

## UNIT FOUR: THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

### SESSION SIXTEEN: I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED

#### **Summary of the Sixteenth Session of the Course**

The principal topics of this session were the Holy Spirit and the Trinity. Discussion of the Spirit also introduced the ongoing topics of the church's nature as a community of faith and of the church's mission.

#### **The Problem**

We began the session by establishing the problem, which is that we are not eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. He lived, died, and was raised nearly 2,000 years ago. We have never seen, heard, or touched him. We have only the testimony of people who did know him as passed down through the centuries by the church. So, the problem is the great distance between Jesus and us.

First, we read John 20:19-23 in which Jesus appears on Easter Sunday to his disciples gathered in the upper room. We noted that John organizes events and topics theologically and so has Jesus' return to the Father (Luke's ascension of Jesus) and the sending of the Holy Spirit (Luke's Pentecost) both occurring on the day of resurrection, Easter. We discussed briefly the difficulties caused for today's Christians by John's labeling Jesus' opponents "the Jews." The other three gospels would have called them the chief priests, scribes, and elders, but John seems to have been presented in its final form in a later time when the opponents of Christianity were seen, not as factions within Judaism or its leaders, but collectively as the Jews. Historically, of course, Jesus and his disciples were all Jews; so distinguishing them from "the Jews" reflects a later situation.

Jesus is alive, and he is the same Jesus who was crucified. He greets his disciples with, "Peace" (*shalom* = wholeness, peace, harmony) and shows them the wounds in his hands and side. The showing of the wounds matters for more than just identification. Jesus resurrected is still the crucified one. The resurrection does not put his crucifixion behind us but establishes it as the consummate act for our salvation. Jesus is always for us the crucified one.

As Yahweh breathed into the human the breath of life making the human a living being (Genesis 2), so Jesus breathes on his disciples and tells them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Humanity was intended to be alive with the breath of God – to receive life as God's gracious gift and live it in trust and thankfulness. Now, the new humanity is brought to life by the very Spirit of God. In the biblical languages, breath, wind, and spirit are all related. So, what is the difference between

Genesis 2 (where God breathes into the human the breath of life) and John 20 (where Jesus breathes into his disciples the Holy Spirit)? Certainly, we are being told that, just as life came as God's gracious gift to humanity, so the *new life* begun by Jesus' resurrection comes to us as God's gracious gift, also. Our life and vitality come from God, not from within us. So, what is different here? That question followed us throughout the session as we tried to understand the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Giving his disciples the Holy Spirit goes with Jesus' calling them into being as a community of faith which represents him to the world. The Spirit enables the church's mission. In John, the progression goes like this: as the Father has loved Jesus, so Jesus has loved his followers; as the Father has sent Jesus, so Jesus now sends his followers – to the world. God loves the world (John 3:16). In the Bible, to be called by God is always to be taken out from among the many to be empowered by the Spirit for *service to the many*. God calls prophets for the sake of the people, and they are empowered by God's Spirit to speak God's word to the people. Jesus calls disciples for the sake of the world. The church exists for the sake of the world, so the world may know God's love and mercy. The church does not exist for its own sake, to build itself up, nor can the church be faithful to Jesus by going into isolation from the world to keep itself pure.

Next, we read John 20:24-29. Thomas, one of the disciples, was not present when Jesus appeared to the others on Easter Sunday. He serves as the figure of doubt who refuses to believe unless he sees for himself and even touches Jesus, putting his fingers into the wounds. Here, we need to realize that faith is not just a matter of believing in the *fact of Jesus' resurrection*, but of believing in (trusting in and committing life to) the risen Jesus. Believing in the resurrection as a fact is not faith, any more than believing in the existence of God as a fact is faith. Real faith is a life-commitment of trust. It is not believing *that* Jesus is alive but believing *in* Jesus who is alive. Thomas wants proof. He must be an eyewitness, or he will not believe.

A week later, Thomas is given his chance to be an eyewitness, and he confesses his faith. The crucial part of the account comes in Jesus' response to that confession: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That's for us. We are the people who have not seen but are called to believe, to put our trust in this Jesus who suffered and died for us and whom God raised from the dead to give life and peace (*shalom*) to the world. We are the ones now called by Jesus so he can send us into the world to represent him to people. We are the ones who, without being eyewitnesses, are called to receive the Holy Spirit and become alive with the new life that comes from God, through Jesus.

We are very far removed from Jesus. How are we connected to him? How can we come to faith, sustain it, and live it? We do not have Thomas' option of holding out for seeing him.

### **The Holy Spirit: Who?**

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Spirit is a "who" not a "what." From the beginning of this course, we have seen the importance of the personal pronoun "who." God loves, and love is always

personal. We are not things created by God but people, particular persons. God is Person not thing. God's Spirit is Person, not thing. The Spirit empowers people, but the Spirit is not power as such but God's personal presence with us, among us, and even within us.

Before I could go any further, we got into a discussion of the Trinity because my presenting the Spirit as Person somehow distinct from God (the Father) and Jesus (the Son) raised questions. Why is God's personal presence with us a separate Person? What's the difference between saying God helps, guides, and corrects us and saying, instead, the Holy Spirit helps, guides, and corrects us? Why a third Person? These questions never left us for the remainder of the session, and so a major part of my challenge in writing this summary is be open to the questions and try to be helpful in clarifying the matter. As a follower of Jesus and believer in him, do I really need to distinguish God's presence as the Holy Spirit and not simply as God? It is not sufficient here to cite authorities or church councils, because what is sought here is sense and understanding, not orthodoxy.

## **The Trinity**

We began with the word itself which combines "tri" (three) with "unity" (one or oneness). As Christians, we speak of God as Triune (the adjective) and as the Trinity (the noun). Three in one: one God known to us in three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible has no doctrine of the Trinity as such, but, then, the Bible really has no doctrines as such. The church developed its doctrines from the biblical witness (and, also, from the philosophies and reasonings of the particular times and places in the church's life). The New Testament does, however, present the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as three distinct personalizations of God's presence with us.

The crucial factor in the New Testament seems to be *love*. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. God has always loved and did not need to wait for the creation of human beings to begin to love. Therefore, love is basic and essential to God. The second crucial factor is *presence*. Somehow, God is so present in Jesus that Jesus represents God to us and is God to us. In Jesus' absence, the Spirit represents God to us and is God to us. So, we are not left as orphans by Jesus' return to the Father. The Holy Spirit is God with us, among us, and within us (unseen but real) during this long time between Jesus' resurrection and his coming at the end in the consummation of God's new creation.

The doctrine of the Trinity can become a stumbling block to people, including Christians. The more we talk about it, the more confused we become – unless, of course, we are willing simply to parrot the orthodox formulations without questioning what they mean and why we need them. As I was writing this summary, I had to acknowledge to myself that everything I had said about the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's work could be understood simply as God's personal presence with us, among us, and within us. Perhaps the key is "personal." God is Person, not power. God loves personally. So, Christian faith and life, the church's life and ministry, and our hope for God's new creation are all empowered, not by an impersonal force, but by a personal presence – God's presence

in person. The Bible calls this presence in person the Holy Spirit. The church names the Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity, the Triune God.

The rest of the discussion concerned what God's personal presence with us, among us, and within us *does*. In Trinitarian terms, the question is, "What does the Holy Spirit do?"

### **The Work of the Spirit**

We read John 14:18-20,25-28. Jesus will not leave us without support; he will not leave us alone (orphaned), on our own, to succeed or fail in faith. We will "see" him, not literally with our eyes, but truly with our faith, and faith will not be an illusion. We will be empowered to know him and his way of life (all that he has commanded us), not by evidence, but by faith. The Father will send the Holy Spirit to be with us and to teach and remind us of the things of Jesus. So, the Spirit does not bring something new but develops within us and among us the things Jesus has brought.

Then, we read Romans 8:14-17, 26,27. The Holy Spirit confirms our belonging to God as God's sons and daughters, brothers and sisters of Jesus. We do not belong to God just because we say so or even believe so, but because God's own Spirit joins us in saying so. What we say in faith, the Spirit confirms as real and true. The Spirit keeps us personally connected with God. Even when we don't know how to pray or what to ask, the Spirit communicates our needs to God.

In practical terms, what I have just written in the preceding paragraph could probably be said without specific reference to the Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity. God affirms our belonging, and God understands our needs even when we don't. In the way Paul puts it, however, there is a closer, more personal bond. God loves, and somehow within the very being of God, God loves; and we have now been included in that bond. We have a companion, an advocate, a counselor in life, to strengthen and uphold us, to hold on to us when we falter or stumble. We have someone with us who knows us to our depths and, also, knows the very depths of God. The bond is highly personalized. We are included in something that is the mystery of the very nature and being of God, but it is a mystery of love not power.

I found it helpful during our discussion to look at the alternatives. Our salvation – our belonging to God and to life – is accomplished by Jesus. We realize that salvation through our faith, our trust, in him. Now, how do we live as people who belong to God and to life?

We talked about the distinction between the *indicative* ("you are") and the *imperative* (therefore, you are to . . ."). God said to Israel, "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." That's the indicative: *you are*. Then come the Ten Commandments, the imperatives: *therefore, you must*. . . What drives the imperatives? In other words, what compels and enables us to live as sons and daughters of God united with Christ?

At this point of deciding how we are to live after we have come to faith, much of Christianity falls back upon law. *Do this, and don't do that. Keep the rules and lead the good Christian life.* But law leads to failure and judgment; it compels us but fails to enable us. So, we contradict our own gospel. We are saved by grace but try to live by law, which Paul rejects emphatically (the entire Letter to the Galatians). No, we are saved by grace and must, therefore, live by grace. So, Paul contrasts the law with the Spirit. The Spirit empowers us to live as sons and daughters of God without putting us back under law and judgment. The Christian life is not a test to pass or fail; it is a life to be lived in thankful, humble service. The law turns us inward by making us concerned about our own performance, virtue, piety, and religious correctness. The Spirit turns us outward to the world of people in need of God's love and mercy. So, Paul writes to the Galatians, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. There is no law against such things." (Galatians 5:22,23)

If we attempt to put faith into action under the rule of law, we are pushed toward judgment (*How well did I keep the law and where did I fail? Did I do better than you?*). So, Christians who begin in faith fall back into rule-keeping. In contrast, the Spirit enables us to change and be changed by the grace of God without becoming legalists, rule-keepers.

Another way of putting the question is, "What enables us to change?" or "How are we changed by our faith in Jesus?" How do I move from being one kind of person to being a new and different kind? What empowers me to leave the old behind and actually begin to think and live differently? The answer is not a "what" but a "who" – the Spirit of God. What I cannot do by myself, the Spirit enables me to do. So, God is at work within us. What the church cannot do by itself, the Spirit empowers the church to do. So, God is at work among us. Personally. In person. Or, we may say, in Person (with a capital "P"). The Person of the Holy Spirit.

Paul writes to the Philippians, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12b,13) So, we must do the work, but all the while God is at work within us and among us to make the changes real. What we cannot accomplish by our own efforts, God accomplishes through our efforts (not without them). Unseen but real, the Spirit works through our faith and our efforts at living by faith to effect the changes that need to be made in us and to develop our life and ministry, without binding us to law and judgment.

The Holy Spirit gives life and reality to actions we take in faith but cannot, by ourselves make vital and real. For example, when we baptize a baby, I say, "This child of God is now received into the holy catholic church." Says who? I can say words, but I cannot make them true for that child. Who says she is a child of God? Only God can say so and make it so. I can say so only in faith, as a prayer. So, in the service, we pray that what we do with water, God will do by the Spirit. We, of course, by vote of the session, can receive the child into membership in the First Presbyterian Church of Bridgeton, New Jersey, but we cannot, by any vote, truly receive her into the holy catholic church, the worldwide body of people who belong with Jesus to God.

I write and preach sermons, but who makes a sermon speak to particular person in a way that actually makes a difference for God in that person's life? I cannot. Who makes Communion a true receiving and sharing of the love and mercy of God that happened in Jesus' crucifixion, rather than just a matter of eating a small piece of bread and drinking a tiny glass of grape juice called wine? I cannot. Yes, I can say the words, but only in faith; I cannot make the reality happen.

When a man and a woman are married, they are married – right then and there. “You are now husband and wife, according to the witness of the holy catholic church and the law of the state.” Are they? Are they truly husband and wife, right then and there, or will they continue becoming husband and wife more and more as they live and love together? Immediately after making the declaration (“You are now husband and wife. . .”), I say, “Become one. Fulfill your promises. Love and serve the Lord.” *You are; now become and do.* The imperatives follow the indicative. The marriage is accomplished but only just begun. So it is with anything in life that truly matters. When a person receives a PhD, the statement is made that he or she is now the peer of his or her professors. Really? Yes and no. The degree is the indicative (“You are”), but it is really just the ticket and challenge (imperative) to a life of learning, teaching, and more learning.

I used the example of an older child, maybe around 12, adopted into a family after years of living as an orphan. As soon as the judge declares the adoption final, she is that couple's daughter. How long will it take her to think, speak, feel, and act as their daughter rather than as an orphan? A long time. She will go back and forth. At times, she may even resent being called their daughter because at that moment she will not feel that way about them or herself. She will fight it. Only in time, with a lot of grace, will she truly become their daughter in her own mind and in her actions.

Who enables us to win the fight with ourselves? Who empowers us to do what we cannot do by ourselves: to move truly from deadness to life, from slavery to freedom, from alienation to belonging? We do it by our own efforts and the power of God which works through those efforts to accomplish more than we could by ourselves. But power is an impersonal word. This is personal. So, we say, using biblical terms, we do it by the Spirit of God: God with us, among us, and within us in Person.

## **The Community of Faith and Our Mission**

We read John 17:20-23, which is a small part of Jesus' prayer for his disciples and for those who would come, through their word, to believe in him. We are the latter group: those who believe in him through the testimony of those who knew, saw, and heard him. Jesus prays that we may all be one, not just so we can have a big, happy fellowship, but so the world will see and be able to know God's love that has come in Jesus. He wants us united for the sake of the world.

The church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the world. Jesus sends us into the world because God loves it and all its people. The church is a community of faith in ministry,

in service, and in mission – three ways of saying that we are to take God’s love and mercy out into the world to people, individually and collectively. I say “collectively” to emphasize that God still cares about justice and freedom, not only about getting people individually saved and into heaven. God is concerned for the liberation, healing, and reconciliation of peoples as well as individuals.

The church’s spirituality is one that needs always to be turned outward. A real danger in talking about the Holy Spirit comes from people’s desires for power and for religious experiences of ecstasy. The Corinthians to whom Paul wrote two letters that are now part of the New Testament fell into that trap. They became enamored of the “gifts of the Spirit,” meaning the abilities to prophesy, heal, and speak in tongues of ecstasy. The result was a fixation on themselves and their own abilities that turned them into religious snobs and divided their church. The famous “love chapter,” I Corinthians 13, is Paul’s angry blast at that nonsense. Without love, any gift or ability is useless.

Still today, some Christians hunger for religious experiences. They want to feel the power, to work miracles, and to lose themselves in ecstasy. These Christians turn to the Holy Spirit to gratify such desires, and the results are very often destructive and divisive. The real work of the Spirit is to strengthen us inwardly in order to turn us outward to other people and the world in ministry and service. Talking about the Spirit leads us to discussions of the church’s ministry in the world, not to discussions of religious experiences and miracles. God is still concerned about what happens to people in the streets and marketplaces of the world, not about my personal feelings of power and glory. So, our next subject will be the mission of the church and its history.