

The Personal Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The dispensation of the Holy Spirit is a work of building a new race into Christ, characterized by a superficial quiet, supreme moral quality, infinite gentleness, and a final and inevitable test.

Scripture: Matthew 12:31, Matthew 28:19, John 4:24, John 16:13, Acts 13:2, Romans 8:26, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 2 Corinthians 13:14

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis preaches about the profound experience of a heart transformed by God, singing a new song of redemption and forgiveness, reflecting on the deep love and gratitude for the salvation received. The sermon delves into the question of the personality of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the Holy Spirit as a distinct person in the Trinity based on biblical evidence from the teachings of Jesus, the early church, and the apostle Paul. Furthermore, the sermon explores the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, highlighting the quiet yet powerful work of the Spirit in transforming individuals, emphasizing the moral quality, gentleness, and inevitableness of the Spirit's test in every person's life.

Transcript

Me thought that the Lord showed me a heart into which he had put a new song. Where the heart was I do not know; but I heard it singing about the middle of its song. It had been singing, "What profit is there in my blood when I go down to the pit?" It had been singing the fifty-first psalm, and Jehovah had now put a new song into its mouth. He had done it; and the heart was trying to sing -- I heard it in the middle of its song. It had been reading the fifth chapter of Revelation and trying to sing some of its numbers; and now it was at these words: "For thou wast stain," and, O, how the heart was sobbing and breaking! how it was melting with a joyous grief and a grievous joy! O, how it faltered when it tried to sing, "and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood"! It was the song of one to whom much had been forgiven, and who, therefore, loved much, but it was the song of the chief of sinners, to whom most had been forgiven, and who, therefore, loved most. Yet it faltered and made wrong music; it jarred, and there was discord; and it grated on its own ear and pained it; and God was listening to the song -- God who knoweth all things. But the song was presented to him through and by the Mediator: and if there was discord, it was removed by grace in atoning blood, by the sweet accents of intercession; for it came up as music in Jehovah's ear -- melody to the Lord. It was not discord in heaven. I would know, O God, whose soul that is. O God, let that soul be mine.

-- John Duncan, New College, Edinburgh, 1843.

The Question of Personality. When Professor Beyschlag says that the notion of the Holy Spirit as a third divine person "is one of the most disastrous importations into the Holy Scripture," he is writing as a rationalist and not as a Christian scholar. We should admit at once, however, that there is for the personality of the Holy Spirit no such indisputable exegetical foundation as there is for the deity of our Lord. The fact is, that this is one of those peculiar places where Christian experience must approach the New Testament with a certain bias. With our Lord as a second person in the Godhead, the theological problem finds no further philosophical difficulty by making the plurality into a trinity. Indeed, for a certain type of speculative mind, the trinity actually helps us to understand the plurality. But the personality of the Holy Spirit is much more than an easy addition for the Christian man -- it is almost a necessary addition. The Christian consciousness is ever more and more inclined to believe that the Holy Ghost is a person. In any time of rich quickening and deepening of the Christian life you will notice, in song and prayer and testimony, a continual dwelling upon the personality of the Holy Spirit. And, as we would naturally expect, the bias of the Christian consciousness enters into the interpretation of God's Word, as it certainly should.

All this frankly said, still the argument for the personality of the Holy Spirit is not weak, if it is not overwhelming. Separated from forced and dubious elements, the argument may be outlined as follows:

1. The most unartificial explanation of our Saviour's own conception is that the Holy Spirit is a person. If you study the sixteenth chapter of Saint John's gospel you will notice that the Spirit is always treated in careful separation from both the Father and the Son. Then, the term suggests much more than an impersonal influence. There is personal peculiarity implied. He is the intimate helper in danger, distress, sin, and all daily Christian need. To all this must be added that our Lord, after the resurrection, placed a separate stress upon the Spirit, "baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Saint Matt. 28.19). Some of the critics, I know, demand that this passage shall be given up; but I do not find their reasoning convincing. My conclusion is that there is indication that our Lord did not regard the Holy Spirit as a mere influence from himself, or from his Father, or from both the Father and the Son; but rather as a distinctly self-conscious Spirit.

2. In the early church the inspired Christian consciousness, as seen in the book of Acts, treated the Holy Spirit in distinction and emphasis just as he had been treated by our Lord. There are many such expressions as these: "The Holy Spirit said" (Acts 13.2); "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 15.28). Surely these passages can be explained as figurative color, or more profoundly as psychological dramatization; but to take them as personal is less ingenious; and when connection is made with our Lord's teaching the case is yet stronger.

3. The teaching of Saint Paul can best be obtained by comparing Rom. 8.26, 27 with the following: Rom. 8.15, 16; 1 Cor. 12.4-11; 2 Cor. 13.14. To any student making this comparison in full, Saint Paul will certainly be regarded as holding and teaching the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit. And so the apostle Paul in his epistles must be added to the book of Acts and to the teaching of our Lord.

4. In the antenicene period the Holy Spirit was in Christian consciousness clearly separated from the Father and from the Son, as could not have been the case had he been regarded as a mere impersonal influence from either or both of them. I have space for, only one quotation. It is from Justin Martyr's First Apology (vi), and has been translated as follows: "And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned; but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and

temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both him, and the Son ... and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore."

What I would claim, then, is this: If we carefully examine the body of Christian utterance from the teaching of our Lord down to the most significant expression of the Christian consciousness before the organized church had any crucial doctrinal task on hand, we shall find that a belief in the personality of the Holy Spirit is naturally implied by that utterance. And I further claim that today the case is, for the Christian man, not one of exact exegesis and unbiased interpretation. For two reasons he has a practical and wholesome bias, which turns the above argument into personal conviction: First, the philosophical victory of Athanasius really makes for the personality of the Holy Spirit; and, second, the increasing deposit of Christian consciousness, for all the Christian centuries, more and more requires the personality of the Holy Spirit. It is not an instance of fundamental addition to the Word of God; but it is an instance where Christian history and Christian consciousness have rejected certain possible interpretations of biblical data and have resulted in an interpretation which is not satisfactory to any rationalistic scholar. But the rationalistic scholar himself has just as much bias as has the Christian scholar.

The Dispensation. When we speak of a "dispensation of the Spirit" we do not mean that Christ Jesus is now less in emphasis; nor do we mean that until now the Holy Spirit has been inactive; we mean simply that the peculiar work of building a new race into Christ is the work of the Spirit of God. This kind of work could not be done because the new race was not founded. Thus, when it is said that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit was rendered possible only by the atonement in the death of Christ, the remark, however intended, is the exact truth. Details of conversion will be dealt with later; but, first of all, let us look at some of the general characteristics of this dispensation of the Holy Ghost:

1. The Superficial Quiet of the Dispensation. A very marked peculiarity of this dispensation of the Spirit is that, as a rule, the surface of life is so undisturbed. Now and then the Spirit's struggle with a soul shows itself in noise and external indications of battle, but usually the conflict is fought out entirely in the depths of the human soul. The man talks and laughs and plans a shrewd trade and takes his evening in pleasure and seems to be careless of all spiritual demand; but there is another chapter which you cannot read. Motives are being used, great self-decisions are now and again being made, silently there is deposit after deposit in moral character; and all this is watched and treated and lifted into full redemptive bearing by the swift and profound agency of the Holy Spirit. And there is a philosophy in this quiet, undramatic method, too; for were there constant noise and upheaval and terror there could be no genuine self-decision. It would be easy enough to make the whole race extremely religious by external coercive expedient. One crash of the planets would send every son of Adam to his knees. But this religion of coercion would not have even an atom of ethical meaning, and all the test of probation would have to be made in some other way. One word of exception is necessary here, however. There are times when it is needful to arouse pure fear to break up the habit of torpidity and render the operation of self-decision possible. But even in these torpid situations the fear must not be turned into overwhelming fright. It is to contribute to self-consciousness and not to smother it.

2. The Supreme Moral Quality of the Dispensation. But this quiet, although it lends itself to moral test, does not furnish the positive ethical quality of the Spirit's dispensation. This ethical quality comes from two things: First, from the actual stimulation which the Holy Spirit gives to personality. There could be no realization of moral demand unless the person were made strong enough to remain in self-consciousness. Thus, the foundation of all ethical movement lies in personality itself. And whatever makes for strong personality always makes for ethical possibility. ' In this statement is infolded the main principle of all wise

effort in reforming men. Second, from the supremacy which the Holy Spirit grants to conscience. A full Christian experience involves the entire man; but the Spirit's point of pressure is the conscience. No Christian thing can ever be secured until the conscience is thoroughly utilized and thoroughly satisfied. This does not conflict with anything that I have said in our study of morality. No man can satisfy his moral ideal when it is the cold, abstract, impersonal demand of morality; but the moral ideal in the Christian process is, by the Holy Spirit, quickly related to the personal God and to Jesus Christ; and this Christian change profoundly effects the entire moral situation. But what I wish now to make emphatic is this: In building a Christian man the Holy Spirit places the utmost stress upon conscience. To be a Christian man you must take all your conscience along with you. It is true that we are not come unto a "tempest and the sound of a trumpet," but the mountain unto which we are come has in it just as much moral quality as there ever was in Mount Sinai. And Mount Sinai had in it just as much moral quality as there ever can be in the loftiest pure morality.

3. The Infinite Gentleness of the Dispensation. There are times when the Holy Spirit seems to be furious, and he disturbs a wicked soul until there are no human words which can describe the awful torture. But when we look at the dispensation as a whole we find it full of gentleness. How patient he is with us! How he searches and searches for every faint beginning of better intention, to lift it more clearly into self-consciousness! How he waits for our final meaning, waits like an endless Friendship! And how extremely gentle his touch is! He handles a soul as a Great Mother handles a babe! He is so sensitive that even one vile thought grieves him, and yet he clings and clings to the worst sinner with the tenacity of holy love. "Thy patient love, at what a cost, at last it conquered me!"

4. The Inevitableness of the Test. From the very fact that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit is so quiet and so ethical and so gentle, the test of the moral person as to intention is inevitable. No man, whatever his outward life, whatever his individual inheritance, whatever his opinions, can escape the searching questions of the Holy Ghost. He is the one abiding Interrogator that cannot be evaded and cannot be silenced. He is the augmented Conscience bound to come to terms of clear understanding with the sinner. Every external test, and every mental test, can be avoided. A man may honestly believe a half truth, and himself manipulate a falsehood into personal conviction. He may inherit prejudices which he cannot now even wish to overcome. He may live where his environment is a lifelong disadvantage. But under all -- environment, inheritance, chosen opinions -- under all the Holy Spirit squarely and repeatedly meets the man and says: "What do you mean to do with your moral ideal?" Sooner or later the man must answer that question.

5. The Finality of the Test. If what I have said of the Spirit's dispensation be true, then it follows that, in the very nature of the case, there can be no further moral test. The test under the Holy Spirit is final. Not because God is arbitrary and unwilling, but simply because the dispensation of the Holy Spirit exhausts all moral procedure. There is nothing more which can be done. Of course, if sainthood were automatic, much more could be done; but inasmuch as sainthood is and must be moral (to be sainthood at all), the notion of a second probation is inconceivable.

"The sin against the Holy Ghost." "Therefore I say unto you, Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in that which is to come " (Saint Matt. 12.31, 32; Saint Mark 3.28-30; Saint Luke 12.10). The clue to these seemingly strange words of our Lord is added by Saint Mark: "Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit." They could make an honest mistake as to Jesus

himself, they might not be able to look upon him as their expected Messiah; but to say that all the good Christ did was inspired by an unclean spirit revealed a heart fixed in hostility to the right -- an irremediable turpitude of the personal motive-life. This sin could never be forgiven because it was a finality in their intentional bearing. (In brief, the sin against the Holy Ghost is the full personal rejection of all the moral demand which the Holy Ghost makes through conscience. In the sixteenth article of the Church of England, 1552, we read, "Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is when a man of malice, and stubbornness of mind, doth rail upon the truth of God's Word manifestly perceived." Commenting upon this article, Dean Mansel says, "Thus interpreted, the sin is not a single act, but a spirit of hostility to Christ, manifesting itself in continued acts." The article and the comment have caught the spirit of the sin, but they are not profound enough to fit into the Saviour's statement. The sin is not directly against him, nor directly against the Scripture, but against moral concern itself. It is the culmination of personal sin into a fixed attitude of willful unrighteousness. And so it is the complete exhaustion of the pressure of the Holy Spirit. And so it is not forgivable -- it is everlasting moral ruin.

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