

XIV *The Lord is the Spirit*

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

(2 CORINTHIANS 3:17)

The passage that we wish to discuss in this chapter is considered to be very difficult by many explainers, perhaps one of the most difficult in the New Testament. But despite some degree of difficulty this passage shows us in very clear terms the close relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This text is not per se required as a proof-text for the biblical doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Still, that is the basic background here. In this passage we read about the Lord, and seeing the entire context, that must mean, the Lord Jesus Christ. When we read about the Spirit in the same passage, we think of the Holy Spirit. There is here a very close relation between the Son and the Spirit to the point where Paul can even write: the Lord *is* the Spirit.

Now this does not need to confuse us. For we know that the three Persons in the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct and yet never separate. There is only one God, and therefore a very strong and close identification is made. Just as Christ himself once said: I and the Father are one, and, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father (John 14), so Paul can write: the Lord is the Spirit. Not that the Lord and the Spirit are the same Persons, but they are of the same Being, one divine essence. There are three Persons, but there is one divine Being. This is consistent Biblical teaching.

Difference between Old and New Testament

Yet all this is not the issue in this passage of Scripture. Paul is explaining the relationship that exists between the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit,

and what this means since Pentecost (the outpouring of the Spirit) for the church. The close connection between the Son and the Spirit has great meaning for us as New Testament church. In this entire section of Scripture Paul is contrasting the difference between the old and the new covenant. Let us see in what terms the apostle contrasts the two.

The old ministry or dispensation (of the Old Testament) is described as follows. Verse 3: it was written on tablets of stone. Verse 6: it was a covenant based on a written code. Verse 7 (even stronger): it was a dispensation of death. Verse 9: it was a dispensation of condemnation. Verse 14: it was a dispensation with a veil. In short, the old covenant is a covenant of the law, written on stone, and it brought death and condemnation, while it did not allow people to see clearly and fully the glory of God.

But the new dispensation (of the New Testament) is vastly different in this sense: it is written on human hearts (verse 3), is new (verse 6), and gives life. Therefore it is called the dispensation of the Spirit, even the dispensation of righteousness.

The two are quite remarkably different. The difference lies at bottom in what Jesus Christ has done in his work of atonement as the Mediator of the new covenant. Through this work, the covenant has become new and has taken on a much broader, deeper, and spiritual dimension.

What is a dispensation or ministry?

We read of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The *Revised Standard Version* still has the expression the “dispensation” of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:8). This is now the dispensation in which the church lives and functions. Therefore we need to understand the heart and the glory of this dispensation. We live today in what is called the dispensation or ministry of the Spirit.

The first question that must be answered is this: what is a “dispensation” or a “ministry”? In verse 7 the word is also used: the “dispensation” (ministry) of death. That is the obvious contrast, the one (former) dispensation or ministry brought only death, but the other (present) dispensation of the Spirit gives life. What is a “dispensation”?

The verb “to dispense” means “to hand something out.” When you dispense something, you give something to another person. When you, for example, go to a drugstore to buy prescription drugs, you must pay what is called a dispensing fee, which is the administrative cost attached to the selling of that particular product. You need a prescription for this drug, and the pharmacist must follow certain rules in handing out the medication. Dispensing then is the required and official way of handing out certain products.

The old dispensation was inadequate

The word “ministry” means basically the same. We administer medication to another person. That means we give it under lawful and controlled conditions in the right manner. This is also the case with the manner in which salvation is dispensed, administered, or given. Under the Old Testament salvation was dispensed, given, by means of the written code, the law given through Moses. This was the law of God, and by keeping the law, you were saved, reconciled to God. So the giving of salvation was inseparably connected to keeping the law and its many ceremonies.

But it is clear from Scripture that this old dispensation did not achieve what it wanted to do. Instead of bringing to people salvation and life, this dispensation of the law actually brought condemnation and death. Because people could not keep and did not keep the law, they received not the reward of obedience, but the just reward of disobedience. So let’s say: the old manner of dispensing salvation was inadequate or insufficient, and it did not really achieve what it wanted to achieve. This is not because the dispensation itself was wrong, but because of our human failure to meet the conditions of that dispensation.

Yet that old dispensation did have its glory. Despite all its shortcomings, it still functioned to show forth the glory and grace of God. Paul uses the example of Moses to show something of this glory. When Moses came down from the mountain or whenever he went into the tabernacle and came back out, his face shone with heavenly splendor, a light so bright that people could not bear it. Moses therefore had to cover his face with a veil.

Insufficient and Temporary

The old dispensation certainly had its moments of splendor. It is therefore quite striking that the new dispensation has much more splendor. For the manner in which salvation is now handed out and dispensed to us is not via the Law of Moses but through the perfect atonement of Christ. He has fulfilled the law in our place, and now because of this atonement, the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and we may through the Holy Spirit for Christ’s sake have direct access to all the riches and blessings of God.

Because the old way of dispensing salvation was insufficient, Paul can write that it was also temporary. It served only for a time despite its moments of splendor, and it had to make way for something infinitely more glorious, the new dispensation, which is the dispensation of the Spirit.

Actually, the old dispensation already pointed clearly to Jesus Christ and his work of atonement. However, the people did not understand or see this. Just as Moses needed a veil to cover his face, so the people of Israel could not see clearly: it was as if a veil (a covering) lay over their minds. The only one who can remove this veil is Christ. He alone can and does show us the true meaning of the covenant, how it worked under the old dispensation and how it has been arranged under the new dispensation. To understand how salvation is given, we must go to Christ.

The veil removed

In the words that immediately precede our text we read (verse 16), “But when a man turns to the Lord (Jesus) the veil is removed.” We can say: I can see clearly now, the veil is gone. Now I truly understand how salvation is given and administered. Christ has made full atonement, and each Christian builds on that foundation. Christ fulfilled the law. He also gives insight into the real meaning and function of that law. When someone turns to Christ, he sees clearly the way in which salvation is given.

The sad thing that Paul encountered in his ministry was that many of his fellow-Jews refused to acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ. Every week in their synagogues, they read the books of Moses, but they did not really understand what they were reading. It is still as if there is a veil over what they read. They do not have the proper spiritual approach to the Scriptures. Paul suffered much from the rejection and opposition of his fellow Jews.

But he writes: when a man turns to the Lord and receives Christ as the great Mediator, the true Messiah, and the only Savior, the veil is removed. Then he really begins to see and understand the meaning and beauty of the Scriptures of old. He also sees that the new dispensation is far richer and has much more splendor than the old dispensation. For Christ is the heart of the new dispensation. It all now – as it did basically in the old, but then not so clearly – focuses on him. What was not so clear before is now abundantly clear and true.

In that context follow the words of this text, “Now the Lord is the Spirit.” This sentence refers to the previous one, “when a man turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.” Paul’s point is: if you want to see what the new dispensation is all about, you must begin with the Lord Jesus Christ. Accepting Christ as Savior, you also share in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then more light dawns. For the way to understand the very heart and function of the new dispensation is through the Holy Spirit. We receive this Spirit only when we acknowledge Christ.

The Lord is the Spirit

That's the sense of the words "now the Lord is the Spirit." Paul does not write vice-versa: the Spirit is the Lord. The very point is that the key to understanding the new covenant is the Lord Jesus. When you turn to the Lord, you receive access also to the gift of the Holy Spirit and only by the Holy Spirit do you begin to see and appreciate more and more what great riches you have in Christ.

Paul does not simply identify the Lord Jesus with the Holy Spirit, as if these are the same Persons. He makes very clear: if you want the Holy Spirit, you must acknowledge Christ, for the Lord is the Spirit. The one (the Holy Spirit) only comes together with the other (the Lord Jesus). Their relation is so close and their unity is so deep and essential that you can not have one of the two. You must have both.

The heart of the new covenant is Christ Jesus. He is the Mediator of that covenant, greater than Moses. He is the image of the invisible God, his only-begotten Son. And when you turn to him for complete and full salvation, you receive also the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit comes with Christ, and in that sense, Paul can even say: the Lord *is* the Spirit.

The Spirit guides us to Jesus Christ

You cannot have the Holy Spirit except by turning to Christ. And when the Spirit comes, he directs you always to Christ, the Savior, the great Mediator of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit opens for you the Scriptures and guides you in a proper understanding so that you increasingly see how your entire salvation rests on the work of atonement realized by the Lord Jesus. Salvation is dispensed now solely and exclusively by Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. There is here a *reciprocal* relationship between the Son and the Spirit.

The Spirit always and constantly guides us to the Lord Jesus. For Christ is the heart of the new dispensation. He fulfilled the demands of the law. He bore the penalty of the law. He took away the curse and damnation of the law. He gave us life unending. He binds us to the Father. Through Christ we may see the true glory of God. When you turn to this Jesus, you begin to see things as they really are. The Holy Spirit guides you in this process and the veils are lifted, the shadows are removed, and the full light begins to shine.

He will glorify me

Christ himself spoke of this when he was telling his disciples that the Spirit would come. He said about the Spirit (John 16:13-15), “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 he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

This is a key passage in Scripture about the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ has received all glory from the Father because of his perfect obedience. The Holy Spirit now takes from the Son and gives to us. Here we see the unity in the Trinity, the complete and perfect cooperation, and the one work of our salvation. And at the heart of it all is the atoning sacrifice of Christ, our Lord.

There is freedom

Then the apostle adds “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” We may rightly say that here is the true and deep glory of the dispensation of the Spirit. The Spirit was always present, working and renewing, guiding and leading, but now that the work of atonement has been completed and the Spirit has been fully poured out on Pentecost, we may truly share in his abundant presence. This Spirit does a mighty work, for he grants us freedom. This freedom is the glory of the new dispensation. Never was this freedom so evident as now in the dispensation of the Spirit.

Note carefully that Paul does not say: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there *will be* (perhaps) freedom, but he writes: there *is* freedom. This freedom is not a pious wish, but a reality which is experienced. This freedom is a wonder and every day again we are amazed at it.

What is freedom?

What is this “freedom” of which Paul writes here? For many people freedom is being able to do what they want to do or doing nothing, if they choose. *Freedom's just another word for nothing else to do.* But that is not the freedom of which the Bible speaks.

We must again compare it with the old dispensation. The people of Israel did not really have the “freedom” to behold the full beauty and glory of God. They did not have free access to God. Access to God was always via the priests and the sacrifices through the rules and regulations of the law

that in fact condemned them. Were the Israelites ever really free from their many obligations and restrictions? Was it not a covenant that with its emphasis on works actually functioned to enslave them?

But that situation has now drastically and definitely changed. Now the final and full sacrifice has been made for our sins. We are free from sin and guilt. The outpouring of the Spirit is also proof of this freedom. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. This means freedom from the bondage and the curse of the law. It is freedom from the need to atone constantly for sin. It is freedom also from the power of Satan and sin and the condemnation that results from sin.

We should not interpret or understand the Biblical word freedom in a modern political sense. Freedom is always first of all freedom from sin and death through Jesus Christ.

Freedom only in Christ

The Spirit makes us free. It may be better to say: the Holy Spirit places and confirms us in the freedom which we have in Christ. The Spirit shows us the vast expanse of the true riches of the Scriptures. The Spirit gives us an open and broad perspective on the mercies of God in Christ. The way to heaven is open for us through the atoning work of Christ, and we may freely travel it and have the boldness and the confidence to come before God in prayer and with praise.

The glory of the new dispensation of the Spirit is precisely the freedom to associate with God as his children through Christ. We are not slaves of sin anymore but servants of Christ. We are no longer doomed to do Satan's bidding, but liberated to follow Christ's commandments. In Christ we have freedom to breathe, freedom to live, and freedom to relax. No more does the burden of our sins oppress us and weigh us down. No more are we guided by people who do not understand the riches of the Scriptures. No more do we see everything as through a veil. But we may look upon God in Christ as he truly is.

Freedom is a big word. Many people do not understand it at all. Freedom is deliverance from the bondage of sin and death, being restored fully after Christ's image as sons and daughters of the highest God. The old dispensation already saw glimpses of this glory. It shone from Moses' face. Therein God's children saw how close God had come to his people. But in the new dispensation we may see in Christ through the Spirit even more clearly the glory of God. And one day we will stand in it completely.

Christian freedom

We should remember that Paul writes these words about the Spirit and freedom in the second letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians prided themselves on their so-called Christian freedom. They felt that everything was lawful. The old restrictions of the Mosaic laws are gone, they said, and we are free. This is true, but the new freedom is not to be abused or misunderstood. It is the freedom from sin for service. It is a heartfelt commitment to Christ.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. This has tremendous consequences. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, people do not want to sin anymore. There people want to keep the commandment of love. There people are really being changed into new people according to the demands of the new dispensation.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, people still fall into sins. That saddens and grieves them. Yet they do not live in these sins, but instead repent from them and start anew. For where the Spirit is, there is freedom. The Spirit again makes us free. Christian freedom is never received as a license to sin.

The Spirit is given to confirm and establish our freedom in Christ. He does so by binding us to Christ and leading us into a deeper and fuller understanding of the riches of the Scriptures. Where this happens, people can really say: I am free from the burden of sin and guilt, from the curse of the law. I am free to serve God again thankfully as his child.

Do not abuse Christian freedom

We should never abuse this freedom or misunderstand it. If the glory of salvation was never more evident than it is today in the new dispensation, the same holds true for sanctification. Holiness and piety must now be evident as never before. Now we have to live, more than the Israel of old, as free people.

We may never use this freedom as a cover-up or an excuse for sin. Instead we should grow in the experience and expression of this freedom. We must show that we are really free from the ways of sin and death. It must be clear from our lives that we are led by a true and deep knowledge of the Word of God. We must be free from apostasy, immorality, and selfishness. We must go back time and again back to Christ who has set us free. Constantly we must seek the Spirit, who alone preserves us in the freedom of Christ and renews us in God's service.

This freedom is the glory of the dispensation of the Spirit. It is the new reality and norm since Pentecost. There are no reasons anymore whatsoever to lead a life of slavery to sin and death. There never were any excuses, but now there certainly are none at all. Whoever now sins willfully and constantly does not only deny the very heart of the new covenant but also tarnishes its glory in the Spirit of Christ.

It is sad that many have the Bible, as the Jews have the Scriptures of old, but do not understand it. It has no effect on them. Their eyes are dim and it's like they are looking through a veil. They have not really turned to Christ, and therefore not truly received the Spirit. They do not experience the freedom.

But we may say and know: I am free from all my sins and guilt, from the curse of death and free as a child of God. I may experience this in Christ through the Spirit. This freedom is the most exhilarating thing there is in life. It is the glory of the new dispensation that we can say: we are free.

The challenge of life is not to become free, but to *remain* free. Let us praise God that the Holy Spirit has been poured out, for there lays the guarantee that we shall remain free until we behold the full glory of God and taste the perfect freedom of the new earth.