

“The Sending of the Holy Spirit” (An Exposition of John 15:26-16:11)¹

Introduction

Last Sunday was *Ascension Sunday*, and so we looked briefly at Psalm 110, which is one of the chief texts of Scripture which foretold of the ascension of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Today is *Pentecost Sunday*, which was the day in which the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church, as we read of in Acts chapter two, and which was prophesied of in Joel chapter two.

Outside of so-called Charismatic or Pentecostal churches, it can be somewhat rare to hear much teaching and preaching about the Holy Spirit. This should not be the case. In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes:

“It is startling to see how differently the biblical teaching about the second and third persons of the Trinity respectively is treated. The person and work of Christ have been, and remain, subjects of constant debate within the church; yet the person and work of the Holy Spirit are largely ignored. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the Cinderella of Christian doctrines. Comparatively few seem to be interested in it.” (p.68)

He goes on to say, “It is an extraordinary thing that those who profess to care so much about Christ should know and care so little about the Holy Spirit.” (p.69)

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was actually a result of the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. *It was the ascension of Christ that paved the way for Him to send forth the Holy Spirit upon His church.* That is what Christ Jesus Himself speaks of in our text in John's Gospel.

In his *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion* (recently translated into English), Herman Bavinck writes:

“The first work that Christ performs after His ascension on behalf of his church on earth is the sending of the holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2). This event is an entirely unique fact in history, alongside creation and the incarnation; just as Christ accepted human nature in his conception, never to lay it down again, so the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost chose the church as his temple to dwell in it forever.” (p.128)

The great Puritan theologian, Thomas Goodwin, called the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost “the great promise of the New Testament,” saying,

“For as Christ's coming was the great promise of the Old Testament, so the sending of the Spirit is entitled the 'promise of the Father' in the New: Luke xxiv. 49, 'And behold I send the promise of my Father upon you.’”²

In that same chapter of his book on the Holy Spirit he compares the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to the coming of Christ in the incarnation. In other words, *both are singularly momentous in the history of redemption*, and we as believers should view them as such and hold them in the highest regard.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, p.8

Now we will *not* be able to deal with every detail of our text this morning, but hope to at least touch on some of the highlights, especially that found in v.7, where Jesus tells His disciples that it was actually for their **“advantage”** that He was going to go away, because when He went away He was going to send **“the Helper”** (or the **“Comforter”** - KJV) to them.

The Sending of the Helper/Comforter

The *first* thing that we want to notice in our text is the designation of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, as **“the Helper”** (or **“the Comforter”**). This Greek word (*paraklete*) here is somewhat difficult to translate or interpret. Seeing as there may not be any one English word that perfectly renders the full idea intended by this word, perhaps it is best to see it as involving aspects of *both* “help” and “comfort.”

The *context* of these chapters in John's Gospel is that of *bearing witness or testimony to Christ and being persecuted for His sake*. In John 15:18 Jesus tells His disciples, **“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”** And in v.20 He says,

“Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”

When you consider that this is the context in which Christ speaks to His disciples of Him going away, you can see how that would have been a distressing thought to them, and how they would probably be very much conscious of *their own need for both help and comfort* in seeking to bear witness about Christ before a world that hates Him.

In fact, in the previous chapter Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as **“another Helper.”** In John 14:15–17 He tells them:

“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.” (ESV)

J.I. Packer points out, our Lord Jesus says *“Another Comforter – yes, because Jesus was their original Comforter, and the newcomer's task was to continue this side of his ministry.”*³ The clear implication in putting it this way is that *the Holy Spirit was going to carry on that very work of Christ in, through, and for His people.*

What a help and a comfort that the indwelling Holy Spirit is to us as believers! Where do we even begin? He is involved in *every aspect* of the application of Christ's work of redemption to us who believe. It is the Holy Spirit who powerfully unites us to Christ by faith; it is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us, who sealed us unto our salvation (Ephesians 1:13), is the guarantee of our heavenly inheritance (v.14), and who *seals us for the day of redemption* (Ephesians 4:30).

He *inspired the Scriptures*, and so *guided the Apostles into all truth* (John 16:13); He *illuminates* the truth of the Scriptures to the people of God so that we can understand the whole counsel of God!

3 *Knowing God*, p.66

The Holy Spirit leads every believer to walk in holiness and to **“put to death the deeds of the body”** (Romans 8:14). He is also called **“the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”** and is said to **'bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God'** (Romans 8:15–16).

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit helps us to pray and even intercedes for us! Romans 8:26–27 says:

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

The word for “helps” there has the idea of taking hold of someone or *holding them up*. The Holy Spirit holds us up and sustains us in all of our trials and afflictions. What a comfort and a help that the Holy Spirit is to every believer!

The Purpose in Sending the Helper/Comforter

In addition to these things, perhaps the main thing that the sending forth of the Holy Spirit is intended to help the church with is in *our testifying to Christ and being His witnesses*. Our Lord Jesus says as much in John 15:26-27, where we read:

“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

He is called **“the Spirit of truth,”** and is said to **“bear witness”** about Jesus Christ. And what is the result of the Holy Spirit's bearing witness of Christ? The disciples also bearing witness of Christ!

And is this not the same thing that we see in the opening chapters of the book of Acts? In Acts 1:4 Jesus told His disciples not to depart from Jerusalem, but to **“wait for the promise of the Father.”** And in v.8 Jesus went on to tell them:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The receiving of power had to come first, so that the disciples could be Christ's witnesses. The great commission – the mission of the church to make disciples of all the nations, is *far above our pay grade*. It is so far beyond our ability as to be impossible, and for all kinds of reasons.

But the Holy Spirit enables us to bear witness for Christ. And He 'convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment' (John 16:8) as the gospel is proclaimed!

In his book, *Faith and Life*, Benjamin B. Warfield writes:

“It is because this is the dispensation of the Spirit that it is a missionary age; and it is because it is the dispensation of the Spirit that missions shall make their triumphant progress until the earth passes at last into heaven.” (p.145)

The sending of the Holy Spirit has made this a great missionary age! And so the gospel goes forth in great power unto the salvation of sinners and the obedience of the nations!

The Advantage of the Holy Spirit to the Church

In all of these things Jesus tells us that it is to our “advantage” that He goes away and sends His Spirit. That probably seems as baffling to us as it must have been to His disciples who first heard Him say such a thing. Surely they must have thought it would be *much better* if He stayed with them!

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, D.A. Carson writes:

“Jesus' valuation of what is for his disciples' 'good', indeed, for our good, ought to temper longings of the 'Oh-if-only-I-could-have-been-in-Galilee-when-Jesus-was-there!' sort. That same Jesus insists it is better to be alive now, after the coming of the Spirit. Before the triumphant in-breaking of God's saving reign, before the inauguration of the new covenant, millions ignored the claims of the true God. Pentecost transformed that limitation, and millions have been brought to happy submission to the Lord Jesus Christ and to growing obedience by the power of the Spirit whom he bequeathed.”⁴

What a great way to put it! World History over the past 2,000 years, when compared with the utter darkness of this world previous to that, demonstrates the power of the gospel and of the Holy Spirit working through it as the church faithfully bears witness to Christ!

How privileged we are to live in this great gospel age – the age of the Spirit! It is for our good, to our **“advantage”** to be so!

To use Carson's phrase there, have *you* been brought to saving faith in Christ – even “brought to happy submission to the Lord Jesus Christ”? If so, it was only by the power and work of the Holy Spirit raising you from death to life and granting you saving faith! *If not, turn to Christ and live!*

Of the ascension of Christ and the subsequent sending forth of the Holy Spirit, John Calvin writes:

“Thus being received into heaven, he removed his bodily presence from our sight, *not so as to leave without help believers who still have to live on earth, but to rule the world with a power even more present than before.* Certainly his promise to be with us to the end of the age has been fulfilled by his ascension, for as by it his body was lifted above all the heavens, so its power and effectiveness reach far beyond all bounds of heaven and earth.”⁵ (Italics added)

The Holy Spirit's presence and power is the way that the Lord Jesus is present and powerfully at work in the church in the world. It is the way that He is with us always, even to the end of the age. And it is the way that He is with us in the work of making disciples of all the nations.

This is how Christ continues to be our Helper and Comforter – by sending us **“another Helper”** in the sending forth of the Holy Spirit! - Amen

⁴ *The Gospel According to John* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), p.534

⁵ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1541 Edition), p.253