

# The Spirit of Truth

Isaiah 61:1-4, John 16:1-15 (ESV)

June 24, 2007

“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. But if I go, I will send him to you.... 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. He will glorify me.” Consider our situation. It is part of the human condition that we do not know everything we need to know. It is a part of the way things are that we do not see everything we need to see. It is one of the hard realities of our lives that we do not understand everything we need to understand. This is not only because we are not smart enough, perceptive enough, or comprehending enough, though surely we are all lacking, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of these areas. More to the point, it is simply the case that not everything we need to know is available to us, not everything we need to see is visible to us, and not everything we need to understand is offered to us.

In some areas of life, intelligence, observation, and reflection can move us ahead and yield what we need. This is what science is all about, as we plumb the mysteries of the molecule, the atom, and the various subatomic particles, as well as the various strong and weak forces by which they interact, as we define and defeat one disease after another, having saved the most intractable ones for these latter days, and as we search out the far reaches of the universe where computers also fail. This is all good and useful and wonderful, and we are profoundly grateful for it, realizing that all truth comes from God.

But there are other things that no amount of science, no matter how good, can ever tell us, for they have to do with questions that are not scientific. We can build bigger and better telescopes, to learn more about how and why the stars shine, but that will never tell us who made the stars. We believe that it is possible to look at nature and realize that there is a God, but it is not possible to look at nature alone and come to know God, and it is especially not possible to come to what we call a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can and should eliminate diseases, but we shall never escape death, and more to the point, extending life will never tell us the source, the meaning, or the goal of life. From whom did we come, whom do we serve, and to whom do we go?

Moreover, even in the areas of history and Bible study, there are severe limits to what we can know, see, and understand. Maybe we can know that Jesus was a

Jewish carpenter, but what more can we know without some clue? Maybe we can see that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, a teacher, a mighty prophet who spoke the word of God, but what more can we see without some special insight? Maybe we can understand that he confounded the religious and political authorities of the day and that they had him executed, but what more can we understand without some help? You see, it is part of the human condition that we do not know everything we need to know, we do not see everything we need to see, and we do not understand everything we need to understand. This is where today's reading from the Gospel according to John comes in.

You will remember that Jesus was preparing his disciples for his sudden and violent departure from them, by way of the cross. He knew already that they would be overwhelmed, confused, and dismayed. He was trying, without overburdening them, to give them just enough information to be able to hang on and to hold together through the hard times. Then he told them that it would actually be to their advantage that he go away, for not until he did so could he send back to them the Helper, who would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, even the Spirit of truth, who would guide them into all the truth, speaking whatever he heard, declaring to them the things that were to come, and glorifying Jesus. Here was the extra help they needed. Here is the extra help we need.

We call this Helper or Spirit of truth the Holy Spirit. This does not mean a ghost, though he is invisible. The Holy Spirit is the power of God moving and working among us. It is the way God is present with us, spiritually, when Jesus is not present with us bodily, as he had been with the disciples but was not to be much longer. And it is the Holy Spirit who provides us with the clue that we need in order to know more than we can otherwise, who gives us the special insight to see more than we can without assistance, and who helps us to understand more than we can on our own.

For instance, it is the Holy Spirit who gives us the gift of faith. As the Apostle Paul has written, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3 (ESV)). If you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and if you believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have already experienced the power and the reality of God in your life working in and through the Holy Spirit. Christian faith is not simply a human accomplishment, not something anyone can arrive at or stir up within oneself by trying hard, no matter how badly he or she might want to do that. It is always the gracious work and gift of the Holy Spirit, a way of knowing, seeing, and understanding that is beyond unaided human capability.

It is also the Holy Spirit who gives us insight into difficult situations and discernment of the truth in the midst of confusing or conflicting facts. It is the Holy

Spirit, the invisible presence and power of God, who gives us the courage to do what is right, especially in those situations where it is unpopular and we would much rather go along with the crowd. The first disciples preached on street corners. When they were arrested, they preached in courts and in the palaces of kings. When they were imprisoned and executed, others were raised up behind them to continue the preaching of the gospel. The Spirit gave them courage beyond human measure. Sometimes, of course, we fail or refuse to follow the promptings or guidance of the Spirit. And in almost every circumstance, we could all pray more than we do, seeking and asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance, help, insight, courage, and confidence.

It is especially the work of the Holy Spirit to glorify Jesus Christ, or, we might say, to glorify Jesus so that we can know and believe that he is the Christ. The human, observable life of Jesus was not very glorious. He was born under less than ideal circumstances, he lived in relative poverty, was condemned as a heretic and an enemy of the state, and he died as a common criminal. What more can we know, see, and understand about him? With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can realize and know that this Jewish carpenter is also the agent of the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. With the special insight of the Holy Spirit, we can see and believe that this teacher who spoke the word of God is actually the very word of God embodied in human flesh; he is the message that God has to say to us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we have come to understand and to trust with all our hearts that this one who was crucified, dead, and buried, was also raised from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and share communion, it is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for us, in the simple act of eating the bread and drinking the wine, to be nourished spiritually by the body of Christ, given for us, and by the blood of Christ, shed for us. Consider the power of the Holy Spirit at work within just such a means of grace:

Professor G. Johnstone Ross told of an incident that occurred years ago during the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a little mission church in New Zealand. A line of worshipers had just knelt at the altar rail when suddenly from among them a young native arose and returned to his pew. Some minutes later, however, he returned to his place at the rail. Afterward a friend inquired why he had done this, and he replied:

When I went forward and knelt, I found myself side by side with a man who some years ago had slain my father and whom I had vowed to kill.

I felt I could not partake with him, so I returned to my pew. But as I sat there, my mind went back to a picture of the Upper Room, with its table set, and I heard a voice saying, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” And then I saw a Cross with a man nailed upon it and the same voice saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” It was then I arose and returned to the altar rail.<sup>1</sup>

The great truths about Jesus being the Christ are not available to us from the normal processes of knowing, seeing, and understanding the universe, humanity, history, or even the Bible. But as special gifts and works of the Holy Spirit, these great truths not only inform us about Jesus Christ but also are the clues, the insights, and the helps we need to know, to see, to understand, and so to make sense out of everything else.

“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.” May God give us the grace by the power of the Holy Spirit, even the Spirit of truth, to believe in Jesus Christ, to acknowledge his ascent to the Father, and so to be aligned with him instead of the ruler of this world. Apart from his grace and power, none of this is possible.

It is part of the human condition that we do not know everything we need to know, we do not see everything we need to see, and we do not understand everything we need to understand. “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. But if I go, I will send him to you... 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. He will glorify me.” Here is the help we need.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Macleod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1965, new revised edition, 1980, p. 66.

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