God is not the reliance of the occupant of a sedan chair. It is an urgent, practical, vigorous reliance, working out through faith in a prayer-answering God, and through determination that the *Holy Spirit* shall find in us nothing to grieve Him or cause Him to withhold His power.

The second conclusion to which our doctrine leads us is that the blessing of the Spirit of God must be expected in exact proportion to the place of honour given to the Word of God. We evangelicals are often described as exalting the Pulpit over the Table. This is a misunderstanding of our position. We neither value pulpit as such, nor table as such. In themselves they are things indifferent. Our insistence is rather to exalt the Word of God equally over both. It is not the *preaching* of the Word from the pulpit, nor the *display* of the Word in the sacrament that we prize, but only *the Word* which is preached or displayed. And in proportion as the Word is made the supreme matter of declaration, so that minister and congregation alike sit beneath it, so much we may look to the Spirit to bless. It is certainly true that here again is a point of personal challenge to the minister. He cannot exalt the Word of God in the pulpit unless he is exalting it in the study. We cannot expect the Spirit to bless except in ratio to the place given to the Word in preaching; but we cannot make the honour of the Word in preaching any greater than the honour we give to it privately. Thus, the point of power and effectiveness is the hidden place, the private room, and even the inner man of the heart.

These are the places where the Word must have free course and be glorified. But let us keep these things in perspective. It is still not the minister who is the means of blessing. “The question is not whether better men come into power (in the church) but whether *the Holy Spirit presides* in the assembly; which He cannot do except the Word of God be the only rule and authority.”<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit will work in the hearers, and will be known by them as so working, as they submit what they hear to the judgment of Scripture, and submit their own lives to the same test. And the clergy must train their congregations to do so and demand that they do so. In the long run this is our only deliverance from popery, for what, in essence, is popery but the exaltation of man’s authority, and what use is it to be free of a distant pope in order to fall beneath one nearer at home? Richard Hooker was surely right when he drew the distinction between Protestant and Romanist at this point, saying: “We labour to instruct men in such sort, that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself; they, clean contrary, would make all sores seem incurable, unless a priest have a hand in them”.<sup>28</sup> There is only one way to this great end: that the man in the pew should have a Bible in his

hand, and back of that a Bible in his home, and in his heart. We lose the great doctrine of private interpretation at our peril. A man could have no greater aim in ministry than to produce a Bible-reading congregation. One of the great problems facing a preacher in the Church of England today is that he addresses people who do not carry the Book in their hands to church, nor in their minds. Consequently the truth declared from the pulpit makes little penetration, because it falls upon minds unfamiliar with biblical categories and modes of thought. We must labour, and labour, and labour again to put the Bible back in the homes of our land, and to lead those who already read their Bibles out of the shallows of superficial acquaintance into the deeper things of the Word of God.

Fourthly, and finally, we may look to the Holy Spirit to give the blessings of fruitfulness and increase when the Church gives itself to the proclamation of the Gospel as its sole work for the world. Is not this the answer to our great concern today? Why is the Church powerless? Why is the world unimpressed? Is it not true that the Church of England as a whole has lost its grip upon the Gospel, defined as we have seen reason to define it from John 16—the message of Christ as the Object of personal faith, the Accomplisher of full salvation, the Guarantor of eternal security. This is not the sound that is heard in the pulpits of our land. Can the Holy Spirit then give the increase, since the increase arises from the proclamation of this truth? But the matter goes even deeper than that. The promise of Christ was addressed not only to the man in the pulpit but to the whole Church. We have yet to see what God would do if His people as a whole marched against the world armed with nothing but the Gospel, renouncing all attractiveness save only that of the beauty and glory of the Lord Jesus, and depending only on the power of the Sovereign Spirit who is the truth.

Revive us, Lord. Is zeal abating  
While harvest fields are vast and white?  
Revive us, Lord, the world is waiting,  
Equip thy Church to spread the light.

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### Endnotes:

- 1) 1 John 5: 6
- 2) *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church*, p. 19.
- 3) John 14: 12
- 4) Article VII
- 5) Acts 1: 12.
- 6) 2 Tim. 4: 6
- 7) 2 Tim. 1: 6
- 8) 2 Peter 1: 21

- 9) Acts 27: 15, using the same verb “driven” as is translated “moved” in 2 Peter 1: 21.
- 10) John 14: 26.
- 11) John 16: 13
- 12) John 16: 8ff.
- 13) Cp. John 17: 4, 5, 11.
- 14) Note the emphasis on “with the Father” in 1 John 2: 1
- 15) John 12: 31
- 16) 1 John 5: 12
- 17) John 15: 26f.
- 18) 1 Peter 1: 19f.; Eph. 1: 4.
- 19) Eph. 1: 7; Heb. 10: 10.
- 20) Eph. 1: 13f.
- 21) Titus 3: 5.
- 22) Romans 15: 13.
- 23) Romans 14: 17.
- 24) 1 Cor. 2:14.
- 25) Luke 11: 13.
- 26) Acts 5: 32.
- 27) A. Kuyper: *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, p. 199
- 28) *Ecclesiastical Polity*, VI, vi, 2.