

John 16:5-15 "How Does Jesus Speak Today?"

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It is a privilege to speak this morning to you, opening up God's Word as we just heard it in John. John, as a former student of Anton Chekhov, I worry about that right there, because apparently nothing on stage was to be there unless it was going to be used at some point. And I've got those fangs there, but they keep me on my toes. Let's pray before we dig in. Thank you, Lord, for the joy of celebrating a baptism, for the joy of breaking bread together, for the joy of hearing your Word. And we ask that by your Holy Spirit, you would open our hearts, soften us to take hold of your promise. May we see Jesus. May we hear him today. And in his name we pray. Amen.

[2 : 08] Amen. Now, if you heard last week's sermon, you'll recall that George mentioned how in his younger years he knew a woman who had a word from God regarding whom she was to marry, and that that person was to be George. Well, a few years ago I recall reading an article about a woman in Kenya who believed that God had told her that she was to marry the Holy Spirit, and with a full wedding and everything, not just in some informal way. And I'm not telling you this to poke any fun at her at all, because as far as I can tell, she was very sincere in her desire to see people come to know Jesus.

But the fact is, there's a lot of confusion that surrounds the question of how God speaks today. It's linked to a confusion about the Holy Spirit's person and his work, and who he is and what he does. Anyway, here's what happened. The lady's name was Elizabeth Nalem. I think I'm pronouncing that right. She believed she had a word from God. Along with instructions to marry the Holy Spirit, she was told to go preach the gospel, first in neighboring Uganda, and then to the United States, to the uttermost parts of the earth, if you like.

So she invited her friends to church, where the ceremony took place. But it didn't go down as she had hoped, because, well, the party was somewhat spoiled by a certain man. It turned out to be her husband.

He wasn't on board with every detail there that day. He said, well, the decision had involved him more or less staying back to care for their children.

[4 : 09] And here's what he said. She didn't inform me about the wedding. We are still duly married, and this is a lot of work. He also pointed out, just for the record, that he had paid a substantial dowry of 22 cows and 16 goats.

Well, this was an Anglican network she was part of, and the bishop was brought into the situation, and he came down on the husband's side. Once he'd heard that Mrs. Nalem had gone through with the ceremony, he said, we don't support what happened because Holy Spirit things don't happen that way.

Holy Spirit things don't happen that way. Well, on what grounds could he say that? On what grounds could you and I claim such a thing? Before we try to answer that, and before we turn to our text, consider two main areas of confusion about the person and work of the Holy Spirit today. Some of us are going to be inclined to think at times that the Holy Spirit is a power that keeps everything and everyone connected. In other words, the world and the Holy Spirit share a very tight relationship, a natural kind of intimacy, if you like.

And since it's by this power that relationships happen, it has the appearance of being personal. But the power itself, we have to be clear, is an impersonal one that animates the world.

[5 : 46] To live rightly, according to this understanding, is to stay connected. In other words, to live in unity, in the connectedness of all things that's already there by the Spirit.

To sin, on the other hand, against the Spirit, is to disconnect. It's to create boundaries, like when we draw distinctions between God and creation, good and bad, redeemed, lost, gay, straight, so forth. John Denver, one of my heroes, seems to have been into this kind of understanding when he, years back, sang a song called Wind Song.

And he thought of the wind as the whisper of our mother, the earth, the wind as the weaver of darkness, bringer of dawn, or the sweet taste of love on a slow summer's day.

I think that captured something of this understanding of the Spirit. Now, others like to think of the Holy Spirit as the present God, who's to be distinguished from the God who was active in the past, as Father and Son, in different ages, under different modes.

[7 : 07] The idea that God is personal is here at least a bit more promising because God is understood to speak to us from beyond all created things, telling us his name and his will for us and for creation.

But, and here's the problem, what he says in one age may well be superseded by what he says in the next. And here's what it looks like.

The Father's ministry gives way to the sons, and then that's replaced by the spirits. In practical terms, in the present age of the spirit, we don't really look for God to reveal his will in ways exclusively through past events and through an authoritative word about those events, as we have in Scripture, but more directly, either through an inner voice to the individual heart or to the church through its collective wisdom over the years.

Now, in practice, we tend to be inconsistent, so we won't fall neatly into these categories. So Mrs. Nalem may very well have been diligent in her reading of Scripture, even while actively seeking after a more direct revelation of what God required for her salvation or for the building up of the church.

The same confusion is there for those who try to hold both Scripture and church tradition as sources of revelation. This way may look more cautious and more restrained, but in practice, it becomes very easy for a church slowly but surely to invent stuff that it considers necessary for our salvation or for our unity or for the advancement of the kingdom, for the building up of the church, but that God hasn't required or that God has expressly forbidden in Scripture.

[9 : 10] So we have Scripture as God's Word written, as our only infallible standard for discerning these things. I'll say a bit more about that towards the end, but for now, let's just ask this.

What does Jesus teach about the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit and what is his work? So let's go through that reading together. If you have your Bibles there or your devices, follow with me as we go through this passage once again broken down in three segments.

The first segment, verses 5 to 7, is a necessary preface to what Jesus teaches about the Holy Spirit's work and person and work because it has to do with the fact and the blessings of his going away.

Verse 5, But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, Where are you going? But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper, some translations say comforter or consoler, will not come to you.

[10 : 27] But if I go, I will send him to you. Just let me make three brief points on this section. I'm going to him who sent me, says Jesus.

I'm going to the Father. In the Creed, we confess that Jesus ascended into heaven, but we often overlook that event, don't we?

Since we tend to focus more on Jesus' direct presence in our lives at the expense of a real departure. And the upshot, I think, is that we tend to overlook the necessary role of the Holy Spirit. So we do well to note how perplexed the disciples are. And apart from being troubled, which I'll mention a little further down, Jesus has earlier, just in the previous chapter, said to them, remain in me, even as I remain in you.

And now he says he's leaving. And so naturally, we'd be asking, how is that supposed to happen? And then Jesus, in effect, answers the question.

[11 : 39] Because he says, it's to your advantage, and this is my second point, it's to your advantage that I go away. Here we need to grasp, I think, why exactly Jesus' departure is a real benefit to them.

Now, if we think that a spiritual presence is something less than real, then we will run into difficulties. But the fact is, and as commentaries can help us to see, to remain would limit Jesus geographically, spatially.

And what God has in store in this glorious sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it's not that he wasn't active, the Spirit wasn't active before, but there's this special outpouring at Pentecost. God's design in this wonderful moment means that there are no such limitations to God's power to make Jesus present to every heart that's willing to make him room, as we sing at Christmas time, to receive him for every group, to any group that gathers in his name.

And that's the wonder of a personal relationship with Jesus. We sometimes maybe overuse that term, and it's good to know what we mean. But it's a good term.

[13 : 01] It's the wonder of a personal relationship with Jesus when, by God's mercy, we're brought into it through our repentance and faith in Jesus, as we've heard so well in our baptismal rite.

That's the most important decision we could ever make. Now, the phrase itself, of course, can be misunderstood, personal relationship, as when we think of other personal things, like personal belongings, personal careers, things that you and I can kind of more or less direct and control. But to enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus is really, it's really about Jesus. Brought about by the Spirit who gives life, and it's to have him direct us and govern our lives.

He's in charge, and there really is no other way for a relationship with Jesus to happen. And then the third point has this promise.

Jesus says, if I go, I will send him to you. What we learn here is that the Holy Spirit, sent from the Father, according to Jesus' earlier promise as well, also comes from the Son.

[14 : 16] That's why, and incidentally, it was not wrong to add the filioque clause to the creed. As when we declare that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, and the Son.

There's a theological significance I won't dwell on here. We can talk about that after. But, because now all we need to do is understand why Scripture itself speaks of the Spirit belonging, as belonging to Jesus.

Yes, they are distinct persons of the Godhead, but when Paul writes in Galatians 4, 6, that God's children are able to address God as Abba, as Father, because of the, because of the, because the, because the Spirit of His Son is in their hearts, we're meant to understand the unity of purpose that the Son and the Spirit share.

So we should never drive a wedge between the work of the Son on the one hand and the work of the Spirit on the other. This text draws us marvelously into that truth.

So that, turn with me to verse 8, the second part of the passage. In this second part, verses 8 to 11, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit's work there in the world.

[15 : 36] Verse 8, and when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Concerning sin because they do not believe in me.

Concerning righteousness because I go to the Father and you will see me no longer. Concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. Two brief points here in this text.

The convicting work of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be convicted of sin? Well, it's to have its true nature exposed so that we understand what it is exactly and what its consequences are. It's to be aware and convinced of its real nature. And I think what I want to highlight here is that an impersonal God can't possibly make that happen.

An impersonal God is mute. Even convenient. And convenient because we get to decide ultimately what is what sin is if there is such a thing and what its consequences are.

[16 : 43] But here we see that the Holy Spirit is personal. He's sovereign. His work, far from inserting some kind of general glue that holds all things together, is very specific related to the saving purposes of God.

And he works particularly and specially. As Sinclair Ferguson puts it, the New Testament places the spirit and the world in an antithetical, not conciliatory relationship.

That's because two chapters back, John 14, Jesus tells the disciples that the world does not know the spirit and therefore cannot receive him.

The second point, we, in the second point here is that the convicting work is very specific and it's very closely, tightly related to Jesus' person and work.

It has a very Christological focus. It's very Jesus-centered here. In other words, when the Holy Spirit comes, he will apply Jesus' saving work in three ways.

[17 : 53] He's going to turn hearts from unbelief in Jesus to belief in Jesus. He's going to give the remedy for sin through faith in Jesus and his righteousness, taking on his righteousness as like a mantle.

And he'll establish Jesus' lordship and righteous rule over all things, given the victory over Satan that he's won through the cross.

And that's his work in the world which will continue right to the day, the glorious day when Jesus comes again. And here we see the Holy Spirit not attracting attention to himself.

He's always pointing us and leading us to Jesus. Jesus. Let's see the third part which concerns the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of disciples. Verse 12, I still have many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now.

When the spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all the truth for he will not speak on his own authority but whatever he hears he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

[19 : 03] He will glorify me for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

So just once again some brief points here. The first has to do with who is the person of the Holy Spirit.

We have confessed in the Creed that he is Lord and life giver and we have solid biblical reasons for confessing that.

And here Jesus tells us that he is the spirit of truth. There are many things we could say about the Holy Spirit's person but these are the two that I want to highlight here. He's the life and he's truth. And what it's wonderful how wonderful it is to understand to grasp that the life that the Holy Spirit brings is not somehow disconnected or separate from the truth that he imparts.

[20 : 06] To get one is to get the other. We're so prone to put those things, life and truth, in separate boxes as though we could select one and take one and leave the other aside.

So we can say that the Holy Spirit's work is to give us the truth about who God is and what he has done even even as he gives us new life.

Everything he does serves the purpose of revealing the truth and the beauty of Jesus, whether it means shining light into our hearts to expose things that are not of God or giving us insight and gifts we need for building up the church and advancing Christ's kingdom.

A second point. Jesus says he will guide you into all truth. Whom will he guide? Is the question here. And in the primary sense we have to recognize that he's speaking directly to his disciples. His promise is that the Holy Spirit is going to reveal what they will need to know and understand so that his word can be complete and his written word can be completed, can be sealed if you like.

[21 : 26] That's why he told them in John 14, 26, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I've said to you. But the Holy Spirit's guidance doesn't end there.

We believers of the 21st century benefit from the very same ministry. There is one important difference. The Holy Spirit now leads us into the truth not so as to add to the revelation that's already there but so that we will grow in our understanding of that revelation so that more light may be shed on the meaning of scripture as we apply it in different and new contexts and to new situations.

That's the difference between the Holy Spirit's revelation and his illumination and I think it's a crucial distinction for us to make. So to the last point in the passage he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

There again here we see the unity of purpose between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We see here that it's Jesus who will be speaking through the Holy Spirit.

We see the unity in their present ministry. It's not as though we have Jesus speaking only in the past and the Holy Spirit speaking today.

[22 : 55] No, it's Jesus speaking today through the Holy Spirit. So let's turn to a couple of practical questions. What about God revealing the name of the person we're supposed to marry?

What about what should we expect how should we expect to hear Jesus' voice today? Given that there are competing understandings of this?

Well, the first question raises what's called the doctrine of the Scripture's finality. You can make a note of that. The Scripture's finality. And the best way I try to explain that is just as we seek no further Christ beyond Jesus of Nazareth, the same risen Lord Jesus who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

we seek no further revelation from God concerning salvation. Finality. Scriptures are God's final revelation.

This means that they are the only standard for testing any and every idea that we might consider to be from God. Let me bring in Sinclair Ferguson again here because I think he makes the point far better than I could.

[24 : 11] He says this, since the Scriptures record God's last word for the last days, we should not now expect that God will speak to us directly.

Let's hear what he means. Now that he has spoken in Christ and through the apostles, we discover his will by applying Scripture to all the varied circumstances in which we live.

We do not expect, for example, that God will whisper to us the name of the person we are to marry, the calling we are to pursue, the church to which we are to belong, or the place we should live.

We discover God's will in these areas by the careful and ongoing application of the principles, commands, and illustrations we find in Scripture to the life situations in which we find ourselves.

God has given me a word for you.

[25 : 26] But when it happens, what is the way to receive such a report? Well, I have the option of my own dad's very practical example.

He says, okay, brother or sister, thanks for that. When God tells me the same thing, I'll let you know. It's one way to go about it, right?

But if Ferguson is right in his judgment, as I believe he is, in our efforts to apply biblical principles to life situations, at times we do get a strong sense that this way, as opposed to that way, is the right way to go forward.

After all, the Holy Spirit does enlighten our path by his word, giving us that discernment.

But even there we have to recognize that our vision is going to be fallible. we can never apply to our interpretations of God's will for us any kind of thus saith the Lord.

[26 : 34] We have to recognize that our strong sense may also have other motives attached to it that could cloud our understanding. So to the question of how does Jesus speak today, I do pray that this, what I share here will be of help, as it has been in my own life.

It's not intended to oversimplify something that can be rather complex, but simply to set different perspectives side by side so that we can compare them and see them hopefully for what they are. I didn't come up with this. I got it from John Stott, who some years back outlined five answers to the question how does Jesus speak today? The classic Roman Catholic answer, Jesus speaks today through the magisterium, okay?

The teaching office of the Pope and his fellow Roman Catholic bishops who rely on both scripture and tradition in doing that. That's a standard and official, in a sense, Roman Catholic explanation. But the problem here, apart from having a sort of expanding Bible, if you like, to which we can add more infallible texts, has to do with the fact that final authority rests with a body of bishops, not a body of books.

[28 : 05] C.S. Lewis identified the problem well when he was asked why he wasn't a Roman Catholic or was asked to address the question of why he wasn't Roman Catholic. And even though he was very gracious in his dealings with his close Roman Catholic friends, he answered something like, to become a Roman Catholic, I not only must accept what you teach today, I'm committed to accepting what you might teach me tomorrow because of this open canon idea.

The Eastern Orthodox view is the second one. Jesus speaks today through holy tradition. That is, principally through the Bible, which has pride of place, but also the creed, the first seven councils, the teachings of the fathers, within that period, the liturgy, holy icons as well, and perhaps one or two other things.

But here also the authority rests with the church, understood in a kind of dynamic liturgical sense, what the church in its liturgical life, its worship life, sees fit to incorporate into that great tradition. I'd like to illustrate that, but I don't think I have time. But talk to me after, and I have a way of illustrating that. that I think highlights this Eastern Orthodox understanding as distinct from the Roman Catholic one.

What's the liberal answer? Jesus speaks today, these are John Stott's words, through individual reason, conscience, experience, or the consensus of educated opinion.

[29 : 44] This is the most subjective option, and at best it leaves us with a provisional head count. especially among those who are educated, right? The fourth option, John Stott gives, is the popular Anglican way.

He says, we hear Jesus' voice today through the threefold cord of scripture, tradition, and reason. So we have something of an improvement on the liberal approach, but it's still subjective because it's really left to the individual, or to the individual body of Christians to decide how to coordinate these things, scripture, tradition, reason, experience.

Usually, and in our own times, experience gets to win. So Stott comes to the fifth, what he calls the evangelical answer to the question, Jesus speaks today through holy scripture.

scripture. Why? Well, for the simple reason that Jesus submitted to scripture and urged his disciples to do the same. Now, if we ask, well, wasn't Jesus getting his disciples to submit to the Hebrew Bible, to the Old Testament?

Well, yes, but he explicitly provided for the new with his promise that the Holy Spirit would teach his disciples what they weren't yet ready to bear.

[31 : 08] So how might we respond to what we've heard from God's word this morning? Just a few concluding thoughts.

As we reflect on Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit, I think that this morning we can be grateful for the truth that the same Holy Spirit impresses on your heart and on mine as we attend, as we attend the Holy Scripture, as we listen as we consider it, as we meditate on it, as we discuss it with others.

We can also be encouraged by the hope it puts in our hearts and also challenged by the Holy Spirit's inward work as we look ahead.

So I'll be very brief. First, we're called to be grateful. If you're like me, most of the time you're not thinking, wow, the truth that is now clearing the fog of my brain and unbelief as I meditate on Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And yet it is. So let's give thanks that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth, clearing that fog of our confusion and unbelief.

[32 : 29] Second, we're called to be encouraged by the hope it brings. The Holy Spirit does the work of uniting us to Jesus and keeping him united to Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

To have Jesus is to have a profound and lasting hope that he will do precisely as he has promised. Finally, we're challenged as we look ahead.

The immediate context of the passage is Jesus is teaching about abiding in him and his word, as I mentioned, but also the consequences that will necessarily follow from following him.

It makes perfect sense then that the disciples are troubled, and he's just warned them that the suffering is going to come. He even says in chapter 16, verse 2, that they're going to be put to death with those who kill them thinking they're actually serving God.

And I can't help think here of a period of time that I've been studying, the 16th century Spain, with the church and all its outward signs of authority and even representing Jesus, somehow thinking through the Inquisition that they were doing the Lord's work as they burnt so many at the stake for their faith in Jesus in 16th century Spain.

[33 : 52] I think in light of this reality, we can be challenged in a couple of ways. We can be challenged to depend more on the Holy Spirit's ministry, in guiding us, in dwelling, letting Christ's word dwell in us richly, as Paul says in Colossians 3, so that we can encourage others more and more and also be moved to give thanks.

But the second way we can be challenged is as we recognize the real battle that's there, never to lose sight of the fact that there is a battle going on for our souls.

The cross is a permanent mark of disciples. All who will live godly in Christ Jesus, says Paul to Timothy, shall suffer persecution.

2 Timothy 3.12. The truth is, opposition to God's word is relentless, so in a sense, I don't want to be misunderstood here, in a sense we shouldn't be drawing a sharp distinction between the persecuted church as distinct from the one that isn't.

There are degrees of public and visible persecution, of course, but every Christian is called to do battle against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. If it were otherwise, the armor of God would only be something we'd need to have on occasionally.

[35 : 15] So may the Lord strengthen us to keep it on by his spirit, strengthen us to keep that armor on, and in every victory we gain, may we give God the praise and the glory.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.