
Word and Spirit

– a theological orientation

Iain Campbell

The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is axiomatic for all Reformed theology. When Paul declared to Timothy that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine” (2 Timothy 3 :16), he clearly set down the parameters within which the people of God must do their thinking. But the profitableness of the Word, he goes on, reaches to reproof, correction and instruction, “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”; as John Stott expresses it, “the profit of Scripture relates to both creed and conduct”.¹ For the formulation of a man’s doctrine, as for the regulation of a man’s life, we come back to the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation, and to Calvin’s principle that “The beginning of religion [is] ...humbly and soberly to submit to God’s word”.²

Of equal moment and importance in Reformed theology has been the emphasis upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God. The mechanistic and consequentialistic theology of the pre-Reformation church gave way before the dynamic theology of Calvin and Luther. The medieval mindset of a fossilised propositionalism bowed before the spiritual wave of new life that precipitated the Reformation, what TF Torrance has described as “a radical shift...from an abstract theology of logically ordered propositions to a lively dynamic theology”.³ This is captured for us by William Cunningham in the following sentence: “Calvin derived his system from the study of the sacred Scriptures, accompanied by the teaching of the divine Spirit”.⁴

Where Reformed theology has been less clear and assertive is on the relationship between these two axioms. How does the dynamic, gospel-age, last-days ministry of the Holy Spirit relate to the written, closed-canon text of sacred Scripture? The need to address this question of the interface between the sufficiency of Scripture and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is seen not least in the wave of Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal thinking which has to such a large extent substituted biblical theology with personal experience. At the other extreme is much of our own experience of doctrinal orthodoxy which knows little of real Holy Spirit power. Lloyd-Jones warns that “Nothing is more dangerous than to put a wedge between the word and the Spirit, to emphasise either one at the expense of the other”.⁵ This is to assert Calvin’s belief that “The Spirit is joined with the word”.⁶ In what sense is this so? What is the sacred union between the living Spirit and the written Word, and how does this interact with our daily experience as believers, theologians and preachers?

Inspiration

The Bible clearly asserts that it is more than an ordinary book. Many human documents have survived from antiquity, but the Scriptures stand in a category of their own. Of the Scripture, Peter says that “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private

interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved (lit. “ferried”) by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21). There is a strong image here of the writers of Scripture being influenced upon in a special way by the Spirit at the point of writing. The Holy Spirit superintended the activity to the extent that the writers, acting freely and responsibly, were borne along by a supernatural ministry. The result was that when they wrote what they wrote in the Scriptures, they were kept free from error. While they may have written many other things, these have not been preserved as their Scripture writings are preserved, nor do they have the quality of infallibility that these sacred writings have.

To talk of biblical criticism may seem to slight the high doctrine of biblical inspiration and infallibility. Yet it is only within the context of the Bible being the inspired Word of God that we can pursue any meaningful study of it. Because of the direct and supernatural activity of the Spirit of God, the Bible is, to use Warfield’s phrase, “an oracular book”⁷ – what it says, God says. The disciplines of scholarly criticism, looking at questions of authorship, source and purpose of the biblical writings, as well as questions relating to the formation of canon and text, bring us face to face with the authentic and immediate self-disclosure of God in human language. At the point of origin, therefore, there is the most intimate connection between the God of the Word and the Word of God.

Illumination

There is more, however. The Holy Spirit not only gave us the Word of God, but He authenticates the revelation by persuading men of its truthfulness. Paul says in Romans 8:7 that “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be”. There is, therefore, an actual resistance in the heart of natural man to the Word of God; an enmity that is reinforced by a spiritual inability to submit to the claims of truth. The same point is made in 1 Corinthians 2:14: “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”.

For us to have an understanding of the truth, therefore, the natural bias of our heart has to be altered. Our natural resistance has to be overcome. Our inability to bow before the truth of God’s Word must be dealt with. It is particularly the provenance of the Holy Spirit to restore this ability, and to make primary attestation of the Word of God to us. The Westminster Confession of Faith captures this for us in its argument that notwithstanding all the evidences that demonstrate the supernatural quality of the Word of God, “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts” (I. I. v). Or, to use John Owen’s words, writing on “The Reason of Faith”, “it is the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to believe the Scripture to be the word of God, or the supernatural, immediate revelation of his mind unto us, and infallibly to evidence it unto our minds, so as that we may spiritually and savingly acquiesce therein”.⁸ This was one of the evidences, for example, of the power of the gospel in Thessalonica, that the gospel came to that city, “not...in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

The Spirit of Promise

There is, however, an even more intimate connection between the Spirit and the Word. Not only did the Spirit's influence and ministry extend to the superintending of the words of revelation – the Spirit Himself was the subject of that very revelation. In other words, as the Spirit spoke *by* the Scriptures, the Scriptures spoke *of* the Spirit.

The reason for the outflowing of the Spirit at Pentecost was, according to Acts 2:16ff, the fulfilling of the prophecy by Joel (2:28-32). As the Spirit of Christ in the prophets spoke beforehand of the glory to follow the sufferings of the Lord (1 Peter 1:11), so there was anticipated the outpouring of the Holy Ghost by the exalted Lord. This Spirit was promised as the Spirit of grace and supplications (Zechariah 12:10), by whom men would look on a pierced Messiah.

So much was this the case that Christ emphasised it as the most positive boon to be enjoyed in the wake of His personal departure to the Father: "It is to your advantage that I go away...if I depart I will send [the Helper] to you" (John 16:7). The coming of the Spirit marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the church – a time of supernatural endowment, testifying to the ascension glory of the risen Lord. The Spirit by whom the word had been given had now come, in fulfilment of the promises of that very word inspired under His influence. The Spirit with which we have been sealed is none other than "the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13).

Regeneration

In the New Testament, the new birth is ascribed both to the Word and the Spirit. Peter says that God's people are born again "not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides for ever" (1 Peter 1:21). At the same time, the act of regeneration is clearly that of the Holy Spirit: "unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Both of these agencies are brought together in 2 Corinthians 3:3, where the Corinthian believers are declared to be "an epistle of Christ...written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart". There is an allusion to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, when the finger of God etched the revelation of His mind and will on the tablets of stone. The writer, the Spirit of God, writes now on the hearts of His people. This was, indeed the essence of the new covenant: God's laws written on the heart and inscribed on the mind (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 10:16). So Thomas Goodwin, the notable Puritan says that "all that Christ did would have profited us nothing, if the Holy Ghost did not come into our hearts and bring all home to us".⁹ The *message* that saves is the message of the gospel, the message of the Bible, with its one great theme of reconciliation. The *power* that saves is the power of the Holy Spirit applying these doctrines with conviction, bringing a knowledge of sin and a sense of the glorious provision of salvation in Jesus Christ.

It is a mistake to think that somehow it is possible to be born again through the influence of the gospel and not have the Holy Spirit. The Bible knows nothing of such a condition. It was on this point that Lloyd-Jones was misunderstood on his distinction between *baptism with the Spirit* and *regeneration* when he asserted with authority "that you can be a believer, that you can have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, and still not be baptised with the Holy

Spirit".¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones went on to accuse anyone who asserted that regeneration is to be identified with baptism with the Spirit as "flying in the face of Scripture".

Yet Scripture shows that the Christian has been empowered for service and consecrated to Christ through an act of Holy Spirit baptism. This is, by definition, what the Christian life is about. To be sure, there must be ongoing obedience to the Word of God, growth in grace and knowledge. But at no point can a Christian be not baptised with the Spirit. This was the very contrast between John the Baptist's ministry and that of Christ: according to John 1:33 the One who sent John to baptise with water, Himself would baptise with the Holy Spirit. This was fundamental and definitive.

This is not to downplay the New Testament warnings against grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit of God. Ephesians 4:30 contains the statement that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit of God, and counsels us against grieving the Spirit. In context, Paul is pressing home the need for resistance of the devil and reformation of life on the part of the child of God. The more we lose of the Spirit's influence, the more exposed we will be to the "wiles of the devil". There must be progress, with growth in knowledge, in holiness and in purity. That means development in exposure to the truth claims of God's law. We live now in the Spirit, and must walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

In the great manifesto of Christian liberty, in Romans 8, Paul deals with this whole matter of the new life of the child of God, no longer carnally minded, but spiritually minded; no longer in bondage but at liberty; no longer under condemnation, but justified freely by grace. New life in the Spirit means walking a new road, a new way. And in Romans 8:4 Paul specifically ties the leading of the Spirit, and the impulse of the spiritual life, to the requirements of God's Word. Grace came into our souls, he says, so that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit".

In the first instance, Paul is insisting that for all those who are spiritually minded, the highest claims of God's holy law have been met and vindicated by the self-giving of Christ. But at the same time, those of whom this is true are freed from the condemnation of the law in order to serve God, after Christ's example, by willing obedience to the law's demands. As Charles Hodge expresses it, "The gospel is not antinomian...Holiness is the fruit and evidence of reconciliation with God".¹¹ Holiness, life in the Spirit, cannot be divorced from "the righteousness of the law". "Our Lord did not keep that law that his people might be lawless...His obedience provided no licence for our disobedience...The 'righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us' when we 'walk after the Spirit' in lowly conformity to Christ's example".¹² And as John Murray points out, "by the operations of grace there is no antinomy between the law as demanding and the Holy Spirit as energising",¹³ those who are filled with the Holy Spirit of God are Christlike, and are empowered to demonstrate the reality of their profession by a holy, consistent walk with God that delights in God's law and in honouring God's Word. The only way we can truly "keep in step with the Spirit", as Galatians 5:16 demands of us, is by being filled the more with a knowledge of the truth of God's Word, the right way, in which there is peace for our souls.

Guidance and Assurance

The sons of God, according to Romans 8:14, are "led" by the Spirit of God. They

are guided and conducted by the God who promised to lead his people in ways they had not known, to make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight (cf. Isaiah 42: 16). The children of God are not alone in this world. They know that their Heavenly Father has ordained all things for them, and will work all things together for their good.

But these great assertions of the Spirit's leading will not always clarify for the believer in any given situation the course or direction which he must take. Decisions must be taken. Choices must be made. How does the spiritual man know the mind of the Spirit on matters of personal choice?

There are several principles which must apply in every area of life. **First, the Holy Spirit will never contradict himself.** Paul applies this principle with ruthless logic in his treatment of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14, especially v32: "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets". Every spiritual gift must be assessed in the light of Scripture. We must exegete Acts in the light of Ephesians, and not the other way round. Pentecost was definitive, not normative. The ongoing work of the Spirit in the lives of God's people requires no new Pentecost but a continued filling and empowering. And the Holy Spirit in us will not contradict the Holy Spirit in Scripture.

In other words, the claim of some Christian sportsmen, for example, that God has given them guidance to play sport on His day, stands in marked opposition to the law and word of God. Does the Spirit bend the rules? Not at all – He speaks with a unified voice. He will give no guidance that will offer a concession over a Scriptural principle of doctrine or morality.

Second, the Holy Spirit will never cross Christ's path. In Him there is no un-Christlikeness. His work is to renew the image of Christ in the souls of God's people. All that there is in Christ of devotion to God, dependence upon God, purity and spotlessness of character, holy love and holy anger combined, sympathy and intercession, will be reflected in those who are guided by the Spirit of God.

Clearly, every circumstance that confronts the Christian is to be weighed up in the light of God's Providence, our own gifts and our usefulness to the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit will guide, but He never promises to give us signposts in the sky that clarify the guidance beyond all doubt. There is often a balance to be struck between looking for clear signs of spiritual guidance and using our own common sense, trusting that the Lord will keep us and bless us. The two extremes that are to be avoided are a view of guidance that relies on secret, personal promptings from the Spirit with no reference to the Bible at all and, on the other hand, a biblicist view of guidance that leaves no room for the working of the Spirit on a man's mind and will, planting desires and creating interests that will lead a man's life in a particular direction.

Similarly, with assurance of our salvation, the promise is that the Holy Spirit will testify, or bear witness to, our spirits that we are God's children (Romans 8:16). At the same time, we have to search the Scriptures to find Christ in them (John 5:39), and to "buy Christ in the covenant", to "work out our own salvation" (Philippians 2:12). With assurance of salvation comes Holy Spirit joy and peace, which describes the effect of the Gospel in 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6: "our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance...and you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit".

In Thessalonica, evidently, the phenomenon which occurred was this: Paul and his companions preached the Word, the Christ-centred, God-glorifying, salvation-displaying, Satan-threatening gospel, and the Spirit whose word it was accompanied it with power, assurance and joy. The Thessalonians embraced the truth claims of the gospel by the Spirit, persevered against opposition and in affliction by the Spirit, and knew in the depth of their hearts, through the ministry of the same Spirit, that they were indeed the people of God.

Whatever Paul means when he says that the Holy Spirit ministers with our spirits, he is talking of something deeply personal, and deeply moving. He is talking not of Christians who are alive *on* their feelings, but *in* their feelings. The tragedy with much modern Charismatic excess is that it leaves Christians often relying on feelings of exuberance, joy and satisfaction, plunging them into despair when the momentum cannot be kept up. The tragedy with much of our dead orthodoxy is that we are so often doctrinally precise and Biblically based that we leave no room for the stirring of the heart by the application of truth in the hands of the Holy Spirit of God.

The Puritans, as Leland Ryken observes, believed in “the *affective* power of the Bible”.¹⁴ Ryken quotes John Bunyan who discovered “his soul and Scripture .. to embrace each other, and a sweet correspondency and agreement between them”. The common factor in this sweet agreement is the Holy Spirit, taking of Christ’s things and revealing them to His people. So Thomas Brooks, in his treatise on assurance, *Heaven on Earth*, describes assurance as “a pearl that most want, a crown that few wear”, and defines it as “a sensible feeling and an experimental discerning of a man’s being in a state of grace, and of his having a right to a crown of glory; and this rises from the seeing in himself the special, peculiar and distinguishing graces of Christ, in the light of the Spirit of Christ, or from the testimony and report of the Spirit of God”.¹⁵

The Puritan treatment of assurance is dealt with thoroughly by Sinclair Ferguson in his *John Owen and the Christian Life*, (pp. 116-124). He quotes from Owen who made the important point that “it is indeed not any act of the Spirit in us that is the ground of our assurance, but the communication of the Spirit unto us”,¹⁶ by way of removing, as Ferguson puts it, “the suggestion of any theology of subsequence from his doctrine of the Christian life, without destroying the element of progression and development in experience of God”.¹⁷ Prof. Ferguson also refers to Thomas Goodwin’s distinction between assurance that is *discursive* and assurance that is *intuitive*, the former being assurance gathered from the effects of grace working through faith in the heart, and the latter being, in Goodwin’s own words, “light that cometh and overpowereth a man’s soul, and assureth him that God is his and he is God’s, and that God loveth him from everlasting”.¹⁸

The Puritans, experts in *felt* religion, have much to say to us in these areas. The Word of God comes not in word only. It is a living word, vibrant and affective. It kindles a fire by the power of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the child of God. There is life and spiritual movement. Richard Sibbes expresses it thus: “Those that have the Spirit of God are full of act and vigour...if a man have the Spirit of God in him, it will work in him; it is very operative”.¹⁹ Sibbes demonstrates the practical meaning of this by saying that “no man is ever spiritual but they are readers, and hearers, and conferrers of good things, and attenders upon the means of salvation, because God will work by his own tools and instruments”.²⁰

Revival

A final area of importance is that of revival, a subject much discussed and much misunderstood at the present time. There is no doubt that the church of Christ requires more than anything else in these days, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God in gospel blessing and in reviving power. Habakkuk prayed “O Lord, revive thy work.” (Hab. 3:2), and it is always the great prayer of the people of God.

The church experiences revival blessing at the interface of the power of the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit of God. The Word is always powerful, living and sharp whenever it is preached, never going forth without accomplishing God’s purpose (Isaiah 55:11). The Holy Spirit is always present with His people, blessing and encouraging them as they fulfil the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). But at times of special blessing the measure of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence is enlarged, and the gospel net drags many more fish into the kingdom than is usually the case.

There are two principles here. The first is that with the coming of the Holy Spirit, great attention is given in revival to the doctrines of the truth. There is evidence both ancient and modern that this is so. In his thoughts on the revival in New England, for example, Jonathan Edwards wrote that following the “strange alteration” in the manners and lifestyles of people with the coming of the Spirit, “through the greatest part of New England, the holy Bible is in much greater esteem and use than before. The great things contained in it are much more regarded, the subjects of meditation and conversation...Multitudes in New England have lately been brought to a new and great conviction of the truth and certainty of the things of the gospel...that the great doctrines of the gospel...are matters of undoubted truth”.²¹ Similarly, Rev. Murdo Macaulay, writing of the revival in the Isle of Lewis in 1934, states that the central observable fact during this period of spiritual awakening was a thirst for the Word of God, with no concession being made from the pulpit to “the stirred feelings of the listeners”.²²

Likewise the singular effect of the renewing, reviving times at the Reformation and during the Puritan movement was a desire to give men the Bible. Calvin insisted that the Spirit was promised “not to reveal a new doctrine, but to impress the truth of the Gospel on our minds”.²³ From this conviction sprang his labours on behalf of the common people and their right to the Bible, “to effect that these true Scriptural doctrines should be extensively disseminated...The Lord did this by His Spirit at the era of the Reformation, and He employed in doing it the instrumentality of the Reformers”.²⁴

In other words, the new outpourings of the Holy Spirit which we call revival, are not new revelations, or necessarily new insights, but the empowering of the old gospel message contained in the all-sufficient Scripture. The *locus* of the Holy Spirit is to be found in the doctrines of grace and their application to individuals; the *focus* of the Holy Spirit is the Lord Jesus Christ, in His glory and power to save. It is quite erroneous to regard religious phenomena as evidence of spiritual revival. The one distinguishing feature of genuine outpourings of grace is the exaltation of the Christ of the Scriptures.

The corollary is this: that revival can only be precipitated and preceded by the faithful exposition of truth. Calvin could speak in his day of there being “a great dispute as to the efficacy of the ministry”.²⁵ His words could be echoed today, when all around us we see gospel concerts, evangelistic crusades and celebrity gospel rallies displacing

the centrality of the ministry of the church. But every gospel minister is Christ's gift to His church (Ephesians 4:8-16), and as such we must realise that "God, the author of preaching, connects his Spirit with it..."²⁶ We are to labour faithfully, in word and doctrine, exalting Christ in the proclamation of the everlasting gospel, with the assurance that the Spirit will bless that gospel to men and women. We can neither call down the revival blessing nor engineer its advent. But we must proclaim Christ, showing Him to men as He is shown to us in the Word, and praying that the Lord will bless that message by the power and effect of His own Holy Spirit. For it is, as Wayne Grudem reminds us, "important that all our ministry be done *in the Holy Spirit...in an atmosphere of God's manifested presence*. That is why people in the New Testament can walk in the comfort of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31), and why it is possible just to be 'in the Spirit', as John was on the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10, cf.4:2)".²⁷

References

- ¹ JRW Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, London: IVP, 1973, p. 103
- ² Quoted in G. Miller *Calvin's Wisdom*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1992, p. 22
- ³ TF Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996, p. 3
- ⁴ W Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1862, p. 341
- ⁵ DM Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable*, Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1995, p. 105
- ⁶ John Calvin, Commentary on Isaiah 59:1
- ⁷ BB Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, USA: Presbyterian and Reformed, p. 106
- ⁸ J Owen, *Works*, Vol IV, London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1852, p. 15
- ⁹ T Goodwin, *Works*, Vol VI, Edinburgh: James Nicoll, 1863, p.15
- ¹⁰ DM Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable*, p.23
- ¹¹ John Calvin, Commentary, ad. loc.
- ¹² O Winslow, *No Condemnation in Christ Jesus*, reprint 1993, p.51
- ¹³ John Calvin, Commentary, ad. loc
- ¹⁴ *Worldly Saints*, Zondervan, Michigan, 1986, p. 152
- ¹⁵ *Heaven on Earth*, Banner of Truth edition, 1982, p. 14
- ¹⁶ op. cit., p.122
- ¹⁷ op. cit., p. 123
- ¹⁸ T Goodwin, *Works*, Vol 1, p. 233
- ¹⁹ Richard Sibbes, "The Excellency of the Gospel above the Law" in *Works*, Vol IV, p. 213
- ²⁰ op.cit., p. 215
- ²¹ T Goodwin, *Works*, Vol 1, p. 374
- ²² M Macaulay, *The Burning Bush in Carlaway*, 1984, p. 32
- ²³ Quoted in G Miller, *Calvin's Wisdom*, p.24
- ²⁴ W Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 6
- ²⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.6
- ²⁶ *ibid.*
- ²⁷ W Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Leicester: IVP, p. 648

Rev. Iain D Campbell MA, BD is minister of Back Free Church, Lewis and editor of The Monthly Record
