Select Northfield Sermons

by

Robt. E. Speer, H. W. Webb-Peploe,
Andrew Murray, A. J. Gordon
and others

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THE HOLY SPIRIT'S RELATION TO THE CHURCH AND TO THE WORLD.

By the late A. J. Gordon, D. D.


1. A remarkable expression is found in John 7:39. Jesus had just said: "He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." Then it is added: "But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified."

It reads exactly: "The Holy Ghost was not yet." Had not the Spirit been in the world before this?

Turn a moment to consider Jesus Christ. Many lives of Christ have been written, but with one or two exceptions, they all begin at Bethlehem and end at Olivet. Yet was not Jesus Christ in the world before He was born at Bethlehem? Yes, He was "in the beginning with God: all things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made"; and it is believed that He appeared also to prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament dispensation; and we know that after He ascended from Olivet He lived on and will continue to live. Why, then, shut up the life of Christ between Bethlehem and Olivet? Because those represent the limits of His temporal mission, His earthly ministry.

Exactly so the Holy Ghost had been in the world before, acting in creation and inspiring the prophets. Christ had been begotten by the Holy Ghost, and when He was baptized in the Jordan the Holy Spirit as a dove descended and rested upon Him. How, then, could it be said that the "Holy Ghost was not yet," because Jesus Christ had not been glorified? As Jesus Christ had an earthly mission that began at Bethlehem and ended at Olivet, so the Holy Ghost in His turn has a definite temporal ministry or age mission that began at Pentecost, and I believe closes at the second advent of Christ. As the cradle of Bethlehem contained the infant Jesus, so the upper room was the cradle of the infant church. The one was the birthplace of the Head, the other was the birthplace of the body; so that Augustine very rightly calls Pentecost the "dies natalis," the birthday of the Holy Ghost. Then He entered upon His temporal ministry.

What does He do after He comes down?

When Christ ascended the Holy Ghost descended. "If I go away I will send Him unto you." When Christ took His place on God's right hand, His seat in the heavens, then the Holy Ghost took His place in the church, where henceforth He dwells; and as truly as Christ's abiding place is in heaven, through all this dispensation the Holy Ghost's abiding place is in the church. The first thing,
therefore, that He does when He comes down is to begin to gather the church.

Up to this time the church, the body of Christ, did not exist. How is the church formed? In many theological treatises the definition of the church is: "A body of believers voluntarily associated together for the purpose of worship and edification." As well say that my body is a voluntary association of hands, and feet, and ears, and eyes, associated for the purpose of work and locomotion. The fact is that as my body was formed out of a germ, and all stands together in the head, so the church is formed out of Christ. As Eve was taken out of Adam, so the church, the bride of Christ, is taken out of Christ, and when He arises and ascends to the Father, then the Holy Ghost comes down, and as the Word is preached He begins to gather about Himself those who are to constitute the church of Christ.

It is very instructive to notice at this point the "additions" named in the Acts of the Apostles. As soon as Peter had finished his sermon, "they that gladly received His Word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." The words, "unto them," do not belong there. All it says is that they were "added." The translators could not conceive of addition without adding to something, so they put in "unto them." At the end of the chapter we read again: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." But those words "to the church" do not belong there; all that is said is that believers were "added." If we are desirous to know to what they were added read

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a little farther (Acts 5:14): "And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." And in Acts 11:24, "And much people was added unto the Lord.

Ah! that is it. If you put a slip down into the earth, there will be an addition of branch after branch growing out of it. Jesus Christ came down in the person of the Holy Ghost to constitute the center for the church, and as soon as believers were regenerated they became added to Him. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them," said Jesus. We gather about Him and out of Him, and the church is simply the body of Christ.

Not only that, but it takes the same name.

Have you ever thought of that very significant remark of James in Acts 15: "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name"?

If the church is the bride of Christ, the bride must have the same name as her Bridegroom. If the church is the body of Christ, she must have the same name as her Head. It would be strange if my head and my body should bear different names. In some comments on the passage, "The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch," it is held that this name was given in derision. I think not. If you study the use of the Greek word translated "called," you will conclude they were divinely called Christians. God gave them that name. James speaks about rich men oppressing you and blaspheming that "beautiful name by which you are called." Christ is
the head, and the body bears the same name. In I Corinthians 12:12, we read: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.” Paul is speaking about the church.

What solemn and high significance there is in this fact that we, if we are truly regenerate, bear our Lord's name, “The Christ.” One Christ in heaven, another Christ on earth; one the Head, the other the body.

This, then, is what the Holy Ghost is doing in this dispensation. He is simply embodying Himself. Just as Christ became incarnate at His birth, so the Holy Ghost now incarnates Himself in the church, the body of the faithful; and this gathering out will go on until “we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” That is, when the body is complete; then it will be caught up to meet the Head, and the two will be glorified.

What responsibility this puts upon us! Nothing is more dishonoring to Jesus Christ than a church that is apostate and worldly and unconsecrated.

A man died some years ago, a very eminent literary man, who had a magnificent head, lofty-browed and intellectual, but by a sad misfortune he had that head upon a crippled body. He was a dwarf, a hunchback, and you could not look upon him without pity.

“What a splendid head,” you would say, “but alas that it rests upon such an unsightly form.”

Shall Jesus Christ be so dishonored that He shall have a body unsanctified and misshapen, concerning which the angels might exclaim:

“Alas! what a noble Head, but what an ignoble body!”

It becomes us, therefore, as the body of Christ, to understand our destiny, that we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, to shew forth the virtues of Him that hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.” If Christ has any glory in this world, He must have it through the church. The church represents Christ on earth, as He represents it in heaven. After the Holy Ghost has gathered this body, I need not say what all Scripture says, that He inspires it. Henceforth we “live in the Spirit”; “we pray in the Spirit”; “we are led by the Spirit”; everything within the sphere of the body of Christ is under the guidance of the Spirit, which is now the Administrator of the church.

II. THE RELATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THE WORLD.

Jesus Christ gives us this relation in a remarkable passage (John 16: 8-11). “And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.”

I think the impression is quite general that the Holy Ghost, since He came, is in all the world convincing everybody, the evangelized and the unevangelized alike. I do not think this is taught. What does Jesus in this connection? “Whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him.” Mark that
passage, and put with it this: "If I go away I will send Him to you." Put this with: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

He sends the Spirit to the church to bear witness of Christ in order to bring conviction to the world. Jesus Christ has three stages in the work of redemption, and three offices: First, as prophet, second, as priest, and, third, as king. The Holy Ghost is to take the things of Christ and show them unto us, and He has a threelfold conviction corresponding to these offices: He convinces, first, concerning Christ who was crucified; secondly, concerning Christ who has been glorified; thirdly, concerning Christ who is to come again and judge the world.

1. "He shall convince the world of sin."

What is the need of the Holy Spirit coming to convince the world of sin? I have often heard it said that there was no real conviction of sin among men until the Holy Ghost came. I think that missionaries will say that that is not true, that a heathen who never heard of Christ may and does have a tremendous conviction of sin. Notice that God gave conscience first, and gave the Comforter afterward. Conscience bears witness to the law, the Comforter bears witness to Christ. Conscience brings legal conviction, the Comforter brings evangelical conviction. Conscience brings conviction unto condemnation, and the Comforter brings conviction unto justification.

"He shall convince the world of sin, because they believe not in me." That is the special sin about which He convinces. It does not say that He convinces men of sin because they have stolen or lied or committed adul-

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tery; but because they have not believed on Jesus Christ. The coming of the Son of God into the world made a sin possible that was not possible before. Light reveals darkness; it takes whiteness to bring conviction concerning blackness. There are negroes in Central Africa who never dreamed they were black until they saw the face of a white man; and there are many people in this world that never knew they were sinful until they saw the face of Jesus Christ in all its whiteness and purity.

Jesus Christ now stands between us and the law. He has fulfilled the law for us. He has settled all demands of the law, and now whatever claim it had upon us has been transferred to Him, so that it is no longer the sin question, but the Son question, that confronts us. Therefore, the first thing Peter considers when he begins to preach after the Holy Ghost has been sent down is the crucifixion of Christ:

"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

He does not say a word about any other kind of sin. This subject runs all through Peter's preaching; and as he spoke the Holy Ghost came down and convicted men, and they cried out:

"What shall we do?"

We did not have any part in crucifying Christ; therefore what is our sin? It is the same sin in another form. They were convicted because they crucified Christ; we are convicted because we have not believed on Christ crucified. They were convicted because they had despised and re-
jected God's Son. The Holy Ghost convicts us because we have not believed in the despised and rejected One. It is really the same sin in both cases—

THE SIN OF UNBELIEF IN CHRIST.

2. "Of righteousness because I go to my Father and ye shall see me no more."

For many years I have been perplexed at that expression, but the other day its meaning seemed to come to me in a flash. Remember that when the high priest went in within the veil the congregation of Israel stood without, and they could not know that they were accepted of God until the high priest came forth and lifted up his hands in blessing; not only that, but they constantly feared, when they had been particularly sinful, that God would slay the high priest in the holiest of all, when he went in on the great day of the atonement. That is the reason why he wore the bells, so that they could hear the tinkling of them as he moved about, and know that he was alive. In the same way, after Jesus Christ had offered the blood He passed within the veil. See Him on Olivet rising slowly into the heavens, and as the veil closed in upon the high priest as he went into the holiest of all, so a cloud shut in between Jesus Christ and the wondering disciples, and received Him out of sight. If that were all, we should not know until Jesus Christ returns again whether we were accepted of God; but He does not make us wait all those years to know whether we are accepted—He sends the Holy Ghost to tell us. "He shall convince the world of righteousness." Jesus Christ is only declared to

be righteous as He sits down at God's right hand on the throne.

That is God's way of showing us He is righteous. He went to the cross under the contempt and blasphemy and indignation and hatred that were poured on Him; and He went thence down into an ignominious grave. Suppose He had stayed in the grave. Oh, you who talk about that "Ione Syrian grave," what if the Lord had remained in that grave! Listen: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain." Our case is absolutely hopeless if Jesus Christ did not come out of that grave. But God raised Him up and took Him into heaven, and said: "Sit Thou on my right hand;" and all the angels see Him sitting there. Thus, by divine act, God vindicated Him. Christ accepted of the Father is the ground of our acceptance. Therefore listen to Isaiah's passion psalm: "By His knowledge (that is, by knowing Him) shall my righteous servant justify many." God brought Him from the cross, where He had been despised and rejected, and now He is upon the throne. The fact that Jesus Christ is there settles the whole question. The law has not a single accusation to bring: Satan, the accuser of the brethren, has his mouth shut when Jesus Christ is on the throne.

How can we know that He is there and that God has accepted Him, since He is out of sight, until He comes again? The answer, I think, is in these wonderful words: "Of righteousness, because I go to my Father and ye see me no more." "Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise
of the Holy Ghost. He has shed forth this, which ye see and hear." The fact that the Holy Ghost has come down is a proof that Christ is there, since He said that when He reached heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit to us. If your husband is going to England tomorrow and says: "As soon as I reach Liverpool I will write you," when you get a letter from him you know he has arrived. So when the Holy Ghost came down to that upper chamber they knew that Jesus Christ had arrived in heaven. But how do we know it? Acts 5:30-32 gives you a key to the whole question:

"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him."

Why does Christ want two witnesses? The disciples could testify as far as they knew. They could testify that they had seen Him crucified, that He was buried and rose again, and that they had seen Him go into heaven; but there their testimony ended. We want to know that He is at God's right hand. So the Holy Ghost came down and said:

"I was in heaven when He took His seat. I saw Him crowned there. I saw the angels veil their faces before Him. I saw God giving Him His sublime benediction: 'This is My Beloved Son.'"

When the Holy Ghost had seen it He came down to tell us that Jesus Christ was there, so we now have two witnesses, the disciples and the Holy Ghost.

Now, remember, what Jesus said in John 15:26, 27, when He was going away: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of me; and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning."

Here are the two witnesses: the Holy Ghost is to bear witness, and the disciples were to bear witness. They were to tell what they knew, and He was to tell what He alone knew. How wonderfully Scripture harmonizes! Turn to Hebrews 10:14. "For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. And the Holy Ghost also beareth witness to us." Jesus Christ had been made perfectly acceptable to God by one offering—all settled, completed, accomplished. How do we know it? The Spirit came from heaven to attest this fact.

Now you see what is meant by these words: "Of righteousness, because I go to my Father and ye see me no more,"—the Holy Spirit coming to bear witness of my endorsement, my acceptance with the Father, of my being seated at His right hand. Whenever there is any question about our salvation, there is our appeal. Paul says: "Who is he that condemnetteth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." If He is there, then I know where I stand. Where the Surety is seated there I am seated, because I am in Him, because:
I am a member of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones.

"So near, so very near to God, I can not nearer be,
For, in the person of His Son, I am as near as He."

Yet Jesus once said that after His departure they should still see Him: "Yet a little while and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me." How can that be? When the sun goes down, our hemisphere does not see him any more, but the moon sees him all night long while we see him not, and the moon takes the sun's light and throws it down upon us. When the Sun of Righteousness set behind the hill of Olivet the world saw Him no more. But the church, because it is seated in heavenly places in Christ, all the night long sees the Sun and throws the light upon the world through the Holy Ghost. The world received what light it has from the church, and the church receives its light from Jesus Christ.

3. We come to the third point—conviction of judgment.

I wonder how many of you have heard people pray that the Holy Ghost would convince of sin, and of righteousness, and of "judgment to come"? But that is not in the text. What is the judgment of which the Spirit convinces? We are talking here of evangelical conviction. The famous English theologian, Andrew Fuller, said:

"The truths of the gospel are like chain shot; they are all linked together, and when you send one into the mind the others are sure to follow."
are the sons of God. That is, the Spirit bears witness that we are the sons of God and therefore without condemnation, and standing as the Son of God stands in Him complete. That is the witness of the Spirit to the Christian.

Turn now to Romans 2:15, and you read about the heathen. They have not the Holy Ghost, but conscience:

> which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also co-witnessing, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another."

How remarkable is that! Conscience can accuse a man, conscience can excuse a man—but conscience can not justify him. Here is

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSCIENCE AND THE HOLY GHOST.

The Holy Ghost beareth witness in order that He may justify us, give us confidence and boldness of access as we come into the presence of God. Oh, it is a great thought that for us judgment is passed, that we are not to stand before the great white throne on the sin question, though we are to be judged for our works: that instead of being culprits there we shall sit on the judge's bench. "The saints shall judge the world." It makes a great deal of difference whether you are on the bench or in the dock. Jesus Christ puts us not in the culprit's box but on the throne: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne."

Conscience convicts of sin committed, of righteousness impossible, and of judgment impending. The Comforter convicts of sin committed, of righteousness imputed, and of judgment past. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost has been sent to convince us of judgment, not that we may look forward to it with fear and trembling, but that we may look back on it with exultation, saying:

> "When Jesus Christ died on the cross I died with Him. The law can not touch me. I am dead to the law through Jesus Christ."

Now, return to the relation of the Holy Spirit to us as believers. Christ sends us into all the world to preach the gospel: and I believe that every time we preach the Holy Ghost is present to bring home the message to men's hearts. I confess that I am not sure that if I preach on politics, on the tariff, or on the strikes, I have a pledge that the Holy Ghost will bear witness to that teaching. These may be important matters, but the Spirit has been given to bear testimony to Jesus Christ. I have not the sense of His presence in handling these themes, if I ever venture on them; but I often do have when preaching Christ, even in the simplest way—the Holy Ghost co-witnessing and bearing the message home to the hearts and consciences of men.

Now, let me say three things. First, we want more to apprehend that for which we have been apprehended. The blind man doesn't need more light, but more eyes; the deaf man doesn't need more sound but more hearing; and the Christian does not need more of the Spirit but
more of the inspiration (that is, the inbreathing), of the Spirit.

Suppose I go to a man who is sick with the pneumonia, and the nurse says:

“Oh, sir, he needs more air.”

“But the windows are all wide open, my dear woman; he has all the air there is. Do you not see that it is not more air that he wants, but more lungs?”

Now, the Spirit is “spiritus,” the breath of God, the breath of Jesus Christ; and the church is the lungs of Jesus Christ (if I may say it), and you and I are the cells in those lungs, and if the lungs get closed up, you will have a consumptive church, an asthmatic church, a church that is full of weakness and failure, simply because it does not take in more of the Spirit. It is not that you need more of the Holy Ghost, but the Holy Ghost needs more of you.

Secondly, we should abandon the idea that we are to use the Holy Ghost, and accept the thought that the Holy Ghost is to use us. There is a wide distinction between these two conceptions.

I was in the Chicago World’s Fair, and was attracted to a man dressed up in a very gaudy Oriental costume, who was turning with all his might a crank which was attached to a pump from which a great stream of water was pouring out.

I said: “That man is working hard and producing splendid results.”

I came near and to my astonishment found that the man, who, really only wooden, was not turning the crank, but the crank was turning him, and instead of his making that stream of water go, it was making him go.

Many people want to know the secret of power. They hear about Peter preaching that wonderful sermon, and of course they would give anything if they had the ability to preach one sermon and to convert three thousand people. They say to Peter:

“How did you get hold of the power?”

“I did not get hold of the power at all,” he would say; “the power got hold of me.” “We have preached the gospel unto you with” — no, not “with”—if it had been translated correctly, we should learn that instead of Peter using the Spirit, the Spirit uses him; “We have preached the gospel unto you in the power of the Holy Ghost.”

As a wheel dips itself into the river and makes all the cotton factories whirl, so Peter dipped into the Spirit and was swept by the current.

Then, we talk about being “filled with the Spirit,” yet Paul goes beyond that in Ephesians 3: 16. He says, “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with?”—no, “that ye might be filled into all the fulness of God.”

Do you not see the difference? Here are empty vessels. You say, “First get yourself empty and then fill.” I may dip out of the ocean and slowly fill these vessels, but
put an empty vessel into the ocean and it quickly fills itself. This seems to be Paula’s thought.

Archbishop Leithin makes a beautiful comment on the words of Christ: “Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” The Archbishop, lifting up his eyes to heaven, said: “Lord Jesus, it is only a little joy that now enters into us, but by-and-by we shall enter into joy as vessels put into a sea of happiness.”

Cast yourself into the great deeps of the Spirit, then there will be no trouble of getting filled.

We are baptized into the Holy Ghost; we are to walk in the Spirit; we are to pray in the Spirit; and we are to live in the Spirit. More and more what I am teaching becomes the reality of my Christian life. I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe that He is in the church in living power. If you will only let Him, He will do things of which you hardly dream, in the management of the church and the raising of funds, but most especially in the preaching of the gospel. Think of how many things Christ promised: the Spirit was to show us things to come; to bring all things to our remembrance, and in the Epistle to the Romans He has promised to help our infirmities. There is nothing we need that He has not promised to do for us; and His help is to me the most real experience. When we yield ourselves up to Him sometimes there comes into one’s soul just such a suggestion that could not have come from anywhere else except from God through the Holy Ghost.

I give you one illustration. I was preaching one Sunday in my church and it occurred to me to illustrate

what I was saying by an anecdote which I had read long ago, and had quite forgotten until I went into the church that morning. I said:

“Now, sinner, you have been saying in your heart, ‘Oh, preacher, you have been urging me to believe in order to be saved, but I cannot believe; you have told me to accept Christ, I can not accept Him; my faith is so lame, my hands are so weak, that I can not take hold.’”

I continued: “If that is so, just tell Jesus that you can not take hold of Him, and He will take hold of you,” and this story came into my mind:

Prof. Blankie of Edinburgh called upon a student to recite. The student held his book before him in his left hand. The professor said:

“Take your book in your right hand.”

He blushed and stammered, and went on reading, and the professor thundered at him:

“Young man, don’t you know manners? Take your book in your right hand.”

Then the young man lifted up the stump of his right hand and said: “I have no right hand, Professor.”

The class was greatly moved, and the professor came and put his arms around that young man and begged his pardon.

“So,” I said, “if you can not take hold of Jesus Christ, He will take hold of you and lift you up.”

I finished, and a young man in the audience rose, and lifted up the stump of his arm and said:

“I am that very young man.”
I brought him into the pulpit, and with the mutilated right arm he enforced all I had been saying.

How did that illustration happen to flash into my mind that morning? The impression of the truth and force of what I had been saying about being taken hold of when we can not take hold, was tremendous.

May the Holy Spirit help us to understand the Holy Spirit! May He so strengthen us with all might in the inner man that we shall learn that our strength is made perfect in weakness, our sovereignty is made victorious in surrender! Let us yield ourselves unto God the Holy Ghost, and our members instruments of righteousness unto God.