

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #10

The Holy Spirit

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John 16:4b-15 (RSV)

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 way, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.

And when he comes, he will convince 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 more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

I have yet 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 authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

As we approach the eleventh essential belief of the Christian faith, our difficulty is not that this point is controversial, but that it is almost universally misunderstood. Everyone, it seems, likes to talk about "the Spirit." Consider the following sayings:

"Catch the Spirit"

Team spirit

In the spirit

The Spirit of the Moment

Each of these refer to "the Spirit" as that sense of common purpose, excitement, enthusiasm and unity that takes people and groups of people beyond themselves to a higher plane of achievement. Frequently the agent taking people to this higher plane of achievement is a charismatic leader who is said to be "Spirit-filled" or "Spirit-led." The early Christians certainly experienced the Spirit in this way, but when they spoke of the certain conviction of having "received the Holy Spirit," what they were primarily referring to was One who was a constant reminder of God's presence in their lives.

The Holy Spirit has a personality. This is to say, that God's Spirit is not just a feeling or an energizing "force," but as the Divine Representative of God's love on earth the Holy Spirit has all the reality, character, power and distinctives of God. Three of God's qualities are especially displayed in the Spirit:

1. The Holy Spirit is very *wild*—Although the Spirit is certainly present everywhere, He freely and unpredictably chooses to be *actively* present in some places and not in others. In the truest sense one cannot "catch the Spirit;" instead, one can only make oneself available for the Spirit to do the catching. This is why, although the Holy Spirit is *passively* present everywhere (watching and listening to all), the Holy Spirit is only *actively* present in a limited number of times and places.

2. The Holy Spirit is very *shy*—The Spirit has a strong dislike for the spotlight and will flee undue attention. You can expect the Spirit to be working at the margins, in the shadows, and making little noise. The Holy Spirit is typically not *actively* present where He is not welcome or invited. However, the Spirit does love to put Jesus, and everything about Jesus in the spotlight, as long as the spotlight puts Jesus in the proper kind of light. Since the Spirit was directly involved in Jesus’ conception and every part of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry, you can understand why the Spirit takes such pride in Jesus and is very jealous of attention paid to *anyone* else, even if that anyone is the Holy Spirit Himself. As an aside, the Blessed Virgin Mary is much like the Holy Spirit in this regard..
3. The Holy Spirit is very *compassionate*—Indeed, it is this quality that identifies the Spirit so closely with Jesus (The Spirit is often called “the Spirit of Jesus” in the New Testament), for whom compassion was a prime motivator. The Holy Spirit appears in the New Testament as Helper, Comforter, Advocate, and Counselor. In one passage of the Bible we are told that when we who have taken refuge in Jesus are in trouble, the Holy Spirit goes before God the Father Himself to plead for us so passionately that there are no words to describe the feeling. This is not always a tender compassion, however. The Holy Spirit is perfectly willing to cut deeply to get at the source of an infection.

There is one more quality that one needs to know in order to begin understanding the Holy Spirit’s personality and work. This quality, however, doesn’t belong to the Holy Spirit but to Satan. The Devil’s absolutely favorite sport is counterfeiting the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, passing off his own work as the work of God. At the Nuremberg rallies where Nazism was celebrated under the charismatic leadership of Adolf Hitler there was a Revival and a powerful move of the spirit—no one who watches film of those events can deny it—but it was a demonic revival and the spirit present was Satanic. If it is true that the Holy Spirit unifies people and elevates them to a higher plane of achievement, Satan can also unify people and place them on a more effective plane of achievement for his purposes. Satan not only counterfeits the work of the Holy Spirit, however, Satan also watches what the Holy Spirit is doing very carefully and wherever the Spirit becomes *actively* present Satan is not far behind. Every true Spiritual Revival or truly Spirit-led ministry will be attended by the Prince of Darkness, hiding in the wings to see what mischief he can do.

For this reason one of the most persistent issues in the life of any Christian is distinguishing from the work and presence of the Holy Spirit and the work and presence of counterfeit spirits. This is not merely an issue for individual Christians, it is also perhaps **the** defining issue for churches, indeed for the Church universal. A big part of growing in one’s relationship with God is developing a mature sensitivity, discernment, and skill in distinguishing where and how the Holy Spirit is working.

One would like to ask Jesus about this: “You sent the Holy Spirit to be our Guide and Comforter, but couldn’t You have stayed here on earth as well to help us to know what the Holy Spirit is up to?” Why exactly **did** Jesus have to leave for the Holy Spirit to come? Wasn’t the Holy Spirit present in the world from the beginning? It’s not as though Jesus had to leave to make room for the Spirit, is it?

There are several reasons why it was better for us that the Holy Spirit became *actively present* in the lives of believers only after Jesus left. Jesus wanted to be present equally to each of his disciples, something which He could do *in the Spirit* in a way that He couldn't while in the body. The maturing of a relationship with God seems to require the development of a different kind of sensibility, one that can only be developed when one is "walking by faith" rather than depending on sensory input. One gets the impression that the relationship that the disciples had with Jesus while he was on earth was an *immature* friendship.

There was one reality, however, that made it absolutely *necessary* for Jesus to return to God the Father before the Holy Spirit began His work of becoming actively present in the lives of Jesus' disciples. This reality was that as a human being Jesus belonged to a *single* ethnic group. Consider if the Messiah had come as a white person, then no black person could see the Messiah as truly "black." Jesus was a Palestinian Jew—not a Samaritan, not a Greek, not a Roman, and not even a Jew from outside Palestine. He was aware that his principle ministry was with and for Palestinian Jews. Jesus certainly had wonderful encounters with non-Jews, but *not as one of them!* After Jesus ascends to the Father, he does not cease to be human, but he ceases to be tied to a single ethnic group. The Holy Spirit now makes Jesus potentially part of all peoples, tribes, and nations.

So, whereas Jesus came to the Jews, the Holy Spirit comes to bring Jesus to the world. The Holy Spirit carries out the work of bringing Jesus to the world in three distinct activities. Wherever one of these is happening, one can identify the Spirit at work because *only* the Holy Spirit (and no counterfeit spirit) can accomplish these three tasks. They are convincing the world of 1. sin, 2. righteousness, 3. judgment.

Conviction of Sin--The Holy Spirit is at work where people come to realize that things are not right, that they themselves are perpetuating gross injustices, and that they are separate from God. We ought not be too quick to tell people who are "under conviction" that they should not feel guilty and that God loves them. God does indeed love them, but feeling terrible about our situation and conduct is likely a sign that the Holy Spirit has begun the task of driving us to surrender to God.

Conviction of Righteousness--The Holy Spirit is at work where people realize that Jesus has made it possible for them to be set right with God. We have seen how Jesus worked *Atonement* (making it possible for people to be reconciled to and adopted by God) on the cross. For that atonement to be complete, Jesus the man had to return to the presence of the Father to draw us ultimately into Heaven with God. The Holy Spirit sets people on the path that Jesus opened up.

Conviction of Judgment--The Holy Spirit is at work in the world where Satan's work is unmasked and undone. I think by now it is obvious to most of us that the Holy Spirit was involved in bringing about the disillusionment with communism or the downfall of Nazism. But very high and apparently noble ideals can also be unmasked and undone by the Spirit, especially when those ideals substitute for a relationship with God in people's lives. So, if "the American Dream" has replaced meaningful faith in the lives of many, we should not be surprised if we see "the American Dream" beginning to be undermined.

The Holy Spirit is not only at work in the world at large, however, He is also at work in the lives of individual believers. Indeed, the Holy Spirit prepared our hearts to meet Jesus Christ long before we were consciously aware of Jesus—a sneaky kind of subtle wooing

that the Methodists call prevenient grace (grace working in our lives before we become Christians). The Spirit goes with us and guides us. We have the promise that through the Spirit, Jesus himself will be with us always and that if we wholeheartedly seek to please Him, the Spirit will show us what to do in every situation. We have already seen that the Spirit advocates before God on our behalf.

But there is one thing that Jesus says about the Holy Spirit's work in believers that is utterly shocking—the Holy Spirit reveals Truth to us. Although Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, He did not claim to leave behind a complete systematic theology, a religious system that would enable his followers to easily and categorically answer every question that life posed. Instead Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth.

Some theologians claim that Jesus' words apply only to the lifetimes of his disciples—that the Holy Spirit would guide Jesus' immediate disciples into the Truth that would enable them to complete writing the New Testament and that then truth would be sealed and complete forever. Because the New Testament bears a witness to the life, death, resurrection, and teaching of Jesus it is indeed the definitive exponent of the Christian faith. But there is a profound sense in which a Christianity that regards all potential questions as already resolved is unchristian. That popular bumper sticker, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," is the symptom of a dangerous spiritual disease in which the believers' heart is hardened against the Spirit's guidance. Unlike other religious teachers, Jesus declares that after He leaves them, His disciples will still have things to learn. In the new situations of our lives and culture, we have new things to learn and new ways to apply the Christian faith which are different than anything that has gone before.

I have to be careful here. Other theologians have made the following deduction: since the Holy Spirit is God, and since the Holy Spirit is wild, free, and unpredictable; that means that the truth the Spirit reveals must also be free from the trammels of what has gone before, even if what has gone before was in Scripture. The Holy Spirit is indeed God. The Holy Spirit is indeed wild and free. But the Holy Spirit is also (amazingly!) under authority: *For He will not speak on his own authority*, Jesus said.

Because the Holy Spirit seeks to reveal the mind of Jesus Christ regarding each new situation, the truth that the Holy Spirit imparts will be consistent with what is revealed of the mind of Christ in the Bible. Quantum Physics, the Internet and Biotechnology are not mentioned nor conceived in Scripture, but each of these scientific and technological developments have profound spiritual implications. Christians ought not to take each latest discovery or trend and treat it as truth apart from Scripture and what the church has experienced in the past. Instead, as we search the Scriptures in the light of each new day and as we pray for the Spirit's guidance in harmony with those Scriptures, we have the promise that we *will* be guided into *all* truth and will be able to discern by faith what our relationship with God has to say about each new situation.

Furthermore, if we allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, we have the additional promise that He will unite us, draw us to a higher plane of achievement, will call forth charismatic leadership, and the result of this move of the Spirit in each new situation will be that Jesus will be glorified ever more by an ever widening circle of believers from every tribe, nation, and tongue who by the Spirit will have come to see Jesus as "one of us."