

The Spirit and the Bride

*The Spirit and the bride say, Come!
And let him who hears say: Come!
Whoever is thirsty, let him come;
and whoever wishes let him take
the free gift of the water of life.*

(REVELATION 22:17)

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the last phase of history has really begun. We truly live in the last days, the time of the end of the ages. Christ has completed his work of redemption on earth, has ascended in glory, and now through the Holy Spirit is preparing all things, also his church, for the great day of his glorious *return*.

This final phase of history is elaborately described in the book of Revelation. I remind you of what I wrote in the previous chapter that there are in this final phase of history *two lines*: the world is being prepared for ultimate *judgment* and the church is being gathered for final *glory*. These two lines flow together in this way: only when the church has been fully gathered, will the Day of Judgment come. As the one is sure, so is the other.

In this time the Holy Spirit fulfills a very prominent and decisive task, especially in the life of the church and the lives of the believers. You find this already in the very beginning of the book of Revelation, in the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor, where the constant refrain is heard: he who has an ear, let him hear what *the Spirit* says to the churches.

It is evident that in this last phase of history the church on earth stands under the special care and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The church and all its members will need this care, for we must go through what is called “the great tribulation” (Rev 7:14). When the world undergoes God’s just judgments, the church will also be severely chastised and sorely persecuted.

The Spirit has come to stay

In the last chapter of the book Revelation we read of the final outcome of history: the promise of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is confirmed. In this context again the Holy Spirit is expressly mentioned: He will never leave the church by blood once bought. As a matter of fact, we learn that the Holy Spirit keeps the expectation of the church alive that the great day of the Wedding Feast will come.

This brings us again to the significance of Pentecost, a matter that required our attention throughout this book. We know that on Pentecost the Spirit was poured out over the church. It is important to remember that this fact indicates the start of a new and final phase in world history. Pentecost means that the Spirit has come *to stay* with us until Christ returns. We are convinced by Scripture that Pentecost can not be repeated: it is an event that opens a whole new era, even *characterizes* that era as one of great spiritual activity. The Spirit has come to dwell *in* the church as the body of Christ and so to dwell in all its members. Pentecost marks the *permanent* indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the church and its members.

Because it is the *start* of a new era, it is accompanied by wondrous signs: a sound as of a mighty wind and tongues as of fire (Acts 2:1-4). Only at the beginning of this new phase are these special signs given. And while the signs are not repeated, we are nevertheless convinced that the new reality – the presence of the Spirit – is constant.

How will we persevere?

When we read in the book of Revelation about all the terrible things that will happen in this last phase of history, the judgments and trials, we can really wonder how we will be able to *persevere* in expecting the return of Christ. Our Lord in this last chapter may repeatedly state, “Behold, I am coming soon!” but it will not be easy for us to live in that expectation every day. We might even come to wonder if this promise is really true: things just seem to go as they go, from bad to worse, perhaps, but with little progress. The time of waiting may lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

In this last phase of history we will have our hands full, just managing to keep our heads above water, so to speak. Will what was evident at the *beginning* of the era of Pentecost last for the *duration* of that era, and even be still alive at the *end* of that era? Pentecost was a nice and enthusiastic beginning, but will the feeling last? Will the church persevere?

We know by experience that a good start is important, but also that in the course of time, we can lose sight of the beginning and get bogged down by the many woes and cares of life. Things never quite turn out the way we expected, do they? We know from Scripture that the apostasy of mankind and the accompanying delusion will be great, and that the love of many will grow cold, and what can then realistically be expected of the church and its members? We are all weak and mortal, and we are hardly able to withstand the many onslaughts of an enemy far more powerful and determined than we are.

The church is called the bride

The church is called “the bride.” In Revelation 19:7, after the fall of Babylon is described, we read these triumphant words, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory, for the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready!” The bride is ready, dressed in fine linen, bright and clean, prepared for the great feast. But how can we be sure that the bride will be ready? If the waiting for the wedding appears endless and the Bridegroom tarries, will the bride not lose heart?

Our Lord himself once spoke about the time between ascension and return as a time of mourning and *fasting* for the bride. In Matthew 9:14 and following we read that John the Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus and ask him why his disciples do not fast. John’s disciples fast, and even those of the Pharisees do, but those of Jesus do not. Fasting was a common religious practice in that time and the question is quite appropriate: why do Jesus’ disciples not engage in it? He then said: how can the guests of the Bridegroom mourn when he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast.*” What does that mean other than that Christ himself recognized the great need and stress of the waiting bride in the last era?

Fasting, typically a practice belonging to the old covenant with its ceremonies, was prescribed in the law only on the day of atonement, and only after the exile was it extended to other times, but it had become in Jesus’ days one of the many forms of *self-righteousness*, instead of a sincere expression of sorrow over sin. The Jews fasted left, right, and center, seeking thereby to achieve favor with God. But Jesus lets the disciples know that with the coming of Christ a *new era has come*, one of celebration and joy as of a *wedding feast*. You don’t fast during a feast, do you? Later when the bridegroom is taken away, they will fast, and he means: really fast, mourn and grieve for all the right reasons, in longing for the return of the Groom.

A time of longing and yearning

My intention is not to discuss fasting as such. My point is to make clear that the time before the great marriage feast, the coming wedding, is described by Jesus as being in a sense comparable to a *fast*. It will be not a time of feasting but of fasting, not a time of rejoicing and celebration, but one of grieving and suffering, of great longing and yearning. We are now, as it were, a bride without a Bridegroom.

I fully realize that some explainers take this fasting to mean the time between Good Friday and Easter, and that element is certainly present, but we may also see it in a broader sense as denoting the time between the ascension and the return of Christ when we are as a bride without a Groom, waiting, longing, and yearning for the great Wedding Day.

How can we persevere in expecting the coming of the Lord? In this passage (as elsewhere in the book of Revelation) it is not without reason that the church is called a *bride*. It does not say: the Spirit and the *church* say: come, but the Spirit and the *bride* say: come! For the church is by definition a *bride*, some one who has received a promise or pledge and *knows* the great day is coming because the Bridegroom is trustworthy. A bride knows her bridegroom and she is prepared for the great day. Her life is characterized by readiness and expectation. She therefore does not cease to call out: come! Her only goal and purpose is that great day when her joy will be full.

Single focus and purpose

The bride says: come! She has a single focus. I do not know if you can find yourself in this profile. Is your only goal, focus, and purpose the coming of the Lord? Do we know the longing for the wedding and the yearning for the new heaven and earth? As intensely as it is voiced in our text, so weakly is it often experienced by us. Is it not so?

I once read a kind of poem that went something like this: come, Lord Jesus, come quickly, but not until... and you may fill in the rest. Christ has his focus; we have ours. Christ has his agenda but it is not always the same as our agenda, is it? We can not really be fully heaven-oriented, when we are still earth-bound, can we? How little does the return of Christ from day to day play a role in our lives? Sometimes we do not reckon with it at all, let alone ardently *expect* it or yearn for it. It sometimes takes great trial and much earthly difficulty to make us realize that this life here is not the purpose of our existence, and even then we easily forget.

The Spirit comes first

I am not trying to make anyone feel guilty about a possible lack of fervent yearning for the day of Christ. The text does not seek to make us feel guilty, either. Notice that it says: the *Spirit* and the bride say: come! The Spirit comes first here. The same Spirit who in the first chapters of the book Revelation spoke *to* the church now speaks *within* the church. The Holy Spirit is the one who is here the Motivator and he leads the church to echo the sentiment: come, Lord Jesus!

The bride does not and can not say this on her own. The bride can only say "Come" through the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, therefore, who keeps the expectation of the church alive. The bride is and remains a yearning bride only because of the Holy Spirit within her; the Spirit who came from Christ and leads her to Christ. The yearning of the bride throughout the latter days, the last phase or era, is a direct work and fruit of the Holy Spirit.

As we saw, Pentecost marks a beginning. But the same Bible shows us that the joy and zeal, the longing and yearning of the beginning never end, because the Holy Spirit never ceases to work. The Spirit will keep the longing of the bride alive until the last day, from Pentecost on right through the great tribulation. The Spirit says, "Come," and therefore also the bride says, "Come." The Holy Spirit, now our Counselor and Comforter on earth, will lead the church time and again to the true prayer: come, Lord Jesus.

Freeze-frame or move forward?

Many would like to go back to Pentecost and relive it. But Pentecost by its very nature is the feast of the beginning that leads onward. The Spirit did not come to freeze-frame the church in a certain time or status, but came to move that church forward and onward to the great day, the wedding feast itself. The Spirit comes to dwell in the church but does so to propel that church forward throughout the last era until the day of the wedding feast comes.

At Pentecost, in Acts 2, we stand at the beginning of a great journey, but here in Revelation 22 we are shown what it is like towards the *end* of that journey. What is consistent is the longing and yearning of the bride for the Groom.

Much has changed since that first day in Jerusalem. The world and the church undergo constant change. But what does not change is the expectation of the bride for the coming of the Lord. If it has changed in any

way, it has only intensified. The farther we come in the history of this world, the more we see that our only real hope for decisive and lasting change lies in the coming in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Great expectations

The Holy Spirit came to keep the expectation of Christ's return alive and vibrant, to make this a catholic, world-wide expectation. The permanent indwelling of the Spirit alone guarantees the functioning of that expectation.

Here I must add something extremely important. How does the Holy Spirit bring about this expectation and keep it alive? In the context of this chapter, John describes how he hears about the "words of the prophecy of this book." Verse 7: Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who *keeps the words of the prophecy of this book*. Verse 9: the words of this book. Verse 10: do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book. Verse 18: I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. Verse 19: and if anyone takes words away from the book of this prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city....

The Spirit of the Word

There is a very strong connection, obviously, between the *work* of the Holy Spirit and the *words* of the prophecy of this book. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the *Word* of the prophecy of *this book*. This is not surprising, because Pentecost is the day when the *Word* of God began to be proclaimed in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit works through the Word and the proclamation of that Word. It was only after Peter's *sermon* on Pentecost that the people asked: what shall we do?

It is important to note how the "word of prophecy" is here connected to a *book*. From the beginning in Revelation 1, John was expressly commanded to *write everything down in a scroll*, in a book.

Many commentators hold the view that in the verses 18 and 19 the expression "the words of the prophecy of this book" refers to the book of Revelation, and indeed it does directly. The Revelation to John is here recognized as the glorious and definite conclusion of the Word of God; nothing may be added, nothing may be taken away. But this being so, this warning has meaning for the *entire Scriptures* given by God.

The exhortation to adhere to the words of the prophecy of this book is also found earlier at other key moments in Scripture. In Deuteronomy 4:2,

where the *law* is repeated, it is said also, “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the command of the Lord your God that I give you.” And in Proverbs 30 (a book in the Hebrew version towards the end of the Old Testament) it is also said: every word of God is flawless... do not add to his words or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.” So, indeed, this warning sounds familiar, functions strongly in the Old Testament, and comes out clearly at the conclusion of the New Testament: this is the full and final revelation of God. Do not add to it; do not subtract from it.

The Word of the Spirit

The point is now that the Holy Spirit *works* in the church with the full and complete *Word* of God. The power of the Word was evident already of old, and that is what will deeply characterize the last era as well in an unprecedented manner. The expectation of the church will be kept alive by the Holy Spirit through the working with the Word by the preaching of the Gospel.

The Spirit will guide the church and speak to the heart of the church by the *Word of God*, and this is what will nurture and deepen the expectation and the hope of God’s people. The Spirit says through the Word: come Lord Jesus, that is the great goal, and the church says in response to the Word: come Lord Jesus, indeed that is the great goal.

The song of the bride, Come Lord Jesus, Maranatha! is the response of the church to the Word of God with which the Holy Spirit fills the church and the lives of all its members. Our Lord Jesus spoke of this himself even before he went to the cross, in that night of the Passover, John 16:13 and 14, “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all *Truth*.” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, wisdom, and understanding, and he takes the Word of God and makes it known to us, applying it to our hearts and in our lives.

The main feature in the last ages

This means, then, also that in the last era, the time between Pentecost and the return of Christ, the main feature in the life of the church is the preaching of the Gospel, the teaching of the doctrine of Scripture, and an abiding in the revealed and written Truth.

It is so important to note this carefully. The last age is one of delusion and deceit (2 Thess 2:9-12). There will be many who will deny the Word of

God in the Scriptures and yet claim to bring truth and wisdom. There will be those who tell us that the Spirit cannot be limited to the Scriptures. People will come who suggest that preaching and teaching actually restrict the Holy Spirit. No formal doctrine or preaching is needed, but – they say – a spontaneous working of the Holy Spirit within the heart and soul is the essence of religion. But the whole dilemma is false. The Holy Spirit, sovereign and omnipotent God, who can never be restricted but does remain true to himself, will keep alive the expectation of Christ's return through the working of the Word, the power of the Gospel, that unique Word which speaks of life in Christ through grace.

The big question for the last age

The big question will be for this last era: what will you do with the Word of God? Pentecost brings that question everywhere to the fore: what are you doing with the Word of God? For you are the *hearers*, and it says specifically in this passage also: let him who *hears, say: come!* Hearing leads to longing and calling: come, Lord Jesus! This Word will go out as the water of life, and we are assured: whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes let him take the *free gift* of the water of life. We need not earn salvation or realize it for ourselves, but we must simply take it by faith as God's free gift of grace.

As we come to the end of this book, we note once more that it has been Pentecost, and since then the Gospel of life in Christ has been proclaimed with a great promise: take freely; life is gift of grace from God in Christ. The Gospel is the Gospel of free and sovereign *grace* in Christ, and it is so: take it or leave it. But whoever *hears*, that means whoever listens and believes, will also speak the same words: Maranatha, come Lord Jesus! You cannot hear the Gospel and then not echo its longing and yearning for the day of glory.

As John comes to the end of this amazing and moving book in which the Lord Jesus outlines his final work of light in this dark world, his counsel of renewal, John may be assured and give assurance to all the churches that the bride will keep on longing for the day, no matter how long it takes, and the yearning will be deepened and intensified. For the Spirit will lead the bride in the call for the return of the Groom!

Preparing the Bride

Jesus Christ says: behold, I am coming soon! That means he is coming without any unnecessary delay. And the Spirit *and the Spirit-filled Bride* say: yes! Come Lord Jesus! God himself evokes the very response he seeks. The work of the Holy Spirit may in this sense be called a work of preparing the bride for the great wedding feast.

Then we understand that it can not just be a matter of *saying*: come! It must be a matter of *living*: come! Our whole life and lifestyle must show forth this longing for the day of Christ. What true bride will wait with longing for the one and only groom if she meanwhile consorts with all kinds of others? The church, as Christ himself so often stressed in the parables, must always be ready for the day. Each one of us must personally be ready for the day. You can not get ready after he has come; you must be ready while he is coming.

When you are waiting, it is not hard to lose your focus, to become distracted, and even to fall away. The best of brides are sometimes impatient for the great day and when it does not come as they want, may turn to others. One of the quickest ways to lose your focus is to shut out the Word, stop hearing the proclamation of the Gospel, and then other things will quickly fill the void. Stop listening and you will stop longing. You will seek fulfillment here and now, seemingly sweet, but always deadly. Only the Spirit can and will through the Word keep the hope strong, the expectation alive, and the lifestyle holy.

Never lose hope

One of the things which strongly characterizes our present society is the tendency to give up. People easily lose hope and expect nothing really to change anymore. With a certain despair also a sense of not-caring anymore sets in. Some give up quickly; others after a long struggle, but give up is what people tend to do.

Do you realize that someone who is part of this bride can never give up the struggle of faith? Giving up would be a denial of Pentecost and of the very power and work of the Holy Spirit. The bride can not be defeated because *the Spirit and the Bride* are inseparable. If you stay with the Word of God, believe it heartily, and act accordingly, much can go wrong, but you can not be defeated. You will always find the way and the strength to carry on in faith, sadder in yourself perhaps, but wiser in God. We can be bent, but not really broken, for the *Spirit* and the bride say: come.

This is what the final age really means: the Spirit preparing the bride for the great wedding feast. He alone can do it, right through the great tribulation of the latter days. There is only one of two ways: play the false harlot or live as a true bride. What will it be? If we did not have the Holy Spirit and his abiding presence, we would not be able to persevere. But now we can. He has come to stay and lead us to the great day when we shall be perfectly united with Christ. The Spirit is truly the Spirit of hope and perseverance, causing love and zeal to flourish there where all may fade and fail. He is himself the guarantee that we shall be forever free when Christ returns on His great day.

“O come, Lord Jesus, come,” we pray.