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THE SPIRIT OF GOD

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

One of the unique features of Christianity is its teaching about the gift of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament teaches that God Himself dwells within the true Christian to guide him, to teach him, and especially to make him Christ-like in character. No other religion in the world has ever had any doctrine like the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is not only a doctrine, but it is also an experience, for every true Christian knows in his experience the fellowship with God Himself which the Holy Spirit's presence in the heart brings; and not only fellowship, but also power, for when God has fellowship with our inmost personality God's power passes over into our moral being so that we are strengthened with might in the inner man, as St Paul puts it.

In Acts 2 is the account of the pouring out of God's Spirit on the Day of Pentecost on every member of the Christian Church. That day was the beginning of the specifically Christian experience of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is a wonderfully humbling as well as an exhilarating thought that God Himself should dwell with those who believe on Christ as Lord. It is not therefore surprising that the New Testament is full of teaching about the Holy Spirit. In particular it teaches that God gives His Spirit to every Christian without exception; thus St Paul says that if a man has not the Spirit of Christ he is not a Christian, Romans 8:9.

The gift of God's Spirit is the sign and guarantee that God has accepted us as His children. Because we are sons, says St Paul, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts so that we are able to pray to God as our Father. The possession and fellowship of God's Spirit is like a foretaste of Heaven; it is the guarantee that God, Who has given us this privilege, will in due course bring us to the full and perfect fellowship with Him in Heaven. Thus St Paul says in Ephesians 1:13,14 that those who have believed the gospel of salvation have been sealed by God with the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our eternal inheritance until the redemption of God's own possession, unto the praise of His glory.

Because the Holy Spirit is given to all true Christians, they have an independence with regard to the knowledge of God. They are not dependent on others, for the Holy Spirit is directly their teacher. The Apostles took this fully into account. Thus St John told his readers in his First Epistle, chapter 2:20,21, that he recognised that the gift of God's Spirit enabled them all to know, adding "I have not written unto you because you know not the truth, but because you know it". St Paul called the Holy Spirit the 'Spirit of Knowledge'. The Holy Spirit teaches us about God, not through direct revelation, or hunches, or intuition, but He works through the Word of God,

that is the Bible, by enabling the Christian as he reads it to understand the things of Christ which are written in Scripture. The argument that the ordinary Christian can't understand the Bible without the authoritative teaching of the Church leaves out of account the presence of God's Spirit as the teacher of our hearts. Like St John, St Paul also recognised the independent standing of the true Christian. He told the Corinthians in the Second Epistle, chapter 1, verse 24, that he had no lordship over their faith. If this is the position of an Apostle with regard to his own converts, then it is plain that no-one to-day, whether bishop, priest, council or minister has lordship over the faith of any one who is a true child of God and who consequently is in direct fellowship with God through His Spirit.

However, we must avoid any idea of individualism, as though we all had a right to do or think what is right in our own eyes. This is not Christianity, nor in practise does it happen thus, for such a concept of individualism, of which Protestants are sometimes accused, leaves out of account the unifying and cohesive influence that the one Holy Spirit effects. Since God Himself is in the heart of every true Christian, this on the one hand gives the Christian an independency and free status, and at the same time it draws him very close to every other Christian in whose heart the same God

dwells. Moreover, since God's Spirit works through His Word, applying it to the heart and conscience of every true Christian, Christians grow together towards a common mind, namely the mind of God as revealed in Scripture. Christians do not each go their own individual way, but led by the Spirit they more and more converge on God's way. Nor is it God's intention that Christians should grow as isolated units, but we grow together; and the Bible makes clear that we have a duty both to seek and take advice one from another; but at the same time the Bible is equally clear that no Christian is in a position of lordship over another man's faith or conscience or relationship to God. God Himself governs the heart of each of His children, through His Spirit and His Word. He is Lord of the heart. The Scriptural ideal is that we should agree together, not on our own ideas, but rather on the ideas which conform to the mind of Christ.

It will be seen very clearly that the unique gift of the Holy Spirit to Christians confers on them a real unity which is much deeper than any unity which an organisation or denomination can bring into being. It is an inner unity of a common possession of God's Spirit Who is active in guiding and strengthening those in whom He dwells and in drawing them closer together, because He draws each closer to Himself. Christians, in seeking unity one with another, must

not pin their hopes to an outward organisational unity, that would be a form of idolatry, for it would be trusting in something which is other than God; but the fuller unity amongst ourselves which it is our Christian duty to seek, will be found by growing in a deeper knowledge of God's Word, through studying it one with another, and so growing in a common faith and in a common experience of God as He is revealed in His Word, and at the same time growing in love one for the other. All these things are the work of God's Spirit in our hearts, Who deepens our knowledge, Who deepens our faith, and Who deepens our love, if we set ourselves to seek these things by His help.

The presence of God's Spirit in the heart of Christians is consequent on the full forgiveness of their sins through the death of Christ for them. God's Spirit cannot dwell in the heart of an unforgiven sinner. It is only because our sins have been completely blotted out from God's sight through the death of Christ, that God's Spirit dwells permanently in the heart of the Christian. Or, putting it another way, we may say that we have a pathway into God's very presence through the offering of Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the cross. God is present in our hearts by His Spirit; we stand in God's presence in heaven now. These two statements are the same experience, made possible by forgiveness through Christ's death.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses Old Testament language to describe what Jesus did. He speaks of Him as a Priest bringing the sacrificial offering into the Holy of Holies. Because of Christ's death on Calvary, those who are Christ's may now enter, with Him, through His sacrificial blood, into God's very presence in the Holy of Holies of Heaven itself. This is only possible because all our sins are forgiven and completely blotted out. If any sin remained in God's sight as we entered His presence, we would have to be instantly condemned for it, but since all our sins are covered by Christ's blood, we have free access into God's presence. As St Paul put it in Ephesians 3:12, "In Christ we have boldness and access in confidence through our faith", and the New Testament writers urge Christians to be aware of this great privilege that through Christ each may himself enter directly into God's presence. No intermediary is needed, apart from that great High Priest, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. This is the unique feature of Christianity, that every Christian has the right, without the aid of any other human intermediaries, or priests, to enter into God's presence. We live in God's presence: this is the privilege of being a child of God, which is ours through our relationship to God's only Son, Jesus Christ. Nor do we need to offer any further sacrifices, than that of Jesus Christ made once for all on Calvary for us.

In the New Testament Jesus is described as a Priest; that is to say He is one who has the right to enter into God's presence, and moreover every Christian is described in the New Testament as a priest, that is, one who has the right to draw near to God and enter His presence. For example in Revelation chapter 1, the redeemed sing praises to Jesus who "loved us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood: and he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory... Amen". It is interesting to note that Christian ministers, whether bishops or elders, and deacons, are never called priests in the New Testament. The reason is simple, for Christian ministers are not intermediaries on behalf of others, because the Christian believer needs no intermediary between God and his own soul, no intermediary, that is, apart from His Saviour, Jesus Christ, the great High Priest of all Christians. A moment's reflection will show how out of keeping any other doctrine would be, because if God Himself dwells in our hearts through Christ, there is no place for the intrusion of any other human priest. The Bible doctrine is very clear; Jesus Christ is our only Mediator, and for Christ's sake every Christian has been given God's Holy Spirit Who directs and guides and forms Christ's character within him; not, as I say, in a vacuum, but by means of the Word of God as it is read, preached and ministered, Christian to Christian, in the Christian

fellowship or church. Or to put it another way, because of Christ's death, every Christian may enter God's presence directly in prayer, whether for forgiveness or for guidance or for protection, or for petition for others. We do not depend upon any priest for forgiveness, as the Old Testament saints did, for in Christ as our one and only Priest we have a direct access to God. Nor do we depend upon any priest for authoritative direction of our soul in Christian living, for God Himself, the Holy Spirit, dwells in our hearts to teach us and to guide us. In other words, God's Spirit shows us quite instinctively what is the loving thing to do in each circumstance, and, moreover, He helps us to do it, and since love is the only principle for Christian living, for love sums up the whole of God's law, we are thus freed from any human intermediary between our own souls and our Heavenly Father. We do not need any priest to weigh up our actions and pass judgment on them, for God's Spirit teaches us directly. It is only by ignoring the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit that it is possible to erect a church system with jurisdiction over the souls and consciences of Christians. As sons of God, Christians are free, led by the Spirit. We should give full weight to the great privilege of sonship and possession of God's Spirit. St John writes, "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God:

and such we are" (I John 3:1). To be the child of God, sharing His Spirit, is the privilege of all who are forgiven in Christ the Saviour. The future will be even greater than the present. We ought to realise the implications of this privilege, and live accordingly, each day walking in His presence as God's sons and as His priests, going to Him directly in daily prayer for one another and daily reading of Holy Scripture and looking forward to that fuller experience of His presence in the future, of which our present experience of the Holy Spirit is the foretaste and guarantee.

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