

16. THE COVENANT AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

In the previous chapter I mentioned that the Holy Spirit was active also under the old dispensation. Those who accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity will have no difficulty with this statement. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true and eternal God, have worked together from eternity.

It is sometimes suggested that, until the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit stayed in the background. This is true to a degree. Yet he was involved in the realization of God's counsel also before this time. On Pentecost he did not arrive suddenly on the scene but continued the work that he had been doing from the beginning of time. In this chapter we want to take a closer look at the specific work of the Holy Spirit as it is revealed in Scripture and relates to the covenant.

The Holy Spirit and creation

The Holy Spirit was involved in the work of creation. In Genesis 1:2 we read that "the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." The Spirit changed a still inhospitable earth, making it a suitable dwelling place for God's children. He caused life to blossom.

We should pay attention to the word "hovering" in this text. In the "Song of Moses" (Deut 32:11) the same Hebrew word is used of an eagle that "hovers" over its young. Should the baby eagles no longer be able to fly, the mother will swoop down and catch the little ones on its mighty wings. This hovering denotes an intense watchfulness, a relationship of caring and responding. We see the same care evident in the covenant of love.

Just as the Holy Spirit was involved in the creation of this world, so he is also involved in its preservation and continuation. In Psalm 104:30 we read: "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." The context shows that all living creatures depend on God, and need the preserving and

governing presence of the Holy Spirit. The renewing of the face of the earth may refer to the time of spring, when crops grow again so that all creatures are sustained. Nature cannot do without the rejuvenating power of the Holy Spirit. That power, of course, becomes even clearer in the renewal of fallen man. The Spirit who gives birth and life also gives rebirth and new life.

The old covenant could no more function than the new one without the renewing power of the Holy Spirit and the love manifest in his preserving care.

The Holy Spirit and the work of office

The Holy Spirit has always equipped God's people for service. It is no wonder, therefore, that the granting of special gifts to God's children is also something in which he is involved. In Exodus 31 we read of the appointment of men who will work on the building of the tabernacle, the ark, and all the furnishings. It is in this tabernacle that God will dwell in the midst of his people. It must therefore be built according to divine specifications. This important project requires skilled men.

The LORD tells Moses to select for this work Bezalel, the son of Uri, of whom it is said: "...and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts" (Exod 31:3). In the important work of preparing a dwelling for God, in making the ark of the covenant, the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit is needed. Insight must be received into the heavenly scheme of things, for the tabernacle and its inventory are "copies of the heavenly things" (Heb 9:23).

The seventy elders

In Numbers 11 we read of the appointment of seventy elders who are to help Moses as leaders and officials. The LORD tells Moses that these men are to come to the tabernacle, and we read: "I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them" (verse 17). We read that when the Spirit did come upon the seventy elders, they prophesied (verse 25).

When two of these elders are still in the camp (and not with the others at the tabernacle), they continue to prophesy. Joshua finds this inappropriate, and asks Moses to put an end to it. But Moses replies (11:29), "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Moses' wish would become reality at Pentecost.

This sign of prophecy, probably here to be understood as an ecstatic utterance, was meant to underscore the credentials of the seventy at their installation, and, like the signs at Pentecost, did not occur again. Signs function at the beginning of a new phase in the history of redemption. The book of Numbers indeed adds that the seventy elders did not prophesy again (11:25).

The element of special guidance by the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the case of many office-bearers in both the Old and New Testament. Pharaoh testifies of

Joseph, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?” (Gen 41:38). Pharaoh cannot have meant the Holy Spirit, of whom he did not know, but he does recognize divine anointing. The presence of the Holy Spirit is mentioned specifically in the life and work of Joshua, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Saul, David, Elijah, Elisha, and many others. Similarly, the Spirit functioned in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and his disciples.

It is clear from Scripture that no one can fulfill an office except by the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. He alone equips the people of God for service, and He did so in the Old Testament as well as in the New.

The Holy Spirit and doing God’s will

The Holy Spirit gives what is needed to function in God’s service. This is true in times of repentance and renewal of faith as, again, we learn not only in the New Testament, but also in the Old. When David confesses to the LORD his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah, he pleads: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Ps 51:10-12). Renewal of heart and will are gifts of God’s Spirit in his covenant of love.

David, who had been under the power of the Holy Spirit since his anointing (1 Sam 16:13), feared nothing more than that God would take his Spirit away from him. Then, like Saul before him, he would no longer be able to function in his royal office.

Nor was it only office-bearers who were dependent upon the Holy Spirit to live as children of God. It held true for all Israel as a fundamental covenant principle: “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (Ps 143:10).

The promise of the outpouring of the Spirit

The Old Testament, however, also speaks of a time in which the work of the Holy Spirit will be more evident and glorious. The Spirit will be “poured out,” which means that he will one day be more abundantly present in God’s covenant people. In the Old Testament, God gives his people in this respect a wonderful perspective: a time is coming when he will dwell among his people more intimately and richly than before.

In the prophecy of Joel we read of that promise: “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (2:28, 29). This promise finds its initial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is poured out (Acts 2:15). I write “initial,” because there are aspects of Joel’s prophecy which will not be fulfilled until Christ returns on the clouds of heaven.

But again, we should not conclude from this promise of the outpouring of the Spirit that he was not really active under the old covenant. We would be wrong if we concluded that the Spirit did little or nothing before Pentecost. We must remember the unity of Old and New Testament, the one Word of God. Some more examples may be helpful.

In Nehemiah 9, for example, where we are informed of Israel's renewing of the covenant through the confession of their sins, it says: "For many years [in the wilderness] you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets" (verse 30). The prophet Isaiah also describes Israel's history in terms of the presence and work of the Spirit: "Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them" (Isa 63:10). Israel's sin was a grieving of the Holy Spirit. We are reminded of the same warning in the New Testament: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph 4:30).

The Holy Spirit has always comforted God's children. The prophet Haggai encourages Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, and the high priest Joshua in the building of the temple, and says, "For I am with you, declares the LORD Almighty. This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear" (Hag 2:4, 5).

But although the Holy Spirit was indeed active under the old covenant, there was also distance. God lived among his people; yet he was separate from them. This was true with respect to the Holy Spirit as well. Under the old covenant the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out, as he would be under the new covenant. The word outpouring suggests that under the new covenant the Spirit of God would be present in fuller and richer measure than before. Outpouring speaks of abundance.

This abundance could come only through the Messiah, in whom the Holy Spirit richly dwelt. As John the Baptist testifies, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him" (John 1:32). Similarly, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost means that God comes to live more intimately with his people than ever before. No one in the church is excluded from his anointing: "But you [plural] have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth" (1 John 2:20). This happened because Christ, having made atonement for sin, ascended into heaven and poured out his Spirit over his people.

The work of the Holy Spirit

There is more to be said about the work of the Holy Spirit. It is important that we have a clear understanding of that work. As is well-known, he is especially active in the work of regeneration. I will later devote a chapter to this important topic. In this chapter I have concentrated specifically on his work under the old covenant.

Before concluding, I want to emphasize the unity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not work on his own, nor does he work apart from the Father and the Son. In fact, he completes the one work of God.

Our Lord makes clear that the Spirit comes from the Father. John 14:16: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.” At the same time, our Lord can say, “...if I go [to the Father] I will send him [the Spirit] to you” (John 16:7). Therefore the church confesses that the Spirit proceeds *from the Father and the Son* (Nicene Creed).

Why is this important? Because it means that the Holy Spirit does not come on his own, to work something entirely new. Christ said, “...he will testify about me” (John 15:26) and “...he will bring glory to me” (John 16:14). The Spirit will glorify the Son by directing us through the Son to the Father. And he will do so by the Word, bringing into remembrance what Christ has taught. The work of the Holy Spirit is to convince us that there is no salvation except through the Son who came from the Father.

Regeneration means that we recognize and accept the Son as our only Saviour and through him are sanctified to a life of thankful service to the glory of God the Father. In the covenant we have a relationship with the Triune God, and not a bond with only one of the three Persons.