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John 16:4-15

The Illuminating Work of the Holy Spirit

I often hear people say that churches don't talk or think about the Holy Spirit enough. The Holy Spirit is often called the "forgotten" or "most ignored" person of the Trinity. In many ways, I think these critiques are warranted and justified. There has, indeed, been a tendency for Christians to downplay the Holy Spirit, to not think about Him enough, or rightly. Ironically, even in the circles that talk a lot about the Holy Spirit often think and teach incorrectly about the Spirit at times, leading to more confusion. Just this week, the 2025 State of Theology Survey dropped, showing that 53% of professing evangelicals believe the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being, thus denying the Trinity.¹ We clearly need to think, talk, and teach about the Holy Spirit more, and have a sound understanding of what the Bible teaches us about the Spirit. We need to know who the Holy Spirit is, and what He does, in so much as the Bible tells us. We need more teaching and preaching on the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, though, I think Christians and churches actually talk and teach about the Holy Spirit a lot more than they are given credit for, especially in more Reformed circles, because we talk a lot about the *work* of the Spirit and the *results* of what the Holy Spirit does, such as the Holy Spirit's role in salvation, regenerating hearts, sanctifying us, producing fruit in our lives, and so forth. In fact, I think we gain a lot of clarity on this discussion when we realize that the Holy Spirit's role and function is somewhat like that of a spotlight. What does a spotlight do? It shines a big, bright light for the sake of illumination - illuminating *other things*, making other things visible and drawing our attention there - and thus, away from itself. A spotlight is immensely bright and helpful, and when we are seeing it at work and and function most brightly, our attention actually isn't on the spotlight itself - we aren't looking back at the mechanism shining the light - but *on the light in action*: we're looking at the bright light illuminating the darkness, looking at those things in the midst of the light, that are not made clearer and more visible for us. And that's exactly what the Holy Spirit does for us. The Spirit functions like a spotlight, shining brightly into our lives, illuminating truth, sin, and righteousness, illuminating the way to guide us, and perhaps most of all, illuminating the glory of Christ; the Spirit shines a

¹https://thestateoftheology.com/?mkt_tok=MTg5LUUpMQS0yMTYAAAGc_jRb-NRS9pwbaTt5IpUVSZMeLZSionH2HIjGZX2B51ae4ALs3yrVn-uyzX-hnFhNtIervWumbGZKozAKKlJgaJrsKINaGVsnDvnOFVZ16otqI

light on Jesus Christ for us to see Him all the more brightly, glorifying the the Triune God by specifically glorifying God the Son in the Flesh, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Part of why it sometimes seems like there's less discussion of the Spirit than there actually is is because when we focus on the work of the Holy Spirit, He often directs our attention elsewhere - especially Christ. And so it is good for us to understand the Holy Spirit's work of illumination.

That's what we see here in our text this morning, John 16:4-15. We're still in the midst of Jesus's Farewell Discourse to His disciples the night before He will be crucified. He has been giving them - and us, as His disciples today - final words about crucially important topics, such as His atoning work on the cross, the salvation we can have through faith in Him alone, His example of sacrificial love for His people that He calls us to imitate in our love for one another, the necessity of obeying Christ out of love as a sign of real faith, the inevitability of hatred and persecution from the world that we are called to endure, and so forth. And one topic that Jesus spends a lot of time talking about in the Farewell Discourse - John chapters 14-16 - is the topic of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, the Godhead. In fact, we receive some of the most explicit, direct, and concentrated teachings about the Holy Spirit right here in these chapters. In chapter 14, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit would dwell in every believer, as our Paraklete - our Helper and Advocate - to spiritually empower us and make God's presence known to us. Last week, at the end of chapter 15, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would help us to be faithful witnesses of Christ in the midst of the hostile, unbelieving World. Now, Jesus gives more explicit teachings on the *role and work* of the Holy Spirit. This passage is not an exhaustive look at the work of the Holy Spirit; there is much more that could be said, and is expounded on elsewhere, such as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so on. But here Jesus gives us a clear, detailed explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit coming to us, to our own spiritual advantage, in order to convict us of sin and righteousness, guide us into truth, and glorify Christ.

I. Christ left - in His death and ascension - in order to send the Holy Spirit to us, which is to our advantage (16:4-7)

Jesus reminds the disciples again, in v.4, that He has been telling them all these things because He is now leaving them. Then He says, in vv.5-6, "But now I am going to Him who sent me, and none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart." Now, these verses strike us as odd, because the disciples *have*

asked Jesus where He is going. Back in chapter 13:36, Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, where are you going?” Right after that, in ch.14:5, Thomas asked Him where He was going, expressing the disciples’ bewilderment. And there Jesus explained that He was going to his Father’s house, to Heaven, to prepare a place there for all who believe in Him: to secure our salvation. Now, Jesus returns to that subject, here in ch.16 - but why does He say they don’t ask where He is going? This may seem like a contradiction at first, but it isn’t. One possible explanation some give is that He is saying no one is asking that question *anymore*. But I think a far more likely explanation is that Jesus is saying they aren’t asking and thinking about *why* Jesus is leaving, where Jesus is going and what His departure will accomplish; they aren’t asking or thinking about the great *good* that Jesus is leaving to accomplish. Instead, they are focusing on the fact that He is leaving and are sorrowful about it.²

But Jesus assures them that they should not be sad, because Jesus is going away *for their good* - and for our good. His leaving is for our advantage, he says, because He must go in order to send the Holy Spirit - the paraklete, our Helper and Advocate. We see this in v.7: “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.” This is a remarkable statement. The Holy Spirit cannot be sent to us unless Jesus departs. Why? Because Christ secures the work of the Holy Spirit on our behalf through His atoning work on the cross and in His resurrection, through which He fulfills the promises of God in the Old Testament and ushers in the era of the New Covenant, the era in which the Holy Spirit of God is poured out on “all flesh,” as we see prophesied in Joel 2 and fulfilled at Pentecost. And this glorious coming of the Spirit is secured by Jesus’s death and resurrection. Only by the propitiation of Christ’s blood on our behalf, securing our forgiveness, redemption, and sanctification as the Holy Temple of God through His cleansing blood, can we be declared holy and receive the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit. If there’s no death for sin, vindicating resurrection, exalting ascension, and mediatorial intercession of King Jesus, then there is no personal work of the Spirit in each believer: no effectual calling, regeneration, conviction of sin, illumination of faith and understanding, sanctification, salvation, sense of adoption and assurance, fruit of the Spirit, spiritual gifts, guidance and calling, or any other blessing and Help the Spirit brings! How lost and dreary and miserable and hopeless we would be without the Spirit of God! How cold and

² See James Hamilton, *John*, ESV Expository Commentary, p.248.

empty the church would be without the Spirit: not a Temple but a Tomb of spiritually dead men! How dark and hopeless the world would be! But thanks be to God, Christ secured the work of the Holy Spirit on our behalf through the gospel - His death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession! Because Christ died for, and was raised for you, He secured the work of the Spirit in your heart and life!

This is why He says that His going away is to our advantage. It's an incredible statement: our great hope and longing is to be with Jesus, and yet He is saying we're better off because He left! Not because He has abandoned us, but because this was the way that we can have the very Spirit of Christ dwelling in our hearts. We've already seen, from the second half of chapter 14, how the Holy Spirit indwells us, helps us, and makes the very presence of the Triune God manifest and known to us. But now Jesus further elaborates on the advantage of the Holy Spirit coming into the world here in the following verses, beginning with showing us how it is only by the coming of the Holy Spirit that we, and the whole unbelieving world, can be convicted of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Which we see in point 2...

II. The Holy Spirit convicts the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8-11)

When the Holy Spirit comes, He brings *conviction* to the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. In other words, *because* Christ secures the work of the Holy Spirit, and Christ and the Father both send the Holy Spirit into the world - because the Spirit comes into peoples hearts - there is actually the hope, possibility, and even the *guarantee* that unbelieving sinners will be convicted of sin, convicted of faith in Christ, convicted of the judgment of God, and converted through repentance and faith in Christ. We see this in vv.8-11, beginning with the summary statement of v.8: "And when He," that is, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, "when He comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." The word "convict" there is usually translated the same way - as "convict" - across the board in most translations, though is sometimes translated as "prove to be in the wrong," such as in the NIV. That's kind of right, but misses some of the meaning of what's going on here. Convict is by far the best way to capture Jesus's meaning here: the Spirit exposes and convinces people in their hearts that they are guilty of sin, that they have no righteousness in themselves, that righteousness is found in God alone and received from Christ alone, and that God will truly judge the world, and even the Devil. In other words, the Spirit brings the conviction of *faith* into

the hearts of individuals, even those who currently belong to the world and the Devil. We see this more clearly as Jesus explains the Spirit's conviction of each of these three things - sin, righteousness, and judgment - in the next three verses.

In verse 9, Jesus explains how the Spirit convicts the world concerning sin: "concerning sin, because they do not believe in me." In other words, those whom the Spirit convicts concerning sin *do not believe in Jesus* - they are unbelievers. Last week, as we look at the previous passage - John 15:18 - 16:4 - we saw how "the world" here refers to, specifically, the *unbelieving world*: those who don't believe in Jesus, hate Jesus, and therefore hate and persecute and reject Jesus's people, Christians. Unbelievers, that is, non-Christians, don't believe in Jesus (that's part of the very definition of the name). They don't worship the Lord in spirit and truth, they don't have faith in Christ or the gospel, whether they have never heard it, or have heard it and reject it. The world is spiritually dead, following after its ruler, the prince and power of the air, Satan, the Devil. And this describes the default position of *everyone*. Every single person ever to live is a sinner, guilty before God the Almighty Judge. Yet people don't rightly acknowledge their sin and guilt, confess it accurately, or repent and turn from it on their own. We need the supernatural help of God, divine intervention, to have godly sorrow and conviction over our sin! And so this is part of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Christ secured the work of the Spirit, through His atoning work on the Cross, to bring about the conviction and conversion of sinners. Christ sends the Holy Spirit into the hearts of dead sinners to convict us of our sin and guilt; to expose our sin; to make us *feel* our guilt, to be convinced that we are indeed sinners by nature, even guilty for and convicted of specific sins that we have committed, and that we need forgiveness. When someone is truly convicted of their sin, that doesn't come from them - that comes from the Holy Spirit at work in their heart! The Holy Spirit came into the world to convict *the world* - unbelieving sinners - of their sin and unbelief, so that they will repent and believe.

He also came to convince the world - unbelieving sinners - of *righteousness*, as we see explained in v.10: "concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer." Why does John say the Spirit convicts the world concerning righteousness because Jesus has gone to the Father and isn't here anymore? It means the Spirit convicts the world of righteousness *because* Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, being vindicated before the world and exalted in glory! In other words, the Holy Spirit has come to convict the world that *our* righteousness - the righteousness of man, the merits of our own works and deeds -

is not righteousness at all, but filthy rags, and to lift our eyes and see, by faith, that true righteousness is found in God alone! The Spirit comes to expose the righteousness of man as unrighteousness, as falling short of the glory of God, and to expose the true righteousness of God found in Christ, the God-Man! When Jesus spoke these words, He was just about to be betrayed and handed over to both religious and civil authorities, that very night, who would unjustly try Him, accuse and condemn Him as a blaspheming heretic, dangerous law-breaking criminal, and seditious rebel trying to usurp political power as a wannabe king. That's the message that would be sent the very next day, as Jews and Gentiles - the *world* - conspired together to crucify and kill Jesus! But God did not let the world have the final say. On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating and exonerating His Son before all! The Father justified His Son, Jesus Christ, before the world, showing that Jesus really is who He claimed to be and is perfectly *righteous*, the very righteousness of God in the flesh; that He died not for our sin, because He had no sin, but for *our sin*, that we can be righteous before God through faith in Christ alone.

Through Jesus's cross and resurrection, Christ defeated, Sin, and even Satan, by bearing the full judgment of God against Sin in Himself, thereby declaring judgment and victory over the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. We see this in v.11: the Spirit came to convince the world, "concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged." The Holy Spirit comes to convict the world that the Final Judgment of God against the World is surely coming, because the judgment and doom of the world's ruler, Satan, has already been declared on the cross. And if the world's ruler has already been judged by Christ, all those who belong to the world through sin and unbelief shall surely be judged as well. Christ is immeasurably patient; He is gracious and kind and merciful and is allowing time to tick on - sins and injustices and unthinkable atrocities - to keep occurring and piling up, yet there will be an end to His patience; the last kernel of sand shall fall in the hourglass that the Father has appointed, and judgment shall indeed come. The world scoffs and rebels at this - yet the Spirit comes to expose it as truth, to convict and convince us in our hearts that the judgment is indeed coming, that the Devil has already been judged, the World shall not continue in sin and unbelief forever but shall fall under the judgment of God and pass away, that this includes *individual sinners like us* who deserve the judgment of eternity in Hell, and that the only way we can be spared this just judgment is to repent of our sins and find forgiveness, salvation, and righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ alone, as our Lord and Savior who lived, died, was raised, and ascended for our sakes, in our place!

In other words, as we put these 4 verses together, what we see is that the Holy Spirit comes into the world to bring about the miracle of *conversion and regeneration* in the hearts of hardened, unbelieving sinners. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit changing our hearts, opening our eyes and ears to see and believe rightly, no one will believe or be saved. But thanks be to God the Holy Spirit comes to regenerate our hearts, convict us of sin, and bring about repentance and faith within our souls! If you're a believer, that is *exactly* what has happened to you: when you and I were dead in our sins, following the course of this world and its ruler, Satan, Christ sent His Spirit into our lives, through the preaching of the gospel that we heard, so that we could rightly hear it, be convicted of our sins and the righteousness and judgment of God, and believe in Christ for salvation. Our conversion is the gift of God, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our lives! We have conviction, repentance, and faith because the Holy Spirit convicted us, to draw us out of the world and to Christ. As we sang earlier, from *And Can it Be*:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.³

What a powerful, vivid, beautiful description of our conversion, of what happened in our hearts when the Holy Spirit came to convict us concerning, sin, righteousness, and judgment! When the spirit regenerated our hearts, bringing out repentance and faith in Christ, and we were born again! This is the wonderful miracle of conversion the Holy Spirit has wrought in each Christian.

And it is our hope in evangelism. The Holy Spirit indwells believers, but notice here to *whom* the Holy Spirit is coming and bringing conviction: again, it's *the world* - the unbelieving, sinful world. Yes, what we saw last week is true: as we go forth into the world, as faithful Christians and witnesses to the gospel, the unbelieving world will hate us and persecute us as they hate and reject Christ. But it will not be true of *every* person in the world! As we go forth, faithfully following Jesus and proclaiming His gospel to the dark world, calling them to repent and believe, a glorious, amazing, miraculous thing will happen: Christ will send the Holy Spirit into the hearts of some in the world with whom we share the gospel! The Holy Spirit will convict them of their sin, the righteousness of Christ, and their need of the salvation to come! He will

³ "And Can it Be," Charles Wesley, The Worship Hymnal, #250.

convert them so that they are born again, repent, and believe in Christ! The Spirit will do this in the hardened, darkened, evil, wicked, unbelieving world that hates Christ! He will change hearts, renew minds, and save souls, just like He's done for us! So we can find great hope and encouragement as we go forth: changing the world is the Spirit's work, not ours! We are simply responsible to share the gospel as faithful witnesses of Jesus, which too is by the grace and power of the Spirit, as ch.15:27 told us. People in the world will be saved not based on how great of a speaker you are, or how persuasive and knowledgeable you are, or how well put together you are: we proclaim the gospel and the Spirit will use the gospel to bring conviction and faith into the hearts of those the Lord has appointed to save, no matter how worldly they may be.

Praise God the spirit convicts to convert. And that He continues to work in us after conversion, by continuing to guide us into all truth, as we see in point 3...

III. The Holy Spirit guides us into all truth (16:12-13)

In vv.12-13, Jesus tells the disciples that even though there's much more to say, He can't tell them all now: they aren't ready to handle it all yet, emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually; nor do they have time, for He will be arrested that night and crucified the next. But it's not like Jesus has been caught flat-footed, having to scramble because he's running out of time unexpectedly. No, this is all part of the plan. And he's not going to leave them to figure it out on their own either: He promises, in v.13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all 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."

THis is exactly what happens in the rest of the New Testament, beginning with Pentecost. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the very Spirit of God who is Truth, came down and descended on the Apostles, to proclaim and prophecy the very Word of God, and inspired them to write the New Testament Scriptures, the Bible, part of the Holy, INspired, and Inerrant Word of God, giving us the rest of the revelation of Jesus Christ that we might understand the things that were to take place - namely, the gospel: Jesus's death, resurrection, ascension, His ongoing heavenly reign and intercession, and His pending Second Coming. We have the Scriptures to guide us into truth.

But it still gets even better: Christ sends the Holy Spirit into *our hearts* - the heart of every Christian, every true believer - to help *us* understand and believe and live out Scripture. The Spirit of Truth dwells in us to guide *us* in all truth. We experience this, as we read and study

God's Word, and it's hard to understand, yet the Spirit gradually gives us greater understanding and faith; as we seek to obey and apply it, and the Spirit guides us in how to do that; as we seek God's Will, and the Spirit leads and guides each of us in the way He wants us to go. He doesn't leave us to stumble about in the dark but guides our way and illuminates our path. But note very carefully: the Spirit of Truth does so *in conjunction with the word of God*, and will never lead us in a path contrary to or independent from what He hears the Father and Christ speak. In other words, the Spirit will never reveal something to you new or different from what the Bible says. Even as the Spirit subjectively leads and guides you in your own life, He will never lead you in a way that contradicts the clear teachings and commands of Scriptures. Instead, the Spirit will guide you in the truth of God's Word, to better understand, believe, and obey it personally.

And this is because the Spirit always works to glorify Christ, as we see in our final point:

IV. The Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (16:14-15)

The passage ends with a climactic look at the ministry of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit always works to *glorify Jesus Christ*. We see this in vv.14-15: Jesus says, "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." This is why the Spirit of Truth guides us in all truth in conjunction with the word of God: the Spirit is always working to magnify Christ, to lead the world to Christ, to exalt the glory of the gospel of Christ, and to understand and believe the entirety of God's Word, which unfolds Christ to us and magnifies His glory. The Holy Spirit works in such a way to always be about the glory God specifically by glorifying God the Son, Jesus Christ. In this way, the entire Triune God - God the Father, Son, *and Spirit* - are glorified, as we worship the one, Triune God through Spirit and Truth. But amazingly, the Spirit is not emphasizing His own name and presence, but directing our attention and focus on Jesus. The work of the Holy Spirit is Christ-Centered. Like a spotlight illuminating an actor on a stage, so the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and lives to illuminate Christ, to draw our attention to Jesus, to focus our gaze on Him and to glorify Him!

And if the Holy Spirit, the third person of Trinity, is Christ-centered, then we should be, too! To be Spirit-filled is to be Christ-centered. That's how you know the Holy Spirit is at work in an individual, a family, a church, a ministry, an organization, a worship service, or a sermon: if the Spirit is in it, it will be about glorifying and exalting Christ. If it doesn't, then the Spirit is not in it. A spirit-filled person is a Christ-centered person. A spirit-filled family is a Christ-centered

family. A spirit-filled ministry is a Christ-centered ministry. A spirit-filled church is a Christ-centered church. A spirit-filled sermon is a Christ-centered sermon. If Christ is not preached the Spirit isn't in it. A spirit-filled worship service is a Christ-centered worship service. A spirit-filled song is a Christ-centered song. One time, a family visited our church, and we had them over for lunch after. They were telling us what they liked and didn't like about the church, and the wife said that she didn't like that our worship music wasn't Spirit-filled. I asked her to explain what she meant, and she said that it was so dull and boring, and we really needed some guitars and drums to usher the Holy Spirit in. Now, I like guitars and drums as much as the next guy, but music that invokes certain emotional responses inside of us *must not be confused as the work of the Spirit!* YOU could have the best sounding, most emotionally riveting music in the world, but if you aren't singing about Christ and glorifying Him with the words, then it is not Spirit-filled at all! Exalting and glorifying Christ is how you know worship is Spirit-filled, whether that's done with piano, a cappella, or a full praise band, with screens or hymnals, with musical excellence or musical ignorance. All that matters is whether Christ is glorified, in our words and in our hearts. No Christ, no Spirit. But when the Spirit is working and moving, He exalts and glorifies Christ at the center!

So let us be led by the Spirit to exalt and glorify Christ at the center of our hearts and lives in all that we do, Brothers and Sisters. And so it is fitting, isn't it, to conclude our worship service by coming to the Lord's Table, where we exalt and glorify Christ by holding up the visible, tangible symbols of His death as we proclaim the gospel and profess our continued faith in Him, to His glory. If you're a Spirit-filled Christian - that is, if you have been convicted of your sin by the Spirit and are repenting and believing in Christ alone for salvation - then you are welcome to come to the Table with us. And the three signs of the Spirit in your life that we ask to be present are that you believe in your heart, have professed with your mouth through baptism, and are in good standing with a gospel believing church.

If one of those three things doesn't describe you, we would love to discuss it with you after the service. Most importantly, if you are not a believer, and do not have the Holy Spirit present in your life, cry out to the Lord and ask the Spirit to convict you of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and then follow the lead of the Spirit to repent, believe that Christ died and was raised to save you, and praise His glorious grace. Let's now have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Table.