

Comprehending the Comforter

⁵ “But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ 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; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. ⁸ And when He has come, He will **convict** the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. ¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³ However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you. ¹ (John 16:8–15)

When I once took a job in Pretoria, I rented a garden cottage from a couple who attended a large charismatic church. They asked me what church I was attending, and I told them. Their response was, “Oh, yes, but they don’t believe in the Holy Spirit”.

Well, I had never heard of binarians, and I was pretty sure the church was Trinitarian, but I knew what she meant. She meant that if you did not embrace Pentecostal or charismatic doctrine, then you didn’t believe in the Holy Spirit.

But it is safe to say that some non-charismatic churches do seem to act as if the Spirit makes no difference. It was Tozer who wrote:

“A doctrine has practical value only as far as it is prominent in our thoughts and makes a difference in our lives. By this test the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as held by evangelical Christians today has almost no practical value at all. In most Christian churches the Spirit is quite entirely overlooked. Whether He is present or absent makes no real difference to anyone. Brief reference is made to Him in the Doxology and the Benediction. Further than that He might well as not exist. So completely do we ignore Him that it is only by courtesy that we can be called Trinitarian.”

What we know for sure is that there is massive confusion over the Holy Spirit. Many things are attributed to Him that He has no part of. Many things that He truly does are not honoured, admired or praised. One side of the church expects Him to do things that Scripture does not promise He would always do in all times. Another side of the church fails to expect Him to do the very things He did promise to do.

So what should we expect the Holy Spirit to do? What constitutes a practical, living belief in the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit? How do we comprehend the Comforter?

Jesus gave us many of the answers in the Upper Room Discourse. In this Farewell sermon, Jesus explained what the apostles should expect life to be like once He was risen and ascended. And five times during this sermon, Jesus references the Holy Spirit, which He also calls the Helper and the Spirit of truth.

Last week we saw how the words of Jesus in 15:26 showed that the Spirit is a Person, a distinct but yet equal person to the Father and Son, but yet One who shares the being, the personality of the Father and Son. From verses 5 through 15, we learn what to expect of the Spirit in the New Testament era, both regarding the world, and the church. Here are three descriptions of His work that can clear up what it means to believe and expect the work of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Spirit Is A Christlike Comfort

⁵ “But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ 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; but if I depart, I will send

Him to you.

As Jesus winds down this great lesson on the Christian life, He brings it back to this main point: that He is going, but He is sending a replacement. This replacement is not inferior to Him. Instead, this replacement is actually going to make the situation even better.

Of course, when Jesus says the disciples are so sorrowful that they are not asking “where are you going?”, He has not forgotten that in 13:36, Peter said, “Lord, where are you going?” But when Peter asked that, He wasn’t really interested in the destination, He was saying it like someone shocked and disappointed that the person they expected is leaving. Here Jesus means they are not enquiring about His destination, after all, He has told them about the Father’s house.

But Jesus tells them that His absence is advantageous. His absence will mean the Helper’s presence. Jesus must go to the cross, rise, and ascend, and only then can the Helper, the Spirit of Truth be sent by the ascended Jesus. Earlier in the book, John told us this explicitly:

³⁹ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:39)

Jesus must go for the Spirit to come. Now what this tells us is that the Spirit’s work and presence was different before and during the life of Jesus compared to what it would be after Jesus rose and ascended. In all the texts in the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit as future. Jesus describes a distinct change in how the Holy Spirit would work with believers.

¹⁶ And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you **forever**—¹⁷ the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and **will be in you**. ¹⁸ I will not leave you orphans; I **will come to you**. (John 14:16–18)

Notice the differences. Verse 16 says He will come and abide forever – this will be a permanent presence, as opposed to a temporary presence. Also, up to that point the Spirit dwelt with them, but in the future, He would dwell in them.

Clearly, at the moment Jesus was speaking (which was still Israel under the Law), the Spirit had not come in this way, and He had not indwelt believers. In the Old Testament, the Spirit was working differently.

What changed? When did all these future predictions about the Spirit coming happen? It happened fifty days after Jesus ascended. On the day of Pentecost, 120 believers were gathered together in Jerusalem and the Spirit came to immerse the existing Jewish believers into the body of Christ, and then indwell those believers, permanently, sealing them with His presence. From that day, He had now come to indwell and seal believers.

Now there are two more subsequent, public acts of the Spirit’s coming to baptise in the book of Acts. In Acts 8, He came to immerse Samaritan believers into the same body of Christ, and in Acts 10, He came to immerse Gentiles into the body of Christ. Those are the only times His baptism was subsequent to conversion, because it was necessary to give a public sign that these believers were not second-class believers, that they were truly fellow-citizens of God’s holy nation.

But in-between those events, and ever after, the baptism of the Spirit is silent and invisible; it happens at the same moment as regeneration. The new covenant ministry of the Spirit is one of immersing us into Christ and then indwelling us. One of the reasons we water baptize is to symbolize what the Spirit does to every one of us at the moment of salvation: He immerses us into the death and resurrection of Christ, and thereby into the body of Christ.

Now one of the great errors in the church today is to fail to see that the Holy Spirit worked differently in the Old Testament compared to the New. So you find people reading the book of

Judges, reading the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, where the Spirit came upon people to empower them for service in Israel, and they then import that into our New Testament context. They expect the Spirit, in their words, “to anoint” us, to “fall upon us” and bring the same kind of power he brought Samson.

But the way the Spirit worked in Israel was not meant to be permanent. Jesus clearly tells us He would be coming and would change His methods.

They read David in Psalm 51 saying “take not your Holy Spirit away from me” and they fear this can happen. But David is writing 1000 years before Pentecost. The Spirit did come upon Saul and leave Him and did come upon David. David was pleading to not lose the theocratic anointing, the presence of the Spirit that empowered Israel’s prophets, priests, and kings. In the New Testament, the Spirit is not anointing kings and prophets, He is indwelling all believers.

A similar error is to assume everything in the book of Acts is normative for us today. But remember, the book of Acts is the bridge that gets you from Israel and the Gospels to the epistles. It is the transitional book. Bridges are great, but you don’t build a dwelling on a bridge. You move across it.

The New Testament work of the Spirit is the baptising and permanent indwelling and sealing of the Spirit. It is the Spirit placing you in Christ and bringing Christ in you by Himself. And it is permanent and cannot be lost.

Sometimes you hear people speak wistfully and nostalgically about the time of Christ’s ministry, “If only I could have been there then! My Christian life would be so much easier, so much better!” Jesus says, “No, the best time to live is after He has gone, when the new covenant has been paid for in blood, sealed and ratified by the resurrection and ascension, and then inaugurated by the coming of the Spirit.

Now if you had to choose between having the presence of Jesus for three and a half years, and only when you were around Him, and having His presence in you at all times, which would you choose? That’s why it is an advantage, an improvement, a betterment for the Spirit to come. It is more of Christ, not less.

II. The Spirit Brings Christlike Conviction

8 And when He has come, He will **convict** the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

The next way that we see how the Spirit truly continues the work of Jesus is through conviction. The word Helper means not only Helper or Comforter, but it also means Advocate, the one called alongside you to defend you and assist you. But just as Advocates can work to defend, they can also work to prosecute.

This is not the same work of conviction that He does for believers, where He warns us in our consciences that something we are doing is wrong. Instead, this is very much like the work of Jesus in exposing the guilt of the world.

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. (John 15:22)

Jesus spoke of Himself as a light that some people loved and some people hated.

¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (John 3:19–21)

So once Jesus is gone, the Spirit takes up this work of exposing the guilt of a God-rejecting world. Jesus tells us He will do it in three ways, which correspond to the world’s three most common excuses.

First, he will convict them of sin, because they do not believe. The world’s excuse is: “we didn’t

know! We were ignorant!” But the Spirit says, it’s not innocent ignorance, it’s the sin of unbelief – rejection. The ultimate root of all sin is unbelief. The Spirit will show the world that it’s evil can be traced back to rejecting the One True God revealed now fully and finally in God the Son. At the time of Christ the world population was only around 170 million people. The vast majority of the human race has lived after Christ, the vast majority of the human race has lived in the light of the truth that God sent His Son into the world to save it. Yes, there are those who have not heard, and who have only the testimony of creation and conscience, which is enough to reveal the holy Creator to them.

But far more people have heard about Christ than have not heard, far more people have had the light of the news of a Saviour shine on them. The Spirit has used the church to spread the Word of God across the globe. The Spirit shows them they are guilty for knowing that there is light, and loving darkness instead. In His common grace, He has even shown them this in the last 2000 years of human history. Wherever societies have accepted Christ, what followed was stable families, better governments, laws, more prosperous economies, the rule of law, the enshrinement of protections, hospitals, schools, the blossoming of discovery and innovation. The Spirit says, repent of sin and rejection.

Second, Jesus says He will convict them of righteousness because I go to My Father. Jesus went to His Father because He was righteous. There is only one religious founder in the world whose tomb is empty. The tombs of Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius are all occupied. But Jesus rose bodily and ascended bodily, vindicating Him as the only truly righteous man who has ever lived. The resurrection was the ultimate statement that Jesus was not a sinner like everyone else, because the wages of sin is death. Jesus is truly the Righteous one. So the Spirit is going to point the world to the empty tomb and compare the righteousness of Jesus with their self-righteousness. The world’s excuse is “we are good people! We don’t hurt or kill or steal.” The Spirit says, Jesus wouldn’t have died on the cross if we were all good people. Jesus was the only good person, proved by His returning to the Father. The Spirit says, forsake your self-righteousness and embrace Christ’s righteousness.

Third, Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world of judgement, because the prince of this world is judged. Through the cross and resurrection and ascension, through Pentecost and the start of the church the message is clear that the prince of this world, the ruler of darkness did not wrestle with Jesus and win. He lost, and is losing. He has been judged a rebel, and the loser in his war against God. If he lost and was judged, then so will everyone else be who sides with his rebellion and rejection of God. The world says, “There’ll be no big day of judgement, no heaven or hell.” The Spirit says, if Satan has been judged, so will all those in his family be.

Once again, when Jesus convicted the world, it was a specific section of the world: the unsaved world of 1st century Israel. But now, with the Spirit’s coming, this convicting work has gone global. All over the world, using creation, conscience, culture, the canon of Scripture, the Spirit continues to be like the preaching carpenter from Galilee, except He’s everywhere. He says to people, you know Jesus has come. You even know it in the date – it’s 2024. Two-thousand and twenty-four since when? Since who? Why do you reject Him? He says, why do you call yourself a good person when that Jesus left the tomb behind, and He defined what it is to be good? Why do you think you will never face judgement when on that day the sun went dark, sin was judged, Satan was judged, and our world has never been the same.

Never fear that the world has not been sufficiently warned and convicted of sin, righteousness, and judgement. The Spirit has come.

III. The Spirit Brings Christ-Centred Communication

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. ¹³ However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will **guide you** into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will **tell you** things to come. ¹⁴ He will **glorify Me**, for He will take of what is

Mine and **declare it to you**. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and **declare it to you**.

Jesus now moves from the unsaved world to the church. He returns to the theme of what the Spirit will do for believers as He indwells each one of us. And the overwhelmingly dominant action of the Spirit is that He communicates, like a preacher. Look at the actions. In verse 13, the action is **guiding into all truth** and **speaking** what He hears, and **telling things to come**. Verse 14 says He will **declare** Christ's things.

Look back to 14:26:

²⁶ 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 things that I said to you. (John 14:26)

²⁶ "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will **testify** of Me. (John 15:26)

The Spirit teaches, reminds, tells, speaks, guides, testifies, declares. The Spirit of God is first and foremost a communicator, a teacher, a speaker. He is not the source of irrational things like people convulsing, or falling down for no reason. The only time in Scripture when someone fell backwards was an act of judgement upon unbelievers in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus announced His name to them. The Spirit does not cause people to have fits, bark like dogs, or laugh uncontrollably. The Spirit does not send people into mindless ecstasies: those are always the marks of pagan worship.

Instead, everything the Spirit does with the church has to do with rational, thoughtful, comprehensible truth. Jesus tells us **what** He communicates, and **why** He communicates. Notice **what** He communicates:

¹³ He will guide you into **all truth**; He will tell you **things to come**.

²⁶ 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 things that I said to you**. (John 14:26)

Truth, the words of Jesus, the things that would take place after Jesus. This all corresponds to Scripture, the inspired Word of God. The Spirit works with truth.

Now there is a primary application here and a secondary one. The primary application is directed at the eleven men listening to Jesus: the apostles. The Spirit was going to remind these men of what Jesus had said to them over those three years. He was going to give these men special guidance, special instruction, and in some cases, even prophecies about things to come. And that's exactly what happened, and it resulted in our New Testament. You're holding in your hands the promise fulfilled that the Spirit would teach, remind, declare, speak, and guide these men into all truth.

The secondary application is how He takes the Scriptures He inspired and then illuminates us today. He teaches us, reminds us, declares, speaks, tells, the truths that He inspired. He does not give us the direct revelation he gave these men. The Bible calls the apostles and prophets the foundation of the church in Ephesians 2:20. You lay a foundation once and then you build on it. There are no modern-day apostles because an apostle needed to have seen the risen Christ, and been endued with specific signs and wonders to verify their office. But the Spirit does take the words He gave the apostles and illuminate them and bring out their application to us.

Very importantly, Jesus also tells us **why** the Spirit communicates.

¹⁴ He will **glorify Me**, for He will take of what is Mine and **declare it to you**.

²⁶ "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds

from the Father, He will testify **of Me**. (John 15:26)

Jesus says that the Spirit's teaching will glorify Him, Christ. The Spirit is entirely Christ-centred. As Jesus did everything to point to the Father, so the Spirit does everything to point to Christ. Like Jesus, the Spirit does not have some personal, independent agenda. He passes on what He hears from the Father and Son.

for He will not speak **on His own authority**, but whatever He hears He will speak;

¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take **of Mine** and declare *it* to you.

Anytime you are dealing with a ministry that seems to direct and terminate its focus entirely on the Holy Spirit, to the exclusion of the Father and Son, something is amiss. That would be like seeing a sign with an arrow pointing, and instead of looking in the direction the arrow is pointing, you just keep staring at the sign itself. The Spirit teaches, declares, speaks, tells, testifies of Christ, because Colossians 2:9 tells us: "9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily

To know the Son, the Word, is to know the full expression of God to man. Therefore the Father has made His Son the focal point of salvation, and the Spirit directs our attention always to Jesus.

So when you are examining what is said to be a work of the Holy Spirit, ask, does it point to Christ? Does it show you more of Christ? The old Puritan Prayer addresses the Holy Spirit and says

O God the Holy Spirit,
Take of the things of Christ and show them to my soul;
Through thee may I daily learn more of his love, grace, compassion, faithfulness, beauty;
Lead me to the cross and show me His wounds, the hateful nature of evil, the power of Satan;
May I there see my sins as the nails that transfixed him, the cords that bound him, the thorns that tore him, the sword that pierced him.
Help me to find in His death the reality and immensity of His love.
Open for me the wondrous volumes of truth in his, 'It is finished'.
Increase my faith in the clear knowledge of atonement achieved, expiation completed, satisfaction made, guilt done away, my debt paid, my sins forgiven, my person redeemed, my soul saved, hell vanquished, heaven opened, eternity made mine."

So ask yourself, if what is being claimed of the Holy Spirit does that? The so-called word of knowledge, word of wisdom, prophecy, tongue, private prayer, sign, miracle, does it exalt Christ and His saving work? Does it show you the Son, who shows us the Father?

"Since He is the Spirit of the Father He feels toward His people exactly as the Father feels, so there need be on our part no sense of strangeness in His presence. He will always act like Jesus, toward sinners in compassion, toward saints in warm affection, toward human suffering in tenderest pity and love." - A. W. Tozer

So do you believe in the Holy Spirit? You don't need to believe in modern-day prophecy, tongues, or signs and wonders. You believe in the Holy Spirit if you believe that He is the Third Person of the Trinity, equal with the Father and Son, sharing fully in the personality that is God, that He came to communicate the presence of Jesus by indwelling and sealing believers upon the moment of salvation. You believe in the Holy Spirit if you believe He continues to shine the light of Christ on the world convicting them. You believe in the Holy Spirit if you believe He continues to communicate to believers today through the inspired Word, showing us Christ, lifting up the Lord Jesus as He illuminates the Word He inspired.