

# Melva's Corner



## Empowerment!

(The Presence of the Holy Spirit)

May 7, 2007

(John 14:25-26)

**Central Truth: From that holy Pentecost Day until now, the principal proof of the Spirit's presence has not been fire and noise. It has been and remains and always will be changed lives that are being brought under the Spirit's control.**

When you hear the term "Holy Spirit," what comes to mind? Do you think of Pentecost? Do you think of modern controversies over tongue-speaking? Do you visualize "tongues like fire" over the heads of the apostles? My concern is that most of us think of the Holy Spirit as a radiating power or influence rather than in personal terms – a mysterious 'It' rather than a gracious Person. I suspect I know why we think that way.

In both Greek and English, "Spirit" is a neuter noun. And we think of a neuter noun as an "it" rather than a he or she. Thus we think of the Holy Trinity of orthodox theology in a peculiar way. God the Father we visualize in warm, personal terms. God the Word (i.e., Logos) we more often speak of as God the Son and think of personal images ranging from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Jerusalem. Not so, however, with the Holy Spirit. Both the neuter noun and the biblical images of fire and anointing tend us away from personal to impersonal imagery, from Spirit as divine personality to Spirit as divine emanation. How unfortunate.

### The Spirit-Paraclete

In the Gospel of John, Jesus invites us to know about, expect, and experience the Holy Spirit. And He speaks of the third member of the divine family in terms that are personal. In fact, He challenged His original followers to think of the Holy Spirit in the same personal ways they had experienced Him. He has already told the apostles: **"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you**

everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). The Spirit would take Jesus' place in their midst both to "teach" and "remind" them of what had happened during His ministry.

In our text for today, Jesus returns to His promise of Holy Spirit presence, teaching, and guidance among those disciples. He told them:

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"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, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:4b-15).

Notice what the version I am using calls the Holy Spirit in the two texts we have read. The New Revised Standard Version has Jesus calling Him "the Advocate" – as opposed to the King James Version's "Comforter" or the New International Version's "Counselor." The original term in John's text is *parakletos*. Because of its background in court settings, I suspect "Comforter" is too passive a rendering. The Holy Spirit represents our interests, stands in for us, and goes to bat for us (cf. 1 John 2:1).

Getting a word for *parakletos* is not easy. I read how the Karre language of certain African tribes, for example, was proving to be particularly difficult for translators with this word. How could they describe the activity of the Holy Spirit to people without the sort of legal system developed countries know?

One day the translators saw a group of tribesmen going into the bush with bundles on their heads. They noticed there was one in the group who carried nothing, and they assumed he was the boss who was there to oversee the rest. To the contrary, they discovered his task was to be alert, see anyone about to fall from exhaustion, take up his load, and carry it for him. He was known in the Karre language as “the one who falls down beside us.” The translators used that word to convey the work of the Holy Spirit in their rendering of the Gospel of John.

I think the apostles were overwhelmed and reeling with the thought that Jesus was about to leave them. As far back as 13:36 and 14:5, He had told them that he would not be with them much longer. They were supposed to carry on without Him? These men who had been dependent on Jesus were supposed to go it alone now? That was enough to stagger them, all right!

So what does the text mean when it quotes Jesus saying, **“But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ” (v.5).** Hadn’t they asked? Hadn’t Peter asked to go with Him? Hadn’t they all been troubled by His announcement? Well, yes. So what did Jesus mean? It gets clear if you read the verse with an emphasis on one word: **“But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are YOU going?’ ”** They had reacted to His earlier announcement with shock, concern, and confusion about what His departure meant for them (cf. v.6). Jesus’ answer was to say that their fears could be diminished if they would ask what He was going to do in His absence. Abandon them? Forget about them? Hardly!

As soon as Jesus returned to heaven, He was going to send the Holy Spirit. That would be – so Jesus assured them – “to your advantage” (v.7b). How could the Spirit’s presence be more helpful than Jesus’ presence had been? Jesus could only be present with them at one place in any given moment, but the Holy Spirit presence would fill them all and simultaneously accompany each of them at every moment. There would be an advantage to God’s presence with them through the Holy Spirit. He would be an ever-present Defense Advocate, Burden-Bearer, and Strength-Provider.

More specifically still, He would empower the apostles and the church they founded on Pentecost for its mission. **“When he comes,”** said Jesus, **“he will prove the world wrong about sin**

**and righteousness and judgment" (16:8).** In other words, the believer's Defense Counsel would become the unbelieving world's Prosecuting Attorney! As He would on Pentecost and in so many other settings, He would prove the world had sinned in its failure to receive Christ (16:9); that rejecting Him in the name of its own self-serving righteousness had been wrong-headed (16:10); that it had placed itself under divine judgment with its unbelief (16:11).

Sure enough, when the Spirit came on that first Pentecost Day following the resurrection of Jesus, He glorified Him as the Son of God and caused thousands to be pricked in their hearts, turn to Jesus, and be baptized in His name (Acts 2:36ff). And the same Holy Spirit has been doing that same redemptive work from that day until this one. I am a Christian because the continuing ministry of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit convicted me of my sin, showed me the impossibility of creating my own righteous path to God and made me sense the guilty verdict that had been pronounced on me. Then He glorified Christ before my eyes, convinced me that He was the only way to eternal life, and invited me to open my mind, heart and life to Him so I could be saved.

### **Asking in Jesus' Name**

It isn't difficult to understand why the disciples were self-absorbed in their sadness and confusion over the looming departure of Jesus. If only they had been able to understand then what became clearer to them later!

**"A little while, and you will no longer see me," Jesus said, "and again a little while, and you will see me" (16:16).** If they had been bewildered before, think how they must have felt at hearing that. But you and I have the advantage of hindsight. Yes, He would vanish from their sight and – to all appearances at least – be swallowed up by death. But in a matter of a very little while, He would be back among them – first in His resurrected presence and then in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And their anguish would turn to joy, as that of a woman giving birth through great pain (16:17-22).

And the nature of that joy? They would know that all of Jesus' claims were true, that Jesus had become their full access to the Father, that His name would henceforth be their authorization to ask whatever they needed for the sake of the kingdom of

God. During His earthly ministry, these men had seen Jesus as the one through whom they could learn of and have access to God. In the post-resurrection and post-Holy Spirit era, these disciples and their ever-widening circle (i.e., the church) would be part of the fellowship of eternal life that would mark a new beginning, a new era of partnership between heaven and earth. This is what I understand Him to have meant when He said, **"On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete"** (John 16:24-25).

That the interpretation I have offered of these words is correct seems supported by verses 26-28. After the resurrection, these disciples – along with the rest of us who trust in Jesus – would know that the love of God has been made flesh in Jesus and that we are invited to come before the throne of God boldly with all our needs (cf. Heb. 4:16).

**"We understand now!"** the disciples said. **"We've got it, Jesus! You don't have to worry about us anymore – now that you have been plainspoken and direct with us!"** (cf. 16:29-30). Right! Sure! However, they would be scattered in a matter of hours – cringing in fear and wondering if any of Jesus' claims had ever been true. They and their heirs in faith would later doubt Jesus' promises because of the persecution that came against them.

So what was Jesus promising as the basis for our joy? That nothing in the unpleasant circumstances we may have to endure in this world can take away our eternal inheritance. That trouble, hardship, and death will never separate us from the love of God that we know in Christ. **"In the world you face persecution,"** Jesus says. **"But take courage; I have conquered the world"** (16:33b). Thus His promise is that everyone who is in Him may rest secure in His settled peace of triumph over evil (16:33a). The same Holy Spirit who would raise Jesus from the dead was coming to dwell among His followers and will raise us up in the last day to share His triumph (cf. Rom. 1:4). Those in whom the Spirit dwells are as secure against the threats that would keep us from that destiny as Jesus Himself!

### **Is He Among Us?**

People did not have the relationship with the Holy Spirit believers experience now prior to the resurrection and

ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, the Spirit had existed from eternity past with the Father and the Son. He had been active in creation and at other times in the history of heaven's dealings with humankind. He was certainly at work in the supernatural conception, miraculous signs, and brilliant teachings of the Son of Man. But late in the life and ministry of Jesus, we are told: **"Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39).** The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in human beings would be initiated only after Jesus arrived safely home at the right hand of the Father.

In his book *Symbols of the Holy Spirit*, Gordon Brownville tells about the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. On one of his trips to the North Pole, Amundsen took a homing pigeon with him. When he had finally reached his destination at the top of the world, he opened the bird's cage and set it free. It takes very little imagination to see in your mind's eye the happy face of his wife when the pigeon circled the sky above their house and came to its resting place with her. In that moment, she knew her husband was alive and thinking of her. She knew he had reached his destination safely and would be returning to her shortly.

The ascension of Jesus was something on that order to the apostles. He had left them. They were anxious. They needed to know he had not forgotten them – and would come back. That is why Pentecost was so joyous for them! They had waited in Jerusalem and held onto His promise in trusting prayer. Then the Spirit descended into their midst, and they knew they had not been forgotten. Jesus had arrived at the Father's right hand. In His victorious triumph over the world, He had guaranteed theirs by sending the Holy Spirit. And that is the abiding message of God the Holy Spirit in our midst. Nothing can separate those who are in Christ from the love of God, the presence of the Spirit, or the certain hope of eternal life.

### **Conclusion**

From that holy Pentecost Day until now, the principal proof of the Spirit's presence has not been fire and noise. It has been and remains and always will be changed lives that are being brought under the Spirit's control.

When a man or woman is baptized in Jesus' name, that person

receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). His body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19), and her mind begins to be renewed by the Spirit's presence (Rom. 12:2). Selfishness and greed get transformed into generosity. Lust gets purified into love. Anger, pride, and self-absorption are metamorphosed into a forgiving spirit, unpretentious behaviors, and captivation with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit within us moves us to worship, drives us to the Word of God, and stirs our consciences.

To believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe that the Living God is able and willing to enter human personalities to change them.

Christ sent the Holy Spirit to be in us. We are dead in our trespasses and sins. All the commandments and laws of heaven cannot bring us back to life. But we can be quickened and made alive by His indwelling presence – born from above by the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the living hand who works inside and through us. I want to be filled with His presence, animated by His power, and used for God's purposes in the world.

Come, Holy Spirit! Fill your church. Empower us as your people. Make us living witnesses to your illuminating presence in this world.

### **Scriptural References:**

**“In the world you face persecution,” Jesus says. “But take courage; I have conquered the world” (16:33b).**