

The Holy Spirit and God's Plan (1)

Introduction

KNOWING THE SPIRIT BY HIS WORK

God has always been the God of action or, as some have said, 'God is pure action'. It is not possible to conceive of God without action, and indeed without incessant action. In any case we generally learn of a person from his acts, especially when those acts are true and not merely simulated or deceptive. The Scriptures contain the account of God's acts. Through them we come to know *the kind of God He is*.

When we tabulate, from the Scriptures: (i) the plan of God as we see it in acts, in prediction, and in fulfilment; and (ii) the participation of the Spirit in this plan, then we come to know much of the Spirit's person and work. However, to this point we have assumed that God has a plan, and now we need to see that indeed Scripture tells us of this plan, and shows to us much concerning the intention of God, His predictions of the same and the fulfilment, at least to our time in history, of that plan. We would expect prediction of its end and fulfilment as also

indications that this is in the process of happening. This is precisely what the Scriptures tell us.

THE PLAN OF GOD

Biblical history¹ would be incomprehensible in the light of the nature of God, if it commenced somewhere only to go nowhere in particular. The creation of man was followed by his fall. In Genesis 3 we see the punishment of the man and the woman, and the exclusion of the human race from paradise. Man had been offered access to the tree of life, but had neglected to use it, choosing instead the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The statement of Genesis 3:15 was prophetic and predicted the defeat of the serpent by the seed of woman. This indicated some plan in history.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis prepare the reader for the remainder of the book which has to do primarily with the Abrahamic covenant, and the selective manner in which his seed is chosen to bear the covenantal promise, until the tribes of Israel are formed. The books Exodus to Joshua show the working out of God's purposes for those tribes. Likewise the prophetic books from Joshua to Nehemiah indicate the wider plan of God for Israel. Israel in exile hears its prophets predict a return to their land, and this happens. A second temple is built, the sacrifices renewed, and Israel seems set for the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant which, beyond the covenant given to Moses, is a covenant of grace. This, in fact, does not happen. Israel is constantly ravaged and brought under the domination of militant nations, even up to the times

¹ Biblical history is dealt with in full detail in my book *Salvation History* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2008).

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of the New Testament when she is part of the great Roman Empire.

With the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus, Israel should fulfil the prophecies and be a great nation at peace, living in righteousness and prosperity. For the most part the Jews did not recognise Jesus as their Messiah, but officially denounced him as a blasphemer and an impostor. Hence they judged and crucified him. Whilst his followers claimed he was proved to be the Son of God (Messiah) by resurrection from the dead, this was never officially received by the nation. However, Christianity began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The church began. A new era commenced, but again it was not recognised by the Sanhedrin, the official body of Jewish leaders. At the best, Christianity was tolerated as a curious sect. At the worst it was heavily persecuted from time to time by the Jews.

It is in the New Testament that the prophetic writings flower. It is in them that the plan of God is discussed, its outworking rationalised, and further predictions added. This is a study all of its own. The reason we mention it here is that the New Testament rounds off the Old Testament in the following manner:

- It claims that the Old Testament prophets spoke of the Messiah to come and that these predictions referred to Jesus (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12). The book of Acts is studded with claims that they, the preachers, proclaimed only what the prophets predicted, the very things Jesus fulfilled.
- Since the prophetic predictions were fulfilled, then Jesus was the Messiah of the kingdom of God. They proclaim him and his Gospel so that men, especially Jews, must have repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ.

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- They claim that God's plan, sealed in its intention by the cross, resurrection and ascension, is to be consummated at the end of the present age. This will be by the *parousia* or appearing of Jesus. The same end events as predicted in the Old Testament prophecies concerning 'the last day' or 'the day of the Lord' will be fulfilled.

Ephesians 1:4–14 speak of God's plan for his elect people. This must necessarily relate to the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gal. 3), for this covenant involves not just the people of Israel but all the nations of the world. Acts 3:21 speaks of Jesus being held in the heavens 'until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old'. Revelation 10:1–7 speak of God shortly fulfilling 'the mystery' (i.e. the plan) which He had announced to His servants the prophets. Amos 3:7 has it, 'Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets'. From this we conclude that: (i) there was the plan of God; (ii) He revealed what needed to be known of this plan to man, by His prophets; and (iii) His intention for history has been being fulfilled, and ultimately will find its final and ultimate completion.

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Doubtless the portion of the plan which most intimately concerns us is our own salvation, sanctification and ultimate glorification. Hence we most easily relate to the Spirit in these areas, particularly where his ministry would touch us personally. Nevertheless it is good for us to see His work, as is often said, holistically. Many treatments of Scripture have divided the Bible into epochs or dispensations. Doubtless there are such, but in every epoch it is the same Spirit, as it is also the

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same Father and Son. Some treatments see these epochs atomistically and not holistically. We should see them as integral parts of the whole of salvation history.² What we are really saying is that we have the same Spirit operating in every epoch and with the same aim or goal or plan in mind. This does not mean that he does the same thing in every age, for each epoch is a further instalment of the plan of God. It is just that we must not see any epoch as a failure on God's part, or a new epoch as a revision of His plan. Nothing He does is ever an expedient to meet a contingency.

When we see the work of the epochs holistically this helps us to understand what God is about in each age, and to better understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In fact it is difficult for us to truly understand the Spirit apart from his agency in the plan and work of God from creation to the end time.

THE SPIRIT AND CREATION

Without doubt, as we have seen, the Spirit is present at creation (Gen. 1:2). When he moves across the face of the waters it is not as a bird broods over its egg for he has nothing to hatch out!

It is out of the chaos that he brings form and order, purpose and beauty. This is paralleled by the doctrine of spiritual new birth or re-birth as seen in John 3:3ff. Out of the inchoate and disordered chaos of the fallen man comes the new, true

² When we say 'salvation history' we do not mean there are two histories, one 'secular' and one 'religious'. There is only one history—God's action, His plan working out for the salvation of His elect. All history is salvation history, but since few see it that way there are other rationalisations of history. Hence we designate salvation history to distinguish it from secular understanding.

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creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). In 2 Corinthians 4:6, God said: 'Let light shine *out* of darkness', that is, not *on* it, or *into* it. The Spirit then is the Spirit of creation, form and order. Hence in Job 26:13, 'By his [*ruach*] the heavens were made fair', and Psalm 33:6, we have the commanding word—to make both the heavens and 'all their host by the [*ruach*] of his mouth'.

Further, in Psalm 104:29–30, the *ruach* from God is the principle of life. The animal creatures die when it is removed. The writer says, 'When thou sendest forth thy Spirit [*ruach*], they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground'. Doubtless he is speaking of the initial creation, but also of creation continued and sustained. The New Testament passages such as John 1:1–4, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Colossians 1:15–17, and Hebrews 1:2–3 speak of all creation as created for God and contingent for its true and continued being upon Him. Also at the same time the Son upholds creation by 'his word of power', and 'in him all things hold together [subsist]'. Here the Spirit is the creative Spirit of life.

This is seen in Genesis 2:7 when God breathes into man. He breathes not the *ruach* of life, but the *neshemah* of life, and man becomes 'a living being'. This is taken to mean the Spirit comes to him and gives him true being. This is not simply animated clay, but spiritual being.³

We say this because to think of the Spirit being the agent in creation, and not to understand *the nature of that creation*, is to miss the nature of God as Father, as Eternal Son, and as Holy Spirit (cf. Ps. 19:1ff.; Rom. 1:19–20). This 'living being'

³ See A. B. Come's detailed and powerful treatment in his book, *Human Spirit and Holy Spirit*, (Wesminster Pr., Philadelphia, 1959). He maintains against monistic, bipartite, and tripartite theories that man is truly spirit, as man who is contingent upon God who is essentially Spirit.

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compasses the whole variety, capacity and ability of man as a human creature in relationship with God.

The renewing creative powers of the Spirit we have seen in Psalm 104:30. They are also pointed out in Isaiah 32:15 and context, but it is in Ezekiel 36 that the new Spirit points to the miracle of the ‘new heart’ or, as Jesus put it, being ‘born anew’. Likewise in Ezekiel 37 the *ruach* of God comes to bring national renewal. He comes as the wind, similarly to his operation at creation and, later, at Pentecost. Hence to call him ‘the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ may mean he is the Spirit of life, or he is the Spirit of life in Christ, but then 2 Corinthians 3:6 speaks of (the guilt of) the law bringing death, but the Spirit giving life, a thought repeated in Romans 7:6. When, then, we understand that the Spirit is the great creative power, we are awed and astonished that he is present to every detail of creation, giving it initial life and sustaining it in life. The gift of redemptive life by the agency of the Spirit is doubtless connected with creation, but we will speak of it elsewhere.

THE SPIRIT AND ANTEDILUVIAN MAN

If our claim is correct—that man as created is a creature of spirit—then we must accept that his fall brought a difference to him. He died, particularly in relationship to God, and so to himself and to the woman (his neighbour). This does not mean he did not remain a spiritual being, but in this case a contradiction of that true spiritual being, a perverse spiritual being and, from God’s point of view, dead (Gen. 2:17). What is interesting to note is that one son ‘was of the evil one’ and the other, a righteous man, in fact a prophet (1 John 3:12; Heb. 11:4; Luke 11:50–51). Cain is omitted from the ‘generations of Adam’, Seth being the substitute for Abel (Gen. 4:25–5:4).

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We draw the conclusion, then, that through grace men like Abel and Enoch (for example) were true men of the Spirit (cf. Gen. 5:21–24; Jude 14), being prophets (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2 Pet. 1:21).

When we come to Genesis 6:1–3 it seems that the godly line of Seth and the ungodly line of Cain ('sons of God and daughters of men') are now joined, and such evil takes place as can be called 'evil with a high hand', that is, the evil of presumption. At this point God changes His pattern of the use of His *ruach*. Genesis 6:3 can mean a number of things, but generally it appears to mean that man has forsaken his creative being of spirit, and has become flesh. This is a perversion of his true created being. For this God will judge, or abandon him, even though 120 years will elapse in which Noah will proclaim the truth of God (cf. 2 Pet. 2:5). We assume then that, despite the fall, the Spirit worked not only in his capacity of creative and sustaining Spirit, but also with man to give him the powers of true spiritual being. The flood came as judgement upon sinful man. Only Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. He, of all, must have been a man of the Spirit.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD AND THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

The first covenant of grace is given, through Noah, to mankind. Judgement in the nature of the flood will not again come to man, no matter how deeply he sins (Gen. 8:21–22). The normal rhythm of creation will proceed uninterrupted by this kind of judgement. Man, then, sees what grace is. Nevertheless a covenant of (grace) blessing is not given universally until God appears to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1ff.; Acts 7:2ff.).

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It is clear from Genesis 10 and 11 that man does not intend to obey the creational mandate (Gen. 1:28ff.), not even in its post-flood form (Gen. 9:1–7). Nimrod disobeys it, and the men of Babel spurn it. Yet God appears to Abraham.

In the text of Genesis we have no explicit reference to Abraham and the Spirit. However Galatians 3 and 4 speak not only of Abraham being justified (Gen. 15:6) but his son Isaac was born of the Spirit and not, like Ishmael, of the flesh. If Isaac, the heir of the Abrahamic promise, is a man of the Spirit so, even more, is Abraham. Even Sarah seems included in this as ‘the free woman’. Abraham, of course, is known as a prophet (Gen. 20:7), as prophets are, in some sense, men of the Spirit, as we have seen. Jacob, Isaac’s son, is also a prophet, as Genesis 49 well shows (see v. 10). Of his son, Joseph, Pharaoh asks, ‘Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the Spirit of God?’ We take it then that the Spirit moved amongst these (covenantal) patriarchs, and of course this fact is pointed out in Hebrews 1:1.

Later we will see that the covenant which was given to Abraham, although for an epoch confined, so to speak, within the Mosaic covenant, eventually flowers out (in accordance with the prophecies) into the new covenant, which is the covenant of universal blessing, embracing both Jew and Gentile. For the moment, however, we need to examine the Spirit and the Mosaic covenant.

THE SPIRIT AND THE MOSAIC COVENANT

As we examine these epochs we should see them as forward-moving steps within the plan of God, and not endeavours upon the part of God to rectify regrettable errors and rebellion on the part of man, and even His own chosen people. We will

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see then, that the Spirit was doing that work which would build towards the ultimate intention God had for His creation.

Moses is depicted as a man of the Spirit. Not only does God appear to him personally and speak with him in a unique way, which other prophets did not experience (Num. 12:6–8; cf. Deut. 18:15ff.), but also it is explicitly stated that Moses was a man of the Spirit (cf. Num. 11:16–29). In another sense others are equipped with the Spirit for special artisan's works. This we see in Exodus 28:3, and 31:1ff. Under Moses the seventy elders have the Spirit come upon them (Num. 11:16ff.). Joshua is also a man of the Spirit (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9). Later we see explicit happenings of the Spirit coming upon the men whom God appointed as judges in Israel. See the book of Judges for this.

In Isaiah 63:10–14 we see that the Holy Spirit was present with Israel in the exodus from Egypt to Canaan. In the book of Judges (see 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14) we see the Spirit move on such men as Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. This is to teach, rebuke and save the people of Israel. In Haggai 2:4–6, God speaks to Zerubbabel and Joshua—the prince and priest of His people—telling them to be courageous. He says, 'My Spirit abides among you; fear not'. The sense could be, 'My Spirit has always been among you, even in exile, and he is here now, and will so remain'. We know from the prophecy of Ezekiel that the glory of the Lord left Israel at the exile, and yet we are also to understand that God never left His people. The prophecy of Ezekiel 36:24–28 was intended to convey, along with Ezekiel 37:1–14, that God would renew His people in the Spirit, and wonderfully beyond anything they had ever known.

It is when we come to the prophets, as we shall see in our next section, that the Spirit is seen not only to be in Israel, ministering through the prophets, but also through the prophets making promises so wonderful as to be almost inconceivable.

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All of these relate to Israel, and to the kingdom of God. In fact the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Israel appear to be identical in the prophetic teaching and predictions.