

The Spirit of Love

INTRODUCTION: HANDMAID OF LOVE

We have no difficulty, from Scripture, in showing that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love. Such verses abound as would prove the point, but then verses are as nothing until the very heart of them comes alive to the readers and those uttering them. As we have said, the Holy Spirit, though discrete, does not do 'his own thing', for if he has his own thing it is the 'thing' of the Father and the Son. Thus when we see the statement, 'God is love' in 1 John 4:8 and 16 we know that whilst this is probably the most theological statement of all, yet it needs the Spirit to make it revelation to us, or, to put it even better, we must see what he reveals, for there is no reluctance or inability on his part to make that powerful revelation. The Spirit is the handmaid of love in that he constantly brings to us the love of the Father and of the Son, and in his own love continues to work the loving will of God, for man.

THE SPIRIT'S REVELATION OF LOVE

Revelating the Father

Romans 5:5–10 with 1 John 4:9–10 make it clear that it is at the cross we see the love of God, primarily. As we will again see, the creation was God's act of love, and His providence is continuing love, but that is not seen because man has deliberately blinded his eyes to the nature of God, and especially the nature of God as love. When the cross is revealed, then God's love is revealed. When one knows God is love, then one can see that love in everything, even though previously this had not appeared to be so.

How then is the cross love, and how does the Spirit show that love? In answer, the first thing to be grasped is that even prior to creation God had purposed the cross. Speaking of the precious blood of the Lamb which redeems, 1 Peter 1:19–20 says, 'He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake'; while 2 Timothy 1:9 speaks of 'God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago [from all eternity]'.

Then we must grasp something of the holiness and righteousness of God. His righteousness demands the just punishment of the law. His holiness demands the destruction of our unholiness. He is wrathful only where there is evil, and only because of it, since by nature He is love. It must be His love which somehow takes into itself the judgement of law, and His wrath upon unrighteousness and unholiness. This concept is too difficult for us to understand, and history shows that men have not really grasped the true intent of God but have scorned the cross, either condemning God for allowing His wrath and

judgement to come upon His Son, or refusing that this could be so, and so denuding the cross of its dynamic of grace. They have chosen many theories, some very ingenious, to rationalise that cross. Until we see 'the wrath of love' we do not really see God as love. The love of the cross is that it destroys the guilt of man and sets him free. From the cross flows forgiveness, justification and cleansing. Not one jot of this is deserved by man. Not one tittle can be earned by him. This is the offence of the cross but also the revelation of God as love.

When we understand history, and the labour of the Spirit to train man in the meaning of sacrifice and Israel in understanding the righteousness and holiness of God, and his work in the prophets to bring through the message of the Suffering Servant to come who would also prove to be the Messiah, liberating his people from sin and evil, then we see the love of the Spirit.

Jesus came as the Son of the Father, spelling out true sonship in human terms, and so making God's Fatherhood intelligible. Again, Jesus met the obstacle of men's rejection of God, and the remaking of God in the image they cared to have Him in. Jesus makes it very clear in John chapters 14–16 that it is expedient for him (the Son) to go away, so that the Spirit can come in definitive ministry to revealate him (the Son) so that he can revealate the Father. In fact this is what he did. At Pentecost he came, and so gripped the 120 with the truth that they powerfully communicated 'the wonderful works of God'. At this point the person and ministry of Jesus became clear.

Nor was this all. Galatians 4:4–6 sums up the whole gamut of salvation and adoption. The Son redeems from the law. Men receive sonship (adoption). The Spirit is sent into their hearts crying, 'Abba!' They know the Father. They know He is love. They know because they have been forgiven. It is the Son who dies for their sins, but it is the Father who initiates that death, and it is the Father who forgives sins and justifies men.

Revelating the Son

Studies in Christology show how profound is the person of Christ. His many so-called ‘offices’—such as: Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah, King of Israel, and so forth—require much contemplation. Jesus said of the Spirit, ‘he will take what is mine and declare it to you’. The many statements in the New Testament concerning the love of Christ, for example, 2 Corinthians 5:14, Galatians 2:20 (cf. 1 Pet. 1:8), Ephesians 5:2, are simply words until the Spirit translates the action of Christ into the truth of love which we can understand. As he takes the things of Christ so we begin to understand the brimming love of Christ. We see his love for the Father, and his love for us.

It is in his yearning to die for us, and it is in the depthless suffering he endures to bring us to God. To bear our sins in his body, to take on him the iniquity of the world, to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows, to be made sin for us—these are but statements which are bewildering and unintelligible until the Spirit leads us into the truth of them. This he does, and then we know the Son is love.

The Revelation of Love

Revelator of creation as love

The Spirit is the one who revelates Father and Son. Yet he revelates them as the Father who is love, and the Son who loves; not just as Father and Son. We see their love—each for the other—and we see their love, for us. This is quite stunning. Love, as commonsense tells us, if it is the love the Scriptures speak of, is without degree. John 17 speaks of the mutual love of the Father and the Son, and says that this is the love God has for His people. Hence when the Spirit revelates

love he reveals it through this Father–Son relationship which is primarily understood at the cross.

However, when we go back to creation, and especially when we see its beauty, its order and its essential functions, we can, now, understand the love of the Spirit, as also the love of the Father and the Son. This Triune God sets out to create, and God is a ‘faithful Creator’, that is, He not only ensures that the processes of creation are ‘very good’ and keeps them so, but also He has loved enough to meet man’s need and creation’s need, by the work of redemption through His Son. Nor is that all. Whilst creation is continuous and providence unceasing, He has also planned for the proper consummation of His creation. In this sense He is not a faithful Creator, and Redeemer, and Consummator, but He is ‘faithful Creator’ because inherent in His purposes is that love which will bring it to its ultimate and full perfection.

Revelator of redemption

Again we need to emphasise the Spirit’s persistence in bringing the world to redemption, or, rather, redemption to the world, and then the world to redemption. We can see that through the creation and all of man, through the times of the patriarchs, of Israel, and the times of the prophets, he had been shaping up redemption, preparing the world for ‘the fullness of time’. In Christ he had been working until the hour of the cross. We do not know, precisely, his own work within that cross, for it was primarily the work of the Son. Yet, as we may see, it was also the work of the Father, as God was in Christ ‘reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them’. We cannot dogmatically expound ‘who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God’. The word ‘Spirit’ may need to be spelled with a small ‘s’—spirit—but even so, on what did Christ’s spirit draw if not

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the Spirit, and in what sense was Christ's spirit, as a man, eternal? The exegetes have not yet been able to explain. We know that in some way, and some very deep way, the Spirit was in the work of the cross as in every other work of the man Jesus.

Yet, as we saw, the Spirit had to come in a new, different and epochal way (at Pentecost) to become the Spirit of conviction, of revelation, and of application. It is he who makes the work of the gospel an interior work. He works through the knowing, willing, feeling elements of man to show him the 'deeps of God' and the 'gifts of God', and to evoke repentance and faith, and to aid man into receiving the gift/s of salvation.

We have denied that the Spirit is impassible, in the sense that he does not feel. We have also denied he is passible in the sense that he is the object of any passion. What we do know is that he is the Spirit of love. Romans 8:26f. shows how tenderly and intimately he works in each believer so that the heart of that person is as the mind of that Spirit! What of the deep-seated groans which cannot be uttered? What of the dynamic outpouring through the proclamation of the apostles? What of 1 Corinthians 2:5, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Peter 1:12 and other descriptions of life-changing ministries? Was this without the Spirit? NO! Then every nuance, every strong touch, every exercise of power came from the Spirit, that man might know the living truth of the gospel.

Think too of the *application* of the gospel. Paul's great statement: 'the written code [i.e. the law and its guilt] kills, but *the Spirit gives life*'. This is 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' which has 'set me free from the law of sin and death'. Also, 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'. Who can gauge the revelation of the Father as Father, as 'the Spirit of His Son' takes over the regions of the heart?

Who can gauge the responding love for the Father, and for the Son, once the depths of Calvary are known by the believer? ‘We love, because he first loved us’, cries John. Jesus says of the forgiven prostitute that she has loved much because she has been forgiven much. Who can see or know, or experience forgiveness from mere words? Who makes it real in the depths, but the Holy Spirit?

Revelator of the new creation

In 2 Corinthians 5:16, Paul speaks of a false understanding of others, and a false understanding (previously) of Christ. He infers, ‘This was *after the flesh*’. Now he has a better inference: ‘Let us judge after the Spirit!’ Judge whom? Judge the true believer. Judge him according to the flesh (a human way of thinking) and you will make mistakes. Why? Because, ‘if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation’. We see others differently under the Spirit’s love: ‘love covers a multitude of sins’—love is not suspicious. The love of God has been flooded into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

How has that love been flooded in? The answer is: Love is the natural (evoked) response of man when he sees, acknowledges, and comes under the love of God. This love the Spirit has revealed. This love now takes its natural course, filling up old river beds that had run profoundly dry. Now man loves God, loves his neighbour and loves himself. No psychological urging of him to love himself will get anywhere. Only when he sees how God loves him can he love himself. Only then can he, and will he, love others. The Spirit goes on inhabiting him, and taking him to deeper depths of love.

If the Spirit revelates the new creation *now*, he also revelates what it will be in eternity. First Corinthians 2:6–14 makes this clear. Here the ‘gifts of God’ primarily refer to glorification. They are so stunning as to have no parallel in this world or age.

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Yet the Spirit reveals them, these very deeps of God. What a man will be, that is, his hope, greatly influences what a man now is (1 John 3:1–3). The future keeps coming towards us, powerfully, as we keep moving towards it. What will be is greatly helping what is now.

This, then, is further revelation of the love of God.

THE SPIRIT AND LOVE—AS A WHOLE

The Fruit of the Spirit

John 15 is the great chapter on abiding in Christ and so being fruitful. In this sense the fruit of the Spirit is really the fruit of Christ. If we think in terms of man coming to Christ, then that may be termed ‘fruit’. In Isaiah 53:11 we see the Suffering Servant, and are told that ‘he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied’. Redeemed men are his fruit.

Yet we also grasp from John 15 that true fruitfulness is the expression of our lives. Just as Matthew 5:16 says our works glorify God, so the fruit of our lives glorifies the Father. At the same time the fruit of the Spirit or, better still, the harvest of the Spirit, is that fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22f.). It may seem to be character development—traits which we begin to make habitual in our lives, by some assistance from the Spirit—yet this is not fully the case.

The love of which we speak is the love of which we have spoken, that is the response of love to the gospel of love. The joy of which we speak is the ‘joy of salvation’, and the peace is ‘peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’. So we could go down the line. These are the fruit of grace (cf. Titus

2:11f.). They come to be in us because the Spirit has sown the seed of the gospel which has brought his own harvest of love, joy, peace, and so on.

The Way of Love

This fruit of love with its concomitants is the new way of life. Galatians 3:1–6 speaks of beginning in the Spirit, and implies going on in the Spirit and even being completed in the Spirit. Actually this is the way of love, as we shall see.

In Romans 5:5 we are told that our hearts have been flooded with love by the Spirit who, himself, has been given to us. We assume that if he dwells with us, then the exercise of love will be the norm for believers. Also 1 Peter 1:22 suggests that this is the purpose of the gospel, that we should love one another sincerely, from the heart, and in a fervent manner.

Without here going into the modes of love,¹ we see that the life we live is lived in the Spirit. That is why Paul speaks in the first chapter of Colossians of the love which they (the Colossians) have *to all the brethren*. He says he has heard of their ‘love in the Spirit’. Since the Spirit has been working on God’s age-old pattern of love this is not surprising. Through him Jew, Samaritan and Gentile have come, in practice, into the one body. Each has been caused to cry, ‘Abba!’ so all cry to one another as brother and sister.

So often the Spirit is referred to in terms of love, of unity, and of fellowship. Many miss the basic thrust of 1 Corinthians 12:4–31. Because it has within it one of the few mentions of the gifts, they see it as an exposition of the gifts. In fact it is an exposition of the nature of the unity (love) of the body, and

¹ For a detailed study of love and its modes see LFS no. 1, ‘The Nature and Meaning of Love’ (*Living Faith Studies—vol. 1*).

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really it is about nothing else. Verses 4–8 should be studied closely. Their theme is ‘unity in, and because of, diversity’. There is diversity in gifts, service and working, but they all relate to the unity. The body is one, the members are one. It is the ‘one-ness’ Spirit who has baptised them into the ‘one-ness’ body, and each (and all) has drunk of this ‘one-ness’ Spirit. What can there be, then, but ‘one-ness’? That is, love.

On the way persons have become beguiled by the *means of love*, that is, the gifts. They have made them ends in themselves. Since gifts simply make love concrete and are deeds which meet true needs, they are subsidiary to love itself. Hence the powerful exposition of 1 Corinthians 13. The thrust is this: Gifts without love are empty and a contradiction in terms. Gifts are for love and no other purpose. Love itself is limitless in what it does, bears, believes, hopes and endures. It is never negative, hostile, proud—which some are who see gifts as an end in themselves. One day the gifts will be gone, their interim purpose having been fulfilled. Then love will be seen as the one eternal thing. Whilst in this world love is never apart from faith and hope, it is greater than them.

Paul then suggests that the gifts which edify most (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1–2) should be used. These are closest to love, as the servants of love.

The Goal of Love

The gifts, under the Spirit, are the means of love. Yet love is not aimless. Paul calls it the highest way (1 Cor. 12:31). It is the way to somewhere, it is the mode of something. It has its goal. This is the goal to which the Spirit leads. He leads as we proclaim God’s love to others, as we live it ourselves, as we share it in the family of God’s people, as we evidence the harvest of the Spirit in our lives. Yes, and the thrust of the last

verses of 1 Corinthians 13 is that when the partial has vanished the true and full will be manifested.

First Corinthians 3 speaks of what we do here, and of the laying of eternal material in the building of God's building. Fire will test it, and what is not eternal will be consumed. What is eternal will remain. First Corinthians 13:8 tells us it is love that is eternal.

Looked at from another point of view, only that which is sowed to the Spirit will be there at the end—albeit with its harvest! (Gal. 6:8). In Study 15, 'The Spirit and Eschatology', we will see the ultimate harvest of the Spirit, but in Ephesians we read that it is Christ in whom all things will be united, and in him all things will be filled full. Nevertheless we are asked to maintain 'the unity of the Spirit', that is, to act in accordance with it. It is Christ's fullness which will 'fill all things' (cf. 4:10 and 1:23), but we are to go on being filled with the Spirit. Colossians 1:22 tells us that God will reconcile all things to Himself through the cross.

We mean that in these goals (or, this goal) of God the present operations of love relate to the end consummation of love. The Spirit wishes us to understand that the present life and operations are, in fact, eschatological. Their fruit will be seen at the end and, in a manner of speaking, will contribute to the climax of the end. That is, the present operation of love is both contributory and processive, and not merely a trial run or practice with a view to the ultimate. Having begun in the Spirit we must become mature in the Spirit. That way of maturity is the way of love. That is the burden of the final verses of 1 Corinthians 13.



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CONCLUSION

We have to confess that we have barely touched the edge of this subject—the Spirit and love. Love can be spoken about, but in fact it is a life to be lived. The Spirit can be spoken about, but he is a person to be known, a Lord to be obeyed, a Counsellor from whom to receive wisdom. The one way to grieve (vex) him is to live the negatives of non-love. It is also to go the way contrary to what God has planned for us, namely, the way of redemption. The way of the Spirit, we repeat, is the way of love.