

XXVII

The Seven Spirits

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits before his throne...

(REVELATION 1:4)

The text printed above is a part of a salutation which John has written at the beginning of his letter, the book of Revelation, to send to the churches in Asia Minor. We do not always see the book of Revelation as a letter, but that is what it is. It is an important, final letter sent to all the churches regarding what must yet take place.

Perhaps you know that there are various kinds of interpretations of the book of Revelation. The book is largely *symbolic*, which means that various truths and realities, happenings and events are depicted with symbols and numbers that have a deeper meaning. It is not easy properly to explain symbolic writing, but, nevertheless, the basic line is quite clear. The book covers the last period of time, the great millennium, which started with Christ's ascension (and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit) and which ends with the return of the Lord on the clouds of heaven.

In this book we read of sequels of events, which each culminate in the great judgment that is coming. It's like seeing the same sequence over and over again, but always with a new element and greater gravity not seen before. Therefore the book does not give mere repetition, but a constant deepening of what we already know.

Two main lines in the book Revelation

There are two main lines that we must keep in mind as being correlated. First, this final period of time will bring out the utter sinfulness of mankind and prepare the world for eternal judgment. Second, this period of time will be used by the risen and exalted Christ fully to gather his church out of all tribes and nations. God's total and final judgment will come when the holy, Catholic Church is gathered.

It will be a tumultuous and difficult time for the churches. The age-old enmity between Satan and Christ will come to its greatest intensity. There will be many casualties. But the message of the letter is one of triumph and hope. Jesus Christ is victorious. Christ is King. He has ascended into heaven and poured out his Spirit. This book has a sense of anticipation and longing of the Spirit and the Bride: come Lord Jesus, Maranatha! The Bible does not end on a sour note but with sweet music.

The Triune God

The salutation already has this melody of victory. I can hear music. A salutation is an official greeting which sets the tone. In a salutation the author presents himself and the readers are qualified: who they are in relation to the author. In the line of this book about the Holy Spirit we will focus on one element of this salutation namely, the part about the seven spirits. We learn here that the Lord Jesus gives us the assurance that the Holy Spirit will fill his church until he returns in glory. We learn about the Person of the Holy Spirit, the position of the Holy Spirit, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We will focus later on the fact that this passage speaks of *seven* spirits. First it is important that we understand that this salutation or greeting is given by the *Triune* God. We must see how the parts of the salutation relate to each other or we will not understand the middle part about the seven spirits.. Let's first briefly investigate the context.

It is a Trinitarian salutation. It is a greeting in the Name of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore all the riches and glory of the Triune God are contained in this salutation.

I mention also that almost all of the apostolic letters begin with a salutation. But not all include in the salutation specifically the Holy Spirit. It often says something like "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:2). The Spirit is not mentioned.

Still, the Spirit is often *implied*, in the word “saints” or the verb “sanctified.” When you read: to the saints [in whatever place], you understand that there can only be saints because of the Holy Spirit who was poured out. One can even say that the Spirit is not mentioned because he is already present in the church, and not like the Father and the Son in heaven. Salutations may differ in their exact form and still be truly Trinitarian.

A Trinitarian salutation

Here we find very clearly and strongly a Trinitarian salutation. The words “grace and peace” are typical of a Biblical salutation. Grace is the source and peace is the fruit of God’s work of salvation. Then three Persons are mentioned. Please notice that there is here a three-fold usage of the preposition *from*. The grace and peace come *from* him who is, *from* the seven spirits, and *from* Jesus Christ.

This means that each of these persons mentioned is a distinct Person. They are not separate, but still distinct. From each of them comes the same grace and peace. The first person mentioned is the Father. The play on the name “I am” (Yahweh) indicates God as the *originating* Source of all things. The name “spirit” indicates God as the *dispensing* Source of all things. The name Jesus indicates God as the *meritorious* Source of all things. Father, Son, and Spirit are the only source of all life; life revealed, redeemed, and renewed. I read somewhere that this salutation is an excellent proof-text for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the personality of the Holy Spirit.

In any case, what becomes clear is that the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person in the Godhead. He is not, as some would explain, merely a power that goes forth from God, but he is truly God himself. As Lord’s Day 20 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* says, “...He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.”

Spirits in the plural?

Now we have to deal with the fact that the word spirit here is in the plural: the seven spirits. The question that arises is simple: is there not one Holy Spirit? Surely there are not seven. Therefore you see in the NIV printing that the word spirits is not capitalized. The RSV also does not use a capital letter. Better not take any chances, I guess. The King James Version is somewhat bolder, it seems, for it has “the seven Spirits.” I must confide that the KJV version did make me feel better.

If you feel that the plural form (spirits) does not allow you to think of the Holy Spirit, then you must come with a different explanation. The only one that may have some credibility is the suggestion that the spirits mentioned here are *angels*. Does the Bible not elsewhere speak of angels as “ministering spirits”? (Heb 1:14) The problem with that explanation is, however, that in the book of Revelation angels are always specifically mentioned by name or nature, and they perform very significant works. But nowhere in this book are they called “spirits.” It would be strange to find the idea of “angels” in a context which clearly speaks of God, the Father and the Son. I must conclude that the word *spirits* is a reference to the Holy Spirit.

Seven spirits?

But are there really seven spirits? Is there not one Holy Spirit? It is true that there is only one Holy Spirit. The number seven in the book of Revelation is a very important number; found actually 52 times in this book, as the NIV notes in the introduction. In the first chapter, we read about seven churches, seven spirits, seven golden lamp stands, and seven stars. It is explained by the Lord what this means. Later in the book we read about seven seals, seven trumpets, seven thunders, seven signs, seven plagues, and seven golden bowls. There are more series of seven which we do not note specifically now.

The number seven is the number that indicates *God* in his fullness and perfection. It speaks of the great glory of God evident in the abundance and riches of his works. In this connection we note that the number of man is 6, even multiplied, 666 (Rev 13:18). That number never becomes 7, because man cannot become divine. The book of Revelation describes how all things must come to their fullness and maturity, and that the world in this way is prepared for the final and full judgment of God.

Therefore the expression “the seven spirits” means here the fullness of the Holy Spirit. John sees how in heaven the glory of the Holy Spirit is fully and completely evident. Symbolically this is presented in the number seven. It is a very intensive number: the glory of the Holy Spirit is evident before the throne of God, envelopes that throne, and emanates from it. It is not without reason that the number seven, used so often of God’s actions, is applied also to God the Holy Spirit.

The number seven is of great significance here. The Holy Spirit is true and eternal God. He is in the centre of the heavens before the great throne. From there he fills and controls all things. Imagine the effect when this Spirit comes to live in and among us.

Before God's throne

Here is a sublime description of the same Holy Spirit who was poured out on Pentecost. This does not mean that nothing of the Spirit is left in heaven. Remember that he is and remains omnipresent. But it does mean that the Holy Spirit came to the earth with the same great intensity to complete there the work of the Triune God. The seven spirits (to follow the usage of Revelation 1) come to dwell among the seven golden lamp stands with the seven stars. The Holy Spirit comes to live among and in the churches to bind them together in Christ and to equip them in the last phase of history. This is the very heart of what we remember at Pentecost.

Now there is another aspect to which I direct your attention. It says that the seven spirits are *before* God's throne. Not on the throne, not beside it, not behind it, but before it. That is a fascinating detail which we should for a moment explore, because it tells us something about the *position* of the Holy Spirit. I do not mean a position assigned by any higher power, because there is none, but a position voluntarily and purposely taken in by the Holy Spirit in the one counsel of God.

Positions and places are important in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 5 we read how the Lord Jesus appears in heaven (the result of his ascension) and take a place at the right hand of him who sits on the throne. That is not a lesser position than on the throne, but it indicates having full executive power to carry out the counsel of God concerning our redemption.

The seven spirits are before the throne. Why are they located there? Questions have also been asked here about the order, not in rank, for there is none, but in mentioning. We read of Father, Spirit, and Son. Most often we find the order Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There are those who have attached great significance to this position of the Holy Spirit.

Being before the throne means that whatever comes to the throne must be first received and accepted by the Holy Spirit. He is between the throne and all living creatures. No one has access to the throne than through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit determines and guides the traffic, as it were, around the throne. He will do this also when poured out over the church: guide and direct all to the throne up above.

Seven lamps blazing

One scholarly explainer made a comparison with the old temple or tabernacle. There is the holy of holies, where God the Father is. Then there is the lamp stand that casts light on the curtain dividing the holy place from

the most holy. I refer you to Revelation 4:5, where we again see the throne in heaven. It says, “From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. *Before* the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.” Symbolic language is sometimes a trifle confusing, for here the seven spirits are like seven lamps, blazing before the throne.

But it is not really as confusing as it seems. A lamp is not the same as lamp stand. The lamp stands are the churches. The lamp on those stands is the Holy Spirit. For he works in the churches and what comes forth from the churches is not our light, but the light of the Spirit. The church is called to hold up and hold open the Word of God by which the Spirit works. But it is the light of God alone that can enlighten dark hearts.

And then – to stick with our learned interpreter – when you come from the Holy of Holies, and through the Holy section, where the lamp stand is always burning, you come to the area where the *altar* is, where Christ’s gave the true and final sacrifice. Hence the order here: Father, Spirit, and Son. This attempt is a nice construction, but I’d rather say: it is only in chapter 5 that the Son appears in heaven and takes his place on the throne, and therefore he is not presented yet as being in heaven in chapter 1. Let’s not get ahead of things.

Directing people to the throne

The seven spirits are before the throne. They are in that sense an extension of the throne. They exercise the full power symbolized in the throne. The Holy Spirit regulates the heavenly traffic around the throne. He determines who comes before God and who does not. That very same function is also fulfilled by the Holy Spirit on earth after his outpouring on Pentecost. He directs people to the throne above, where God is, where now Jesus Christ is. They can enter only by his power, by the power of the Word. The way to the throne of God is still through the Holy Spirit. Only by the Spirit do we share in the grace of the Son and the love of the Father.

This brings us to reflect with the text on the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus said, before he ascended, “To me is given all power in heaven and on earth.” But that power is exercised on earth by the Holy Spirit. As in the beginning, when he hovered upon the face of the waters, so now also he exercises the power of God, manifest in power of Jesus Christ, over this world in true pastoral care.

Please note one more interesting detail. There are seven spirits before God’s throne. In Revelation 5, where our Lord Jesus Christ is introduced as

having entered heaven, it says in verse 6, “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had *seven horns and seven eyes* which are the *seven spirits* of God sent into all the earth.” (Rev. 5:6) Seven horns mean omnipotence. Seven eyes denote omniscience. The omnipotence and omniscience of the Holy Spirit are also ascribed to Christ, who paid for us, and these will be used for our benefit.

The Holy Spirit is poured out on Pentecost. But he does not come as a lame duck. He comes with the omnipotence and omniscience of Jesus Christ to *complete* and finish the gathering of the holy Catholic Church. He comes to apply the reconciliation that Christ has achieved by his death and resurrection. He comes to show forth the glory of Christ, demonstrated in his ascension and heavenly splendor, and so the Father is glorified and praised ad infinitum.

Perhaps we do not always reckon enough with the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, or we take it for granted, and then it doesn't affect us. We must take it, not for granted, but take it actively. We must live and walk by the Spirit, not gratifying the flesh but the Lord. These are Biblical directions. For this we must pray unceasingly. In the light of the foregoing, I may ask you this question, also implied in Lord's Day 45 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* about prayer, “Do you constantly and with heartfelt longing ask God for these gifts and thank him for them?” Because, it says in that Lord's Day, “God will give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask and thank.” We must be focused on the Spirit. Pray constantly in the Spirit. We must long for his grace. Beseech the Spirit not to leave us, but to continue in us and among us.

The Holy Spirit still determines the traffic: who shall enter and who shall not. He does this by applying to us the grace and love of the Father and the Son. He does this by granting us his fellowship. He now leads us to stand before the throne, and to stand there in Christ.

Nothing can stop him. We read about seven horns. All the power of the Lord is also in the Holy Spirit. No one can hide or pretend. We read about seven eyes. The Holy Spirit searches all things from the depths of God's counsel to the depth of our hearts. He is the other Advocate, the counselor, the conductor, and the connector, who binds us to God in Christ and binds God to us.

He is before the throne and now he is in the midst of the church. Open up. Experience increasingly how the Spirit leads you to the throne, where

the Father is and where Christ, our Lord, is. Then you know what Pentecost really means.