

The Holy Spirit and Christian Truth

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[0 : 00] The reading is from John, chapter 14, beginning at verse 15, and it can be found on page 1086 of your Bibles. If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.

You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me.

Because I live, you will also live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

[1 : 10] Judas, not Iscariot, said to him, Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the world? Jesus answered him, If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

You heard me say to you, I am going away and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

[2 : 23] And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe. Good morning everyone, lovely to see you all.

Just to say, we are starting a two week series this week, and this week and next week we have a two week series, looking at a couple of key Christian doctrines or themes that the Bible teaches on at various points.

The title on the service sheet is actually next week's one, where we are going to be talking about the Holy Spirit and Christian unity. This week, as advertised in the turnpiles, we are looking at the Holy Spirit and Christian truth. So really it's a talk this week about the Holy Spirit, next week about unity.

And because we want to see what the whole Bible teaches on this subject, it's not sort of possible to stick in one passage, and therefore we've got a slightly longer handout, which we should have had inserted into the service sheets, which I think we'll find useful to follow as we go on.

So that's the plan. That's where we're headed. Let me kick off with a prayer. Amen. Paul prays in Ephesians chapter 1 and asks that God would give the Ephesians the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

[3 : 34] Our Heavenly Father, that's our prayer this morning. Please may your spirit reveal himself to us, that we might know him and your son, the Lord Jesus, more clearly.

And we ask this for your call. Amen. Just worth saying, by way of introduction as well, the nature of these timeless topics are that it's not possible to cover everything, so it may well be that you have some questions left after this.

You could do a whole sort of term, couldn't you, looking at the person of the Holy Spirit. We may have time for questions at the end of the talk next week, but that we will this week, because it's going to be celebrating the Lord's Supper. But do feel free to come up and find me afterwards if you do want to ask about anything that either confused you or you could have had time.

That's a tough one. I don't know what your dream job would be, but if I wasn't a Christian and I could do anything I wanted, except perhaps scoring the winning goal for England in a World Cup final, I'd love to be a rock star.

I've often imagined, sometimes in front of the mirror at home, how great it would be to bellow out songs that I've written in front of 80,000 cheering fans at Wembley Stadium. The only problem, though, is that I can't sing, I can't play a musical instrument, and I wouldn't even begin to know how to write a song.

[4 : 46] Although, judging by the Eurovision Song Contest last night, those things don't seem to matter very much. Seriously, though, left to my own devices, I'd make a hopeless rock star.

But just imagine for a moment that the spirit of, I don't know, Paul McCartney came to live inside me. Well, then his spirit could inspire me to write great music, to play complicated guitar riffs, and to sing tunefully.

With his spirit, my dream could just come true. Well, the Bible's teaching about God's spirit, the Holy Spirit, is the most amazing and precious truth.

Left to our own devices, we're unable to enjoy intimacy with God or please him. But wonderfully, God has sent his Holy Spirit to live inside Christians, to help us know and serve him.

Sadly, questions about the Holy Spirit have caused great confusion and division in recent decades. And that's very sad, because the truth about the spirit should fill us with joy and gratitude.

[5 : 55] Let's have a look down with me at that first at the top of the handouts from Ezekiel chapter 36. God promises, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. It's a picture of great intimacy, isn't it? Ezekiel is addressing the people of Israel in exile.

And he looks forward to a day when God will put his spirit within them and move them to follow his ways. And that promise was, of course, fulfilled in the New Testament when the spirit was sent at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2.

Up until that moment, the spirit only came on a few special people in the Old Testament, such as Moses and Samuel and David. And even then, only for a limited period of time, for a limited purpose.

[6 : 58] But now, as Ezekiel predicted, God's spirit lives in all God's people all the time. What a remarkable truth that is.

The living God dwells inside us, if we're Christians. That's how intimate our relationship with him is. No other world faith would make such a claim.

It's an idea that should make the Muslim, the Hindu and the Old Testament Jew green with envy. And yet, this is how the one true living God deals with his people today.

If we're Christians, he lives inside us. We've got two main headings this morning as we consider the Holy Spirit. And the first is this. Who is the spirit? Who is he?

There's a question about which I think there's much confusion. And the first thing to note simply is that the spirit is a person. The spirit is a person. Just have a look down with me at John 14 and verses 16 and 17.

[7 : 58] In that reading we had a few minutes ago, John 14 verse 16. Jesus says, page 1086, if you close the Bible. Jesus says to his disciples, the night before he died.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper to be with you forever. Even the spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive. Because it neither sees him nor knows him.

You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. Jesus describes the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, as another helper. Just as Jesus had been the disciple's helper.

Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit has personal characteristics. He encourages and comforts and helps his people. That's why Jesus describes the spirit with a personal pronoun in those verses.

As a he, rather than merely an it. Did you notice that? You see, like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is a person. He's relational. So it's not right for us to think of the spirit as some kind of impersonal force.

[9 : 02] We need to speak of him as a he, not an it. So in the New Testament, we learn that he can be grieved. He can be lied to. And that we can be led by him.

He's a person. And of course that means that if we have the spirit, then we have all of him. We need to worry that we need more of him or that we've only received some of him.

No, because he's a person, the spirit either indwells us or he doesn't. You see, it's a nonsense to speak about having more of a person. Either I'm here present with you or I'm not. You can't have just some of me.

And in the same way, it's a misunderstanding to want more of the spirit. Sure, we're commanded to go on being filled with the spirit as we allow him to have more of us.

As we surrender more of our lives to his leaves. But we can't have more of him. If we're a Christian, then we have all of the spirit. It's immensely reassuring, I think.

[10:06] The spirit is a person who indwells us. Not a kind of force whose power we can sort of plug into and have more or less of. And why don't I even say gently that isn't it actually somewhat insulting to God to ask for more?

If it suggests that what he's given us already isn't enough. And it's also important to recognise that the Holy Spirit indwells all Christians without exception.

Not only do Christians have all of the spirit, but all Christians have the spirit. But Romans 8 verse 9, on the handout, tells us that anyone who does not have the spirit of Christ does not belong to him. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a privilege enjoyed by every single believer this side of Pentecost. As John Stott puts it, For the Christian, having the spirit is a universal experience because it is an initial experience.

We receive the spirit at conversion. Sometimes people have spoken of the baptism of the spirit, or a second blessing of the spirit, as being on offer for Christians after their conversion.

[11:15] A kind of higher plane that Christians need to aspire to, perhaps marked by speaking in tongues, or victory over sin. But while the spirit changes and empowers us over time, if we're followers of Jesus, we've already been baptised with the spirit.

There's no two-stage conversion. We need no additional experience. So the spirit is a person. But then notice also that he's another Jesus, as it were, another Jesus.

That's to say that he doesn't operate independently from Jesus, but continues the same work that Jesus himself performed on earth. We saw that in John 14, 16 in our reading, where the spirit was described, remember, as another helper.

He's another Jesus, sent to continue Jesus' work. We'll just flip on a page to John 16 and verse 7. John 16 and verse 7.

Jesus says this there. He says, Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you.

[12:27] But if I go, I will send him to you. You see, the spirit could only be sent once Jesus had disappeared from earth. Jesus tells his disciples that first he had to go away.

So the spirit is, if you like, the continuing presence of the risen Jesus on earth. As a man, Jesus is constrained by time and space, only able to be in one place at any one time.

And that's why God sent his spirit into the world after Jesus' ascension to heaven. Because a spirit, rather than flesh, he's able to be the agent of Jesus' ministry in all places.

In fact, if you study John 14 to 16 at some length, it's striking how much of the spirit's description matches that of Jesus. So we learn that they're both sent by the Father. They're both teachers of the truth.

They both convict people of their sin. And they're both rejected by the world. The spirit is another helper doing the same work as the Son.

[13:31] And that means that it's quite wrong for us to think of the Holy Spirit as the sort of, you know, a spooky part of God who does the weird things that we can't quite understand.

No, rather, he's intimately involved with all the Father and the Son do. He doesn't work independently of them. But all three persons of the Trinity work together for the same purpose. And it follows, therefore, that the spirit is also a divine person. We won't spend long on this point, but in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul says that the Lord is the spirit.

Well, do you remember when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit in Acts 5? Peter tells them, You have not lied to men, but to God. Later on, perhaps have a look at those other verses on the handout where the spirit is spoken of as being co-equal with the Father and the Son.

The spirit is divine. We're to fear and worship him rather than seeing him as some kind of power that we can control or that serves us. The spirit is a person.

[14:38] He's another Jesus. And he's a divine person. But on to our second main heading over the page on the handout. What does the spirit do?

What does he do? And we're going to notice two things in particular. First of all, the spirit glorifies Jesus. He glorifies Jesus. That's his supreme work.

The spirit glorifies Jesus. Have a look at John 16 and verse 14 this time. John 16, 14. Jesus talking about the spirit says, He will glorify me.

For he will take what is mine and declare it to you. The role of the spirit is to bring glory to Jesus.

Back in John 14, 26, we're told that the spirit would remind the apostles of Jesus' words.

What Jesus has said to them. We'll just have a look back at the top of the page we're on. John 15, 26. Where Jesus tells his disciples, When the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the spirit of the truth, or the spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.

[15:52] So the spirit points us to Jesus. He glorifies him. And testifies about him. The spirit's ministry has often, therefore rightly been described, as a floodlighting ministry.

In other words, his role is to point to someone else, to shine light upon Jesus. Can you imagine going to a football match, or to the theatre, and spending the whole time looking up at the floodlights, or the spotlights?

Friends, wouldn't it? It'd be to completely miss the point, of why the lights are there, what they're there for, because the whole reason they exist, is to light up what's happening on the pitch, or on the stage.

And in the same way, to become so obsessed with the spirit, that we take our eyes off of some, to whom he points. It's a completely miss the point. In fact, can I say that the supreme sign, the spirit is at work, isn't great emotion, or signs and wonders, or some kind of spiritual ecstasy, as some might think.

But rather that Jesus is glorified, and exalted, and obeys, and proclaims. For example, in Acts 2, the spirit is given to the apostles, at Pentecost, and immediately they're empowered, to boldly proclaim, that Jesus is Lord.

[17:13] So a spirit-filled Christian, will be a Jesus-obsessed Christian. A Christian who loves, and obeys, and proclaims Jesus. The one focused on the spirit, is to miss the whole point.

As the greater 16th century reformer, John Calvin, put it, the principal end, of the Holy Spirit sending, was to glorify the Son. John Scott writes, the spirit is never more satisfied, than when the believer, is engrossed in Jesus Christ.

And of course, the fruit of the spirit, as we see in Galatians 5, is holy, Christ-like, Christ-pleasing lives. You want to know, if a tree is an apple tree, or an orange tree, you look for its fruits, if they're oranges or apples.

And the fruit of the spirit, the evidence that someone is spiritual, is not the gifts of the spirit, which incidentally also, are given to glorify Jesus, as we build one another up.

But the fruit, of Christ-likeness, of love, joy, peace, patience, and so on. So the spirit glorifies Jesus.

[18:21] That's his supreme work. But how does he accomplish that? How does he go about doing it? Well, secondly, under this heading, the spirit works through the word.

The spirit works through the word. His role could be explained like this. The spirit of God does the work of God through the word of God.

Spirit of God does the work of God through the word of God. Word and spirit mustn't be divorced. In fact, they can't be separated. Have a look at 2 Timothy 3.16, a familiar verse to many of us, probably, on the handout.

Paul writes to Timothy, All Scripture is breathed out by God. Now, the Greek word translated breathed out by God or God-breathed, theophanoustos, literally means God-spirited.

Both the normal Hebrew and Greek words for the spirit mean either breath or spirit. So when Paul says all Scripture is God-breathed, he's saying it's all God-spirited, that his spirit breathes it out.

[19:28] Just think for a moment about the relationship between my breath and my words. It's my breath which carries my words, isn't it? I breathe out my words. You can't divorce my breath from my words.

They go together. My words couldn't be heard without my breath and my breath would communicate nothing without my words. And so it is with God. His spirit carries his words.

He breathes them out. God's word, as written down in the Scriptures, can't be divorced from his spirit. In fact, their relationship is so close that they're even spoken of as doing the same things in the Bible.

Just to give one example, it's on the handout. Psalm 33, 6, in the Old Testament, tells us, By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. The first half of the verse, the psalmist says, it was by the word of the Lord that the heavens were made. And in the second half, that it was also by the breath or spirit of his mouth. So word and spirit work together.

[20 : 33] They can't be divorced. And to suggest otherwise is, I think, to make a category mistake, to misunderstand how they relate to one another. So while the word is the instrument through which God works, his spirit is the agent by which he wields or applies that instrument.

But the difference between a trombone which plays music and the trombone is the breath which allows that instrument to make noise. So rather than competing or doing different things, spirit and word complement each other and work together.

The word achieves its purpose as the spirit applies it to individual lives. And that's how it's always been in the Bible. But Ben reminded us at the beginning of the service, didn't he, that back in Genesis 1, God creates through his word.

God said, let there be light. And there was light. And yet it's also by the spirit hovering over the waters that he created. God creates through the word by the spirit.

And it's the same with his new creation today, Christians, his work of redemption. So in the book of Titus we're told that God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 49] But in James 1, 18, we learn that God chose to give us birth through the word of truth. Take it that they're talking about the same thing. Just as God made creation through his word by the spirit, so also his new creation, the people of God, are brought into existence through the word by the spirit.

Spirit and word can't be divorced to neither creation or redemption. And equally importantly, the spirit and the word can't be divorced in the area of revelation, of how God speaks to us today.

God speaks to us through his word by his spirit. Let's have a look at those words in 2 Peter 1, 20 and 21. Peter writes, No prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. See what those verses are saying?

Although the pages of scripture were written by human prophets, they all have one divine author, the Spirit of God, who inspired them, who carried their human authors along. So where do we need to look to hear the spirit's voice?

[23 : 07] Well, as we've already seen in 2 Timothy 3, 16, we need look no further from the pages of the Bible. And this isn't only true of the Old Testament, but the New Testament is also equally the words of the spirit.

We've already seen how Jesus promises his apostles in John 14 that the spirit would remind them of everything he said. The spirit helped them write the New Testament. Well, Ephesians 3, 5 and 6, I think it should be or not, 4 or 5, tells us that the mystery of Christ has now been revealed to his apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

The apostles and prophets who wrote the New Testament were writing under the reliable inspiration of the Spirit. The whole Bible contains the words of the Holy Spirit.

Some people might say, well, that's all well and good, but what about now? How does the Holy Spirit speak today?

Maybe he spoke through Isaiah or Paul in the past, but where do we need to go to hear his voice today? Well, once again, the answer is in the pages of Scripture.

[24 : 18] Just turn on with me, please, to one other passage, the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 3, page 1205, page 1205. And this is, I think, tremendously liberating, but we don't need to try and guess or wonder whether the Holy Spirit is speaking to us in particular ways, but we know absolutely where to go to hear his voice.

Hebrews 3, verse 7, just give you some background. The writer of Hebrews is about to quote from Psalm 95, and yet who does he say is the author of those words of Scripture.

Not David, who wrote the psalm, but verse 7, the Holy Spirit. And notice that he writes, as the Holy Spirit says. Not as the Holy Spirit said, past tense, but as the Holy Spirit says, present tense.

The author of Hebrews is telling us that the same Spirit who spoke through David in the Old Testament was still speaking then and still speaks to us today through those same words of Scripture.

God's word, the Bible, is living and active. It's still the tool through which the Spirit speaks. And it's God's sufficient word to us. All that we need for salvation and Christian living.

[25 : 37] So if we want to hear the Holy Spirit speak to us today, we need to open our Bibles. That's a deeply spiritual thing to do.

I wonder if we've realised that. The Spirit is at work in powerful and exciting ways every time the Bible is preached or quoted. We don't need a time for the ministry of the Spirit on a Sunday, which is separate from the sermon or the ministry of the Word.

You don't need to look anywhere else to hear the Spirit's voice. But the Spirit's work didn't end when he helped the Bible authors write Scripture.

Because wonderfully, he also helps us today to understand those same Scriptures. The Spirit's work of inspiration may have finished in enabling the unique Bible writers to write the Bible, but his work of illumination hasn't.

You see, it's all very well having the Spirit's words, but they're not much use if we can't understand them. A Latin text is useless to someone who can't read Latin. And so too, the Spirit's words can't help us unless we understand them.

[26 : 48] And the Spirit enables us to do that. He illuminates them so we can understand them. Have a look with me at that verse from 1 Corinthians 2 on the handouts.

will tell us that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for they are holy to him. And he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

In other words, we can only understand the Bible if the Holy Spirit helps us. And because he lives in us, we have that privilege if we're Christians. Isn't that astonishing?

The same Spirit who inspired Moses and David and Isaiah and Solomon and Luke and Paul and James and the others to write their words is able to help us understand them if we're Christians. I feel like one of our JAM members doing their GCSEs at the moment having a Shakespeare with them in their English exam to help explain what he meant in Macbeth.

So the Holy Spirit both inspired the words of Scripture past tense and illuminates them present tense to us today. To use a trivial example, imagine that you took a blind man to the unveiling of a portrait.

[28 : 02] Two things would need to happen for that man to be able to see the portrait. First of all, the picture would need to be unveiled. And that's what happens when the Spirit inspired the Bible writings. God unveiled his truth.

But that would be useless unless, secondly, the blind man's eyes were opened. And that's what goes on when the Spirit illuminates the Scriptures to us as we work hard at understanding the words of the Bible.

He opens our eyes to see and understand God's truth. Why we pray before we look at the Bible on a Sunday or in growth groups because we need the Spirit's help to understand his word.

So the Spirit and the word can't be divorced. Sure, God speaks to us today by his Spirit but normatively he does so by his Spirit through the word provided.

Why, if we ever move church or when those in jam look for a university church perhaps we must resist the temptation to look for something different. We must listen to those who say that we're missing out if the word is centre stage.

[29 : 11] Now don't mishear me. Not that God's Spirit can't speak directly. God is sovereign. But such occasions will, I guess, be rare and exceptional.

We shouldn't expect and don't need anything more than what we already have in Scripture. God's normal way of working is to illuminate our minds to understand the writings of those to whom he did speak directly and who've written it down for us in the Bible.

And that means that to quench the Spirit, something that 1 Thessalonians 5 tells us not to do, means to ignore God's words either by not listening to it or by disobeying it.

I guess a church which quenches the Spirit is a church that whatever else it does doesn't teach the Bible or words of the Spirit. And conversely, the Spirit-filled church is a church where Bible teaching is central, where the voice of the Spirit is expounded in the Scriptures and obeyed by the listeners. Evangelical or Bible-believing Christians like we at Grace Church have sometimes been accused of neglecting the Spirit. He's even been called the forgotten person of the Trinity. But do we see that if Jesus is being proclaimed from the Bible, the Spirit, far from being forgotten, is at work in powerful ways.

[30 : 31] Nor is it fair when others accuse us as they sometimes do of worshipping Father, Son and Holy Bible because of our emphasis on the Word. Again, because the Spirit works through the Word, the sign that we worship and listen to and submit to Him is as we listen to and submit to the Bible being taught.

Ephesians 6, 17, puts it, the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. The Spirit of God does the work of God through the word of God. We praise you so much, our Heavenly Father, for the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit.

We know that we are unable to understand the Bible or to obey it as we are, but we thank you that your Spirit indwells in each one of us who are Christians. and we thank you that your Spirit is able to change us through his Word, the Bible, to help us to understand and to get to know you better.

And we pray, therefore, that we would rejoice in the gift of the Spirit, that we would be those who are led by the Spirit and be put into practice what his Word teaches and that we would, therefore, have a greater hunger to read the Bible and put it into practice.

And we ask you in peace and love. Amen.