

VIII

The Holy Spirit and the World

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment; in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

(JOHN 16:8-11)

Often passages which tell us about the work of the Holy Spirit speak of the work which the Holy Spirit does *within* us. The Holy Spirit opens our minds and hearts for God's Word, by which he works in us faith, and so we come to serve God. All this activity of the Spirit is internal; it has to do with inward renewal, personal piety and heart-felt holiness. Our focus is often: what does the Spirit do for me and within me? It is a legitimate and important focus, but it should not be the only one.

In a next chapter we will look at a text which tells us about the inward working of the Spirit. The present passage speaks about the work of the Holy Spirit in the *world*. This is a fascinating angle and important aspect of the Spirit's work which we should not neglect. The Holy Spirit's radius of operation is wider than the scope of the pious Christian or the introverted church. He will convict the *world*, it says. The word *kosmos* is used, that means, the world as a vast, created entity and organic unity, that has become hostile to God through the fall into sin. This world has its own prince or ruler, namely, the devil, as the Lord Jesus has repeatedly noted (John

12:31; 14:30). Something is happening in this world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Common Grace?

It says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world. It is important to note that this passage is sometimes used to defend what is known as common grace or prevenient grace, the idea being that the Holy Spirit has given to *all* people a sense of sin and guilt, a longing for truth, a yearning for God, and that everyone is therefore, in principle, ready for the Gospel. All they really need is to be addressed. All entry ports are open; only the right connections must be made.

By this prevenient grace all people are still by nature favorably disposed towards God. It is suggested that some people can even know him and be righteous *without* the preaching of the Gospel. This is the classic Arminian position. Some people simply are nobler than others.

We also should note that this passage is unique in Scripture. No where else is spoken about “convicting the world.” To build a grand system of prevenient or common grace on one text is rather weak. The consistent testimony of Scripture is rather the complete opposite: people are *not* by nature inclined to hear the Gospel but are prone to reject it immediately. The word convicting already suggests that it takes a lot of work to bring someone to accept the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eye for the context

As usual, we must have an eye for the context in which the passage stands. It is during the last Passover, in the night he was betrayed and in a moving “fare-well” that Christ a number of times speaks about the work of the Holy Spirit, the Counselor or Comforter. He promises the coming of this Comforter (15:16) who will stay forever, and will live in the disciples, as we saw in the previous chapter. The Counselor will also equip the disciples for their work, “[He] will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I said to you.” In this connection (John 15) the Lord speaks about his disciples bearing much fruit. They are to be diligent in the work of furthering the Gospel. All this will lead to persecution, but the Comforter will testify about Christ and enable also the disciples to do the same (John 15:27).

Until now the emphasis has been on the Holy Spirit equipping the disciples for their great work of apostolic ministry. That’s why he came and

that's how Christ will continue to be in their midst. The Spirit abides with the Bride. Although all this is still an internal matter, it already has an outward perspective: the ministry will take place in and to the *world*. This is the emphasis in the passage presently before us.

The power of the Gospel

The question could arise: who will ever listen to us, men of Galilee? The Jews will reject the apostles and the world will laugh, but Christ assures his disciples ahead of time: when the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world. Not: *you* will convict the world, but *he* will convict the world. The power of the Spirit will become evident in the faithful ministry of the church, the preaching of the Gospel to all. This text, then, does not speak about some preparatory or prevenient grace, but it speaks of the saving power of the Gospel because by it the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of men who are dead in sin and transgression.

By the power of the Gospel proclaimed by the apostolic church, the Holy Spirit will convict the world. This is far-reaching and effective. He will convict the world of sin, the one source of all misery, of righteousness, the only way of full redemption, and of judgment, the certain day of final reckoning.

Convict the world

He will convict the world. The word convict is stronger than the word convince, which is sometimes used as translation. The idea is then that as the Gospel is preached, the Spirit convinces the hearers that it is true. This is fine and even true in itself, but that is not really the point of this text. The word *convict* has the connotation of a judicial hearing, a trial and a legal battle. The Comforter or Counselor has the task of conducting such a trial, and therefore he is called in as an "advocate." To convict means to come with solid proof or undisputable evidence, so that everyone, even the accused, must admit: yes, it is true. Conviction then leads to a righteous verdict, and that is followed by judgment. These elements are also specifically found in the text, so we are going here in the right direction.

It says: convict the *world*. This does not mean that all people or all persons will be convicted, but that the Gospel will go world-wide, to the ends of the earth, and *in this process* indeed the entire world will be approached and convicted. The Holy Spirit will use the Catholic Church with the apostolic doctrine to convict the entire world.

We note in passing that John has a particular interest in the theme “world.” This is true throughout his Gospel and also his letters later. In John 1 we already read: the *world* did not recognize him. Jesus is called the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the *world*. God so loved the *world* that he gave his only-begotten Son...etc. The world which was created by God himself, and which fell under the power of the prince of darkness, will be restored to God through his only-begotten Son, and out of this world shall then come forth the new humanity, raised up by the power of the Word.

The great sin: apostasy or unbelief

He will convict the world of *guilt*, it says. That word is added by the translators, but is probably implied in the convicting. I'll just leave it out to show the lines a little more clearly.

He will convict the world of *sin*. What is the sin that is meant here? Of course, it is the original sin of mankind, which is the rebellion against God already in Paradise, by which all mankind became corrupt. Out of that sin flow forth all the actual sins which people commit.

What does this mean? Will the Holy Spirit give to all people some kind of knowledge of sin, even a sense of guilt? It means that when people are convicted, they do know and must admit that their sin is great. Notice how the Lord Jesus in the next verse (9) zeroes in exactly on *the sin* that he really means: of sin, *because men do not believe in me*. This is the real issue, the underlying issue, in the work of the Spirit through the apostolic preaching. This sin – rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior of God – is the one that will lead to condemnation. The great sin of the last days is *apostasy* or *unbelief*. The sin is rejecting the truth once embraced (apostasy) or rejecting the truth now proclaimed (unbelief).

The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ. He will bring glory to me by taking what is mine and making it known to you (16:14). Jesus Christ will be proclaimed everywhere as the God-given Savior and the only Mediator. He alone delivers from all sin. The Gospel tells us about the one source of all misery, namely sin. This is the clear confession of the church. I think of Lord's Day 2 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: from where do you know your misery? The world must come to know its real situation, the sin in which it lays, and the curse under which it lies. Through the preaching (for Christ is here preparing his disciples for preaching) the one cause of all human misery will be exposed, which is sin, the conscious, willful transgressing of the law of God.

People will have to come to confess their sins. But what is then immediately important is that they must accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. They must believe in him, as the one given by God for redemption. The sin of the world will from then on be the sin of *unbelief*. The Jews will in that night already reject the Lord Jesus and consign him to the cross. The prince of darkness will appear to triumph. But he will not triumph at all. Now the claim that Jesus Christ is the God-given Savior must go world-wide, and what is the most serious and prevalent sin which the world will commit in the last days? It's the sin of unbelief, of the rejection of Jesus Christ. Whoever does so, will not be saved, but will be convicted by the Spirit of God himself.

We belonged to that world. It is out of that world that Christ has called us by the Gospel. Have we truly come to confess our sins? Do we also see that the greatest sin of all would be the rejection of Christ, and do we therefore embrace him with a believing heart and a joyous spirit? Are we deeply convicted of sin?

The lesson of life

I read somewhere that this convicting is the most difficult with long-standing members of the church, with people who are noted as believers for many years. Recent converts tend to admit to sin readily; but established members become set in their ways and have learned to live with certain sins. As a grown man in a special relation with the LORD, David still had to learn the greatest lesson of his life: be convicted of sin with Bathsheba. That took some doing. So do not see this convicting as something that applies only to recent converts. Even the most holy and the most pious of believers must experience this convicting powerfully from time to time, whenever sin has crept in or set in.

We constantly need to be brought back to Christ to see our sins, repent from them, and ardently seek our Savior. We need to watch and pray that we may live in accordance with the Gospel, as it has come to us. Only then does Christ by the Holy Spirit take proper shape in our lives.

The big question of the last days is not one about all kinds of spiritual phenomena, charismatic revivals, and millennial hoopla. The big question is: do you believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin? At this point in Jesus' ministry, the world had not yet been confronted with this question. Only the Jewish people were forced to make a decision. The world did not know of Jesus Christ as yet. But through the Gospel they will be told exactly who he is. They will have to admit that the testimony concerning Jesus is

clear and true. They will be shown their sin and misery, and also asked: do you now believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Focus on Christ

We see here again a very important matter about the Holy Spirit that is central to this book: he is always focused on the Son, Jesus Christ. He lights up the work of our Lord, and so directs all men through him to the Father. The spotlight of the Spirit is on the Son, and that light flashes up to the throne of heaven. We must be aware of this and not wrongly internalize the Spirit by thinking that he can be locked up inside of us. The Spirit seeks the world with the Word so that all may know the Son, and through him be reconciled to God.

The question will be asked all over the world: how do we know that Jesus is the true Savior of the world? There are so many world-religions, and Christianity does not have sole rights here in this world. World religions like Islam are growing, while Christianity is faltering and fading. What *right* does the church have to come with the apostolic testimony that Jesus alone is the Savior?

It says: the spirit will convict the world of *righteousness*. Righteousness means that everything was done and is done in complete agreement with and conformity to the law of God. In righteousness, by justice, we are legitimized as God's children.

In this world the idea of self-righteousness prevails. World religions and false Christianity all teach that we can be righteous or become righteous through our will and effort. Hence these religions show the path of self-righteousness that people should follow in order to become one with God and to escape death or condemnation in whatever form.

But the Spirit will convict of a righteousness that does not lie in people but only in Christ. How is this righteousness of Christ manifest? The Lord in this text speaks about it in very clear terms (verse 10) the Spirit will convict the world of righteousness "because I am going to the Father, and you will see me no longer." Christ will be condemned and executed. He will be treated as an unrighteous man, as the greatest of sinners, and as the most blasphemous of criminals. But, says Jesus, I am going to the Father, and you will see me no longer. This speaks of his *glorification*. He will die but he will rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven. He will be seated at God's right hand. In all this he will be justified and vindicated as the righteous one.

Apostolic Preaching

The apostolic preaching sums it up in simple yet deep terms. Jesus Christ is crucified for our sins, is raised for our justification, and has ascended for our benefit. The Holy Spirit will convict the world of the fact that where this righteousness in Christ by faith is rejected, there is no more righteousness to be received anywhere else. This also implies that whoever is righteous in Christ is one hundred percent righteous, because Christ is fully righteous.

The Spirit will uncover the basic misery of man, namely, sin and also show the only way of true redemption: finding righteousness by faith in Christ. His righteousness, demonstrated in his resurrection and further glorification, will come upon us. The world did not yet know all this in the night Jesus was betrayed, for the Counselor had not yet come, but *today* we know it, and millions of others know it. The question is still the same: do we seek and find all righteousness outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ, our risen and glorified King? This is always a key question for the church and for every member: do you seek your righteousness in Christ alone through the personal bond of faith, in the way of the means he has provided? This is the central issue of our lives.

Convicting of judgment

It is a very serious and urgent question. For, says the Lord, the Spirit will also convict the world of *judgment*. Many people live by a no-fault, no judgment policy. If they admit to sin, they certainly do not seek to be justified by faith; neither do they worry about judgment. They live carelessly, as if there is no day of judgment coming (cf. 2 Pet 3:4).

It is also on this point that the Spirit will convict the world. The world that does not recognize God's justice in Christ will undergo the same fate as the prince of this world. It says: the Spirit will convict the world of judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

Notice the word *now*. When Jesus goes into this night and to the cross, the prince of this world will undertake a final attempt to make the Son of God fall, but he will be unsuccessful. Therefore, now he stands condemned. He has played out all his cards, so to speak, has exerted all his energy, and has not been able to overcome the Son of God. Now he stands condemned. He can never escape his final undoing. He has no hope left whatsoever.

The prince of this world

Notice the expression the prince of this world. The Lord Jesus does not say: Satan or the devil stands condemned, but *the prince of this world* stands condemned. The world is still at that point Satan's territory. He rules over it as prince of darkness. The world is in his grip, and he will not let go. But Jesus says: now he stands condemned. When Christ rises from the dead, Satan is cast into the bottomless pit, so that he can deceive the nations no more. Then the real millennium starts.⁷ It is the time of the last preaching and of final grace. The Gospel will be preached to the ends of the earth. The whole world will hear of the triumph, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, who rules in heaven as King of kings.

Whoever does not flee to Christ stands condemned with the prince of darkness. You either rise with Christ or you go down with the devil. This is the power of the apostolic Word which the Holy Spirit will confirm everywhere, and by which the world will be convicted. Everyone will have to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is King of kings, and if they will not do it to their joy in their life time, they will have to do it to their shame on the day of judgment.

There is a definite day of judgment. Satan already knows that he stand condemned. He cannot win anymore. If ever he fostered false hope in this respect, it is now gone. His time is short. This, of course, makes him very angry and more evil. "He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." (Rev 12:12) He will seek to search and destroy whatever belongs to God. He will resist the Holy Spirit at every turn. Wherever the Gospel is preached, Satan will follow to snatch away the seed and to close the hearts of people. Satan has the whole arsenal of worldly weaponry at his disposal. He uses the cultures of this world, the technology of this world, the ideology of this world, and the artistry of this world. He uses all these things in his campaign against Christ.

There is escape

Were it not for the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, no one would escape judgment. All would remain in the grip of the prince of this world. But he will convict the world also of judgment, so that everywhere people do flee to

⁷ See my publication, *Celebrating Salvation*, Premier Publishing, Winnipeg, 1997, pages 265-301, on Revelation 20.

Christ to find shelter and safety. When the great judgment finally comes, all people will have to admit with clear mind and sincere heart that it is just.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit in this world. Through the preaching of the Gospel, which is a power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), the Holy Spirit will convict the world. He will show forth the truth, convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment, because in this way the Triune God resolves the conflict of history, fulfills the hope of his people, and brings about the glory of the new heaven and earth. All this happens through Christ Jesus to the glory of God the Father.

We have seen this work in progress ever since Pentecost. It continues until it is completed, and then the end is here. The Holy Spirit is working towards that end with great longing, and therefore, as it is testified, the *Spirit* and the bride say: come, Lord Jesus! The Spirit who is here to stay and who works unceasingly in this world longs with the church for the appearing in glory of the Son of God, when all the counsel of God has been fulfilled and God is all in all.

Sovereign grace

We do not find here a doctrine of prevenient grace but the teaching of sovereign and triumphant grace, shown precisely in the ministry of the Spirit who works in and with the church through the Gospel to call all the world to salvation.

We still have here one more question. Is there in this text, as some suggest, a kind of a *method* to approach the world in mission or evangelism: first expose sin, then proclaim Christ's righteousness, and finally threaten with judgment? Some preachers have followed and do follow this method. The result is hell-fire and brimstone preaching. I would hesitate to build a method or system on one text. The danger of a system is also that it is easily closed and self-destructive.

But these three elements should not be missing in the apostolic ministry of the church also today. For in the end it is so clear and simple: we can be redeemed from sin only by the righteousness of Christ, which we embrace by faith. We must flee to Christ, who now is glorified, and if we do not believe, we are condemned already, and shall one day face the final judgment of God.

The Holy Spirit says: without Christ, there is no hope. But in Christ, life is secure. This is the catholic and apostolic doctrine of salvation.