

The Holy Spirit 7

The Background to the Gifts

Before discussing the gifts themselves we need to understand something of what we mean when we use the term 'God'. This is difficult because he is so utterly 'other' than anything else we encounter and is so infinitely greater that as St. Paul says:-

For we know in part. (1 Corinthians 13:9 NKJV)

However, he also says:

What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19-20 NKJV)

God has revealed himself partly, as Paul says, in the work of creation, but also and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless our understanding of him is partial and we have to express that understanding to each other in terms that are identifiable from things already familiar to us. That is to say, we speak of God's right arm being strong and his eye seeing us, but then have to say that because God is Spirit he does not actually have arms or eyes. We use these words rather like scaffolding which is set up to construct a building, but once the building is completed the scaffolding is removed. The problem with that analogy is that, unlike the building which is there for all to see, in defining 'God' we are dealing with abstract descriptions. There is nothing to see.

When we are children, because of the scaffolding of words which are used to explain God, we develop a picture of him as an old man with a long grey beard sitting on a throne - or something

similar. As we grow older we abandon that mental picture, but what do we put in its place? We know that we are not to make any material representation of him:-

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. (Exodus 20:4-5 NKJV)

and we cannot make any meaningful mental representation of him. So what is God like?

One of the most helpful explanations given to me was an almost incidental comment by a lecturer when I was training for ordination. He said "think of God as a verb rather than a noun." Over the years, that has transformed my theology. God is not static, he is always active. I have coined a new verb and say that God is always Godding. It is interesting that when Moses asks God his name he is not given a noun in reply, but a verb - "I AM". In fact that is not the only or necessarily the best translation; it also means, "I will be what I will be". God is always expressing himself. I believe that J.B. Phillips's translation of the opening verses of St. John's gospel is a brilliant flash of illumination:-

At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God and was God. (John 1:1-2 Phillips)

I picture God as incredible energy constantly giving of itself, just as the sun gives out its own energy because of the very nature of what it is. But that illustration has to be corrected by two further truths. First, the sun's energy is not infinite, one day it will fail, whereas God's energy is eternal. Secondly the energy is what we

describe as love - self-giving love, and is therefore personal (because an inanimate object cannot love) and can only be described in human language as 'he' or 'him', in spite of the inadequacy of these words. The inadequacy is not simply that it may imply that God is male - nothing would be gained in our understanding by using 'she' and 'her'; they are equally inadequate to describe someone so utterly other than us - but we have to use verbal scaffolding that conveys a personal supreme being and we have no such pronoun in our language.

This continuous expression of personal self-giving love is active in every realm of the creation. God has a plan for it and is constantly working to implement that plan. When I was a youngster there was a popular song "It's love makes the world go round". I am sure that its author was unaware of the profound theological truth he or she was expressing. The writer to the Hebrews explains the truth I am seeking to convey:-

God... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son... through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power... (Hebrews 1:1-3 NKJV)

This self-expression is going out into all sorts of realms. The physical creation, yes, but it also involves every nation, every family, every person. Each of us stands in the centre of his or her own world and we try to make everything and everyone else, including God, go round us. But God is the centre and whilst I believe he has a deep personal interest in and a plan and purpose for each of our lives, that plan and purpose is part of a greater whole than we can comprehend. Our personal hopes and petitions are dependent for their fulfilment on many other people who are expressing their hopes and petitions which are as self-centred as our own. It is astonishing to me that God is able to answer positively so many of those petitions when so many

different interests are involved; in particular his own. We must return to this when we come to look at the subject of prayer and the Holy Spirit. For the present let us learn the lesson that everything will only work as it is intended when God's will, not ours, is done on earth as it is in heaven (and it is only then that we shall be truly joyful, fulfilled and at peace). How then may we discover this will? We return to a text which we have studied before, but now we come to it from a different perspective.

"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, 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 tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."
(John 16:13-15 NKJV)

We state, using verbal scaffolding, "God said." But how did he speak? God has no body, no mouth; and, anyway, what language did he use? Hebrew? Aramaic? Mediaeval English or modern slang? Surely, God does not use any human language, nor a heavenly one. He just expresses himself and his will. Much research has been given this century to the process of our brains. Do we think in words or in pictures? How does God 'think'? Of course, we need to be careful in trying to transpose into our understanding of God, human thought processes, but if God is upholding all things by the self-giving expression of himself, the word of his power, it would be incredibly wasteful to try to put it all into words. Indeed, even to think like that is to fall into the trap of making him in our image (which is a totally different matter from him making us in his). All we can say is that God has a will (in fact we probably need to say he *is* will just as we have to say he is love rather than he has love) and that because he has to be understood as a verb rather than a noun, that all-embracing will is continually being expressed.

In order to grasp something of the implication of this I find it helpful to compare it to the situation of the airwaves. At this very moment there are countless messages being broadcast all around me. The police; where each individual officer has his own radio contact with headquarters; the ambulance service, the fire brigade, taxi firms, and mobile telephones. Messages are flying all around me. Of course, not only are they all going to different destinations for the benefit of many different people in various situations with totally different needs, they are being transmitted from a very large number of different sources. Imagine, however, that they were all transmitted from just one source. What confusion there would be. The ambulance drivers would hear instructions intended for a taxi driver, the police would hear a proposal of marriage from a love-sick suitor to his girl friend, and there would be chaos. But God is continually expressing himself and therefore his will.

It is Paul who gives us an insight into what is happening on the spiritual airwaves:-

But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 2:9-11 NKJV)

What Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit, being part of the Godhead, understands the will and the purpose of God. He selects the particular areas of that purpose which affect each person, group, nation etc. and reveals them as appropriate. So, the overall purposes of God which would be far too great,

complicated and intricate for us to disentangle and comprehend, are sifted and broken down by the Holy Spirit into bite-size portions and revealed to us. The revelations can be in a variety of ways which we must examine later. It may be through those abilities which are sometimes called the 'word' gifts - the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom or prophecy. Or it may be through a vision or a dream. It is interesting to notice how similar Paul's description of the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the deep things of God, is to Christ's description (in John 16:12ff. quoted above) of the work the Holy Spirit will fulfil in guiding his disciples, when he has returned to heaven. Paul said that the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of God and reveals them to us. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would take of the things which belong to his Father and himself and make them known to his followers.

Let me give an illustration of how it seems that the Holy Spirit works in revealing the deep things of God, from the record of the Baptism of Jesus. All three of the Synoptic Gospels (that is, the first three of the four Gospels, excluding John which has a different aim and ethos about it) mention the Baptism and the details are very similar with one important divergence. Matthew says that a voice from heaven was heard saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17 NKJV) Whereas Mark records the voice as saying, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11 NKJV) and Luke agrees, recording, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22 NKJV)

It is easy to dismiss this discrepancy as an unimportant misreporting on the part of one or other of the evangelists. But what if all are right?

In the first session I argued that although Jesus never ceased to be God in his essential being, he really did become man as we are,

with the limitations of a human body and a human brain. In that case, he would have no memory of who he was. As a baby lying in the manger while the shepherds gazed at him, he would not have had some supernatural ability to reason with an adult intellect "You all think I am a normal baby, but I know that I am God incarnate." Just as, like any other child, he had to learn to speak, so he had to learn to reason. He would have been taught the scriptures (our Old Testament) and learned of the expected hope of Israel - the coming of a Messiah. At some stage his Mother may well have told him of the strange events accompanying his birth with the prophecy that he was to be called Jesus because he would save God's people from their sins; although this is by no means certain, she may not have been eager to see him set out on the road which would cause a sword to pierce her own soul. We are told:-

But His mother kept all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:51 NKJV)

Being sinless, he would have had an unbroken relationship with his Heavenly Father, but only slowly and gradually would it have occurred to him that he was the one who was to be the Messiah. (Note: some may see this way of understanding the ministry of Jesus as denigrating the wonder of his person and ministry on earth. I find it even more wonderful. Having, as part of the Godhead, faced the issue in heaven of being willing to come to earth and live as man with no advantage over all the rest of us, except that he was sinless, to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin; he had to face the same issue all over again, this time as man, with no recollection of his previous decision, and go to the cross. This understanding illuminates the nature of the temptation in the garden of Gethsemane for him to refuse to go through with it.) As he was slowly coming to the realisation that he was to be the Messiah, it would almost certainly have passed through his mind that perhaps he was mistaken.

In order to describe the emotions he must have experienced, forgive me if I recount, humbly, my own emotions when it suddenly dawned on me that God was calling me to offer myself for ordination. I tried to ignore it. I put up every argument I could to convince myself that I was mistaken. I felt totally inadequate. In the end, I gave in very reluctantly and with some trepidation went to see my vicar. To my astonishment, he didn't seem at all surprised and encouraged me. As I gradually mentioned the situation to relatives and friends, the majority of them adopted the attitude, "Why has it taken you so long to see it?" I found this a tremendous encouragement that perhaps I wasn't mistaken or big-headed after all. The approval of the selection board who tested my vocation was the final confirmation I needed that I hadn't been imagining it all. If I felt like that about offering myself for ordination as a priest within just one denomination of the world-wide Church, what must the human Jesus have gone through when he felt that God was calling him to take up the role of the Messiah, to be the Saviour of the whole world? But there was no selection board to confirm that he was right.

As Jesus, now filled with the Holy Spirit comes up out of the water, that Spirit, searching the deep things of God, picks up the deep approval of the Father together with his knowledge of the true relationship between them and reveals to Jesus, "You are not mistaken, God loves you for you are his Son and he delights in what you are doing." The human Jesus needed that confirmation and it would have encouraged him to develop his understanding of what it meant to be God's Son.

On the other hand the crowd standing round would not have known anything about Jesus at that time and to them he was simply one of themselves coming to be baptised by John. They needed to hear the attestation in the form, "This is my beloved

Son who delights me." Probably John himself needed to hear that, because although he had been told that the one on whom he saw the Spirit fall would then baptise others with the Holy Spirit, it would be an added confirmation to have that attestation by the voice from heaven.

Thus God the Father did not put his 'thoughts' into words; rather, the Holy Spirit knowing the very heart of God and what he was continually expressing of himself towards his Son, interprets that expression differently according to the particular needs and circumstances of Jesus and the crowd.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit, to search the depth of the Father and understand what he is doing and then to reveal to each of us individually those aspects of the overall plan which apply to us and which we need to know.