



The Holy Spirit and the World

In the days following Pentecost we sit down and think about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work is multi-faceted. I would like to draw your attention to one particular aspect of the work of the Spirit that too often does not get enough consideration. The Holy Spirit is also the prosecutor of the world to aid the congregation in the world. And in this role as Prosecutor the Spirit involves the congregation and puts it to work.

Matters are coming to a head

Jesus speaks about the work of the Spirit in relation to the world in John 16:8-11.

⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

Here we clearly see the convicting work of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. This work of convicting does not apply to the church but to the *world*. I am sure there is also an aspect of the Spirit convicting the church. We know that the Spirit teaches and witnesses and the Spirit makes believers to bear witness. We have the witness of the Holy Spirit with the spirit of the children of God (Romans 8:16). This witness relates to the certainty of being God's child.

But in this passage from John 16, Jesus draws our attention to the Prosecutor's work of the Spirit *in the world*. The Holy Spirit is also called the Comforter, a good translation of the word Paraclete in the original language. But we should not limit the meaning of the word Comforter. There is also the aspect of the Spirit as prosecutor. In this world the Spirit pleads the case of the Lord Jesus Christ as if he were not only Christ's defense lawyer but also that of Christ's church in this world. Ever since Pentecost matters have come to a head. Being neutral is no longer possible. Come to think of it, matters already came to a head in the world and in the life of every person since the fall into sin in the first paradise. When it comes to God and his great works, being neutral has never been an option; but the coming of the Holy Spirit created a new, even more focused dimension to this reality.

Jesus Christ has completed his self-sacrificial task and has now received the name above all names. No person can ignore him. Whoever tries to ignore him will find out, one day, that he made a serious error based on a sinful choice. This world is now under judgment.

We have to be made aware that the New Testament speaks in many places about the judgment over this world. But as long as this earth exists, it is imperative and the most important task that the gospel is proclaimed and that people throughout the world get to hear the rich name of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus' name is the only name given to mankind by which it can be saved. The judgment that is coming over the world these days is directly related to the decisive judgment on the last day.

The guilt of the world

As the Spirit convicts the world he provides proof of its guilt and proof that its neutrality has disappeared. The rejection is revealed as saying "no", as enmity, and as guilt. God does not give up on his right of ownership of the world and mankind. The world appears to claim its own right – the right to have a life without God. But God also reveals his claim of ownership of the world and

the people. He makes it known that the world is indebted to him. That is precisely the work of the Spirit: convincing the world that it is indebted to him. Jesus Christ went to heaven, but the Spirit returned on his behalf and as advocate of Christ in this world. It is the world that is the accused party, and in this case there will be no pardon for this world. The sin of this world is that it does not believe in Jesus Christ. That is the case, and the only case, to be tried. Unbelief is revealed as being the worst and very last sin. Man is not doomed or forced to be a non-believer. Unbelief is not a fate that hits him. Instead, it is a matter of choice – a reaction and response to the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Man opts for, and chooses, unbelief.

Involvement of the church.

In his task of convicting the world, the Spirit involves the church. The Spirit convinces the world by means of the church. The very fact that the church exists is an accusation against the world. As a result of this, the Spirit makes the church a missionary church. The church has the task in this world to be a witness for Christ. To do this, each congregation has to employ and look for opportunities that she can use. Not every church has the same opportunities; some can do more than others. For some the place of worship plays a role; for others, the neighborhood or the culture will determine how things are done. But the church definitively has a missionary facet and a witnessing facet. If these facets are systematically ignored, the church will slowly but surely begin to deteriorate and slowly but surely disappear, because it has shut out the important work of the Spirit. The Spirit is not there to force the church into action. He is the Comforter. He will bring you to Christ and he makes known to you the treasures of salvation in Christ. At the same time, he fills you with the power to be set afire for the cause and name of Jesus and his Father, and to live by that name and to speak of it wherever possible. We do that in public in spite of the rejection by the world. It is precisely the rejection by the world which is its sin. Its unbelief now becomes public, in full view. What at first is called civilization and culture is born out of pure unbelief.

Righteousness and judgment

Jesus Christ is no longer on this earth – at least, not in the body and visible. But he certainly is present in this world with his Word, his Spirit, his grace, his deity, his majesty (see Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Christ Jesus himself is with the Father, and that fact – that he is right *there* – is the ultimate proof of Christ's *righteousness*. The Father gave the Son the right to sit on this place of honor and majesty. Christ's involvement with the world will never end. The proof of that to all people will be the last day – the day of his return in majesty and glory.

Jesus also says that the Spirit convinces the world of its judgment. Because the prince of darkness of this world has been convicted, Satan's days have been numbered, and he knows it. He goes around like a roaring lion, seeking those who he can devour. The world submits itself to the power of the evil one. With that the world calls judgment upon itself, because Christ won the struggle against the devil and its works are destroyed. Everything around the devil is darkness, while Christ is the very light of the world.

Whoever submits himself at this time to Satan's reign – after the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost – such a person chooses for judgment. The Spirit convicts the world of precisely that. Again, he does that through the Word, the preaching and the witness of the church. But the Spirit also achieves that through means of certain judgments over the world which then function as alarm signals. The church should refrain from claiming to know the reasons for certain judgments, but instead it should let the light of Christ shine over the issues. The heart of the matter is the one and only government of Jesus Christ. We are not able to simply connect all the aspects of this government and to make them transparent, since we cannot read the scroll that was given to the Lamb in heaven. We really should not try to make those connections, since we will end up speculating apart from the Word and equate our own wishes with God's wishes, and thus go astray. Take the book of Revelation, – which was given to the church of all times – not as a timetable but as a means of comfort. We will not find the date of the last day in the book of Revelation, but it urges us to recognize the times in which we live and to connect that with the

government and return of Christ. Furthermore, there is the call to a personal faith, to repentance, prayer and perseverance, since it is through perseverance that we will inherit salvation.

Not the world's favorite

The church will never be the darling of the world. As if we would want that! We have to stand up for our own message, the gospel, even if that message is foreign to this world. The Spirit convicts the hearts and opens those hearts for the gospel. That is more than enough reason to be a joyful church and a church that stands firm. We also have to look in the mirror of God's Word, because the warnings also apply to us. The church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit and the doors are wide open for the world. We have to keep ourselves uninfected by the world, and yet, we stand in the midst of this world. That tension has to be maintained. We are dependants of Christ and his Spirit, disciples of the Word – that's how the church is the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The Spirit assures us that those words will be true forever. The kingdom belongs to God and Christ.

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