

The Forgotten Minister

Mark 16.20

Professor Dan Stevens was a mentor to me in my last two years of Bible college. For reasons that I will never understand, he took a keen personal interest in helping me to master Bible interpretation and application. Some of you have heard me talk about faith, hope and love being the key to applying the Scripture – I got that from Dan Stevens.

One of the most powerful lessons I learned from Professor Stevens, however, had nothing to do with Biblical interpretation or application. It had everything to do with humility.

Because our Bible college was small, it couldn't pay the professors a competitive wage. Many of them, including Dr Stevens, had a second source of income. In Dr Stevens' case, it was a side job as the senior executive of a large Bible conference in a beautiful location called Gull Lake.

The board of Gull Lake Bible Conference assigned to Dr Stevens the task of formulating a new strategic plan – a plan that would limit costs yet also encourage growth. While researching the plan, Dr Stevens became convinced that the conference had too many administrators. If one administrator was made redundant, not only would the conference save money, but the remaining administrators would probably enjoy their jobs more – having greater opportunity to use their giftedness and creativity.

The only question was: Who should be made redundant? Surprisingly, Dr Stevens fingered himself – even though he could not afford to lose the income. He was humble enough to do what was best for the whole.

To a larger extent, that is what Jesus did. After working so hard and suffering so much throughout His brief life on earth, Jesus at last triumphs in the resurrection. Wouldn't that be a perfect time to enjoy the spoils?

But Jesus leaves. He leaves before the Church is born with 3000 converts on a single day. He leaves before the gospel spreads to Europe, Africa and Asia. He leaves before vengeance is brought to bear on the hypocritical Jewish temple – destroyed in AD 70 and still lying in ruins today.

Jesus leaves. Why? Because it was better for the whole.

Sermon in a Sentence: **Jesus ascended for us.**

We are noting four benefits to Jesus' ascension from Mark 16.19-20. Thus far we have covered two and a half of the four. We have seen firstly that we benefit because the ascended Christ reigns over us – sovereignly saving some and preparing an eternal place for them. We have seen secondly that we benefit because the ascended Christ defends us – advocating when we sin, interceding when we are tempted.

And last week we started on the third benefit – Jesus delegates to us. He gives to believers the privilege of being His flesh-and-blood ambassadors to declare His Lordship and glory to the world.

As we left off last week, we admitted that being ambassadors – witnesses, evangelists, missionaries – is a daunting task. The world is so big, and the lostness of humanity so great that we often feel intimidated and inadequate.

But that is not all bad . . . if it drives us to depend on the other person Jesus delegates to. And that is our topic this week. Jesus not only delegates to believers, but, most importantly and most gloriously, He delegates to God the Holy Spirit.

This is more of a marvel than we may realise. There is, in fact, a direct cause and effect relationship between Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit. If it weren't for the ascension, the Holy Spirit would not have come. Listen to Jesus:

John 16:7 (NKJV)

⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for **if I do not go away, the Helper will not come** to you; but if I depart, **I will send Him** [delegation] to you.

Do you see that Jesus ascended for us? At this moment in human history, it is better that Jesus is away in heaven and the Holy Spirit is here with us on earth.

The advantage to having the Holy Spirit in place of Jesus is easy to identify. Whereas the incarnation limited Jesus in terms of space and time – for example, when He was in Capernaum, He was not in Jerusalem (see John 6.24¹ for an instance when it was said Jesus was not there – such a thing could never be said of the Holy Spirit) – the Holy Spirit has no such limitation. At the very moment that He is empowering us to worship and to learn in this service, He is on the other side of the world drawing a sinner to be saved.

Mark 16.20 tells us a lot about the Holy Spirit in only a few words.

Mark 16:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, **the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs**. Amen.

B. Holy Spirit – Who is He?

In a moment, we will get to the two functions of the Holy Spirit that are named in this verse. But first, I want to talk about who the Holy Spirit is.

Identified simply as “the Lord” in verse 20, there are two characteristics that are immediately apparent – and these two are absolutely critical. Firstly, this ‘Lord’ is God. No mere mortal is ever accorded the title “Lord” in Scripture. It is a title of divinity. The question is, which person of the Trinity is this verse talking about? “Lord” can be used of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit.

God the Father is an unlikely candidate because He is rarely described as working on the human level. Furthermore, it cannot be God the Son – He is ascended. It must, therefore, be God the

¹ John 6:24 (NKJV) ²⁴ when the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they also got into boats and came to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

Holy Spirit – which a casual reading of the Book of Acts quickly proves out. It is the Holy Spirit who works with believers. It is the Holy Spirit who confirms the word through miraculous signs. So this Lord, according to this and many other verses, is God the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, this Lord is a person. Now ordinarily that would be a rather silly statement to make, but when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we must be deliberate in saying He is a person. This is because many people have the horribly wrong notion that the Holy Spirit is not a person, but just a force. But impersonal forces do not work *with* someone. To work *with* requires a mind, will and emotion – personhood.

So don't listen to Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons who want to tell you the Holy Spirit is not a person. And don't confuse the god of Hinduism with anything Biblical. The Holy Spirit works *with* because He is a person, and because He is God.

Now that we know who the Holy Spirit is, let's consider the main point of this verse, which is what He does.

There are two functions of the Holy Spirit named in verse 20. There is 'working', which is inside a person, and there is 'confirming', which is outside a person.

1. Working

The internal working applies to both believers and unbelievers. Verse 20 tells us the Holy Spirit, the Lord, works *with* believers – believers who are obediently going everywhere and preaching the good news.

In what way does He work with us? This is the amazing part – there are several answers to this question. So great is the power of the Holy Spirit's presence with us!

For the sake of time, I will speak only of three – three that apply directly to the Holy Spirit's working with us to witness:

a. He indwells us

John 14:16-17 (NKJV)

¹⁶And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— ¹⁷the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and **will be in you.**

Jesus speaks prophetically in this verse – a prophecy that was fulfilled only a short time later on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit could not live closer to the believer, because He lives in us.

This means that He is always with us. And it means that we belong wholly to Him because He possesses us.

1 Corinthians 6:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is in you*, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

What a wonder! That God lives in me. If God be for us, who can be against us! (Romans 8.31).

b. He enables us

Do you ever worry that you won't know what to say if someone questions you about your faith? Stop worrying – the Holy Spirit takes care of that.

Mark 13:11 (NKJV)

¹¹But when they arrest *you* and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is **not you who speak**, but **the Holy Spirit**.

Luke 12:12 (NKJV)

¹²For the **Holy Spirit will teach you** in that very hour **what you ought to say.**"

Numerous times I have silently said to the Holy Spirit when I am in a witnessing situation, "Please tell me what to say" and He always does. A verse I memorised as a child and had long since forgotten will suddenly come to mind. I know that is a verse the Holy Spirit wants me to use.

He enables us. Have you experienced the enablement of the Holy Spirit who works with you? Sometimes we may miss out on it because we are avoiding the situations where we might need Him to tell us what to say. Let's go boldly with a willingness to tell.

c. He guides us

On this point, I think of the experience of the apostle Paul when he had it on his agenda to go to the Roman province of Asia and preach the gospel. The Holy Spirit quite unexpectedly guided Paul to change his plans.

Acts 16:6-10 (NKJV)

⁶Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. ⁸So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Sometimes when doors seem to be closed, it is because the Spirit is guiding us somewhere else. He is with us so that we might go and tell.

Isn't it amazing that God indwells us? That God enables us? That God guides us? And at the same time that He is doing that in us, He is also working in the hearts of the people who hear the good news from us.

The Holy Spirit personally works in unbelievers to convict them of sin, and righteousness, and judgement (John 16.8). And so, as we witness, we occasionally come across a person who is strangely receptive of the message – eager to believe and be saved. The Holy Spirit has drawn this one whom God the Father has chosen and he or she cannot help but be converted.

Now don't feel discouraged if you have never personally seen dramatic results – people being saved. The Holy Spirit uses our witness for different purposes. Sometimes it is to sow the seed of the Word. Sometimes it is to water. Sometimes it is to reap.

And sometimes . . . even most times . . . it is to declare Christ's Lordship over those who will not believe. Thus they are convicted without excuse of sin, and righteousness and judgement.

From a global perspective, the collective result of the witness of believers – empowered by the Holy Spirit – is staggering to the imagination. Thousands and thousands are being saved every year. Scores of new churches are being planted all over the world.

And this is as we should expect it to be. Jesus promised that we would see better results than He did:

John 14:12 (NKJV)

¹² “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and **greater works** than these he will do, because I go to My Father.

Jesus ascended for us. Because He is away in heaven, and the Holy Spirit is here with us, greater results are coming in – even in Australia.

Are you part of it? Don't let the Holy Spirit be the forgotten minister in you. Go and tell . . . and see firsthand how the Holy Spirit works internally.

That is the first function of the Holy Spirit that verse 20 names. The second is external.

2. Confirming

There are two phases to the Holy Spirit's external working – each confirms the Word, as verse 20 says. These two are supernatural signs and salvation stories.

a. Supernatural signs

When Jesus ascended into heaven, the evidence that the revolutionary message the apostles preached was indeed from God was in the miraculous signs that people saw.

Mark 16:17-18 (NKJV)

¹⁷ And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will **cast out**

demons; they will speak with new tongues; ¹⁸ they will **take up serpents;** and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will **lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.**”

Why were these signs necessary? Because the New Testament had not yet been written. The Bible wasn't complete. So the Holy Spirit confirmed the truthfulness and the authority of the spoken word with miraculous signs – miracles of the same order that Jesus performed when He was on earth. The connection was unmistakable.

Hebrews 2:3-4 (NKJV)

³ how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which **at the first** began to be **spoken by the Lord** [Jesus], and was **confirmed to us** by those who heard *Him*, ⁴ **God** also bearing witness both **with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit**, according to His own will?

Throughout the Book of Acts we see this happening. On the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the disciples suddenly start speaking fluently in languages they've never studied. Foreigners who had travelled to Jerusalem for a festival were amazed to hear the Word of God in their native tongue. It was a miracle – a sign – from the Holy Spirit, and it confirmed the word of God as Peter preached it that day. Three thousand people were converted.

A short time later, Peter and John tell a lame man in the temple that he is healed in the name of Jesus – a miracle (Acts 3). Thousands of people then crowd around and hear Peter preach the good news for a second time and many are saved. These are at the beginning of Acts.

By the end of Acts, we are hearing of the apostle Paul being bitten by a snake, yet suffering no harm. A miracle – a sign – which confirmed the word that Paul then preached (Acts 28.1-6).

Over and over again we see that the Holy Spirit confirmed the new word – the gospel – that was being proclaimed.

But this raises a question. Should we expect these miraculous signs today? Should we seek to have our witness confirmed by speaking in tongues? By healings? By miraculous protection from snakes and poison?

The answer is no. The reason is because the New Testament – and the Bible – is complete. The transitional age of the apostles is over – dying out with the passing of the apostle John.

Now I am very much aware that many in Christendom today say that speaking in tongues is the proof that you are saved – if you don't speak in tongues, you do not have the Holy Spirit. That teaching has no Biblical basis. Even when tongues – languages – were in use in the first century, it was one of many gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul outright says that not all spoke in tongues (1 Cor 12.30).

But the greater issue is on the side of the Word. If God's Word is complete, and if God's Word is sufficient, and if God's Word is authoritative, not only are signs redundant, but any attempt to re-create signs is distracting and deceptive.

Here's what I mean. Is God's Word complete? Absolutely. That is why this warning is put at the end of the last of 66 books inspired by the Holy Spirit:

Revelation 22:18-19 (NKJV)

¹⁸For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: **If anyone adds** to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; ¹⁹and **if anyone takes away** from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.

With this being true, it is dangerous to seek a supernatural sign of contemporary prophecy from the Holy Spirit today – as many in Christendom do. God speaks to us through His completed Word. And so we read the Word, we meditate on the Word, we memorise the Word, we preach from the Word, we study the Word – and that is how the Holy Spirit speaks to us. He does not speak to us immediately through prophets any more. If He did, then the Bible would not be complete.

Nor would the Bible be sufficient – yet 2 Timothy 3:15-17 declares that it is.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 (NKJV)

¹⁵and that from childhood you have known the **Holy Scriptures**, which are able to make you wise for **salvation** through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* **profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness**, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly **equipped for every good work**.

Do you see from these verses that the Bible is sufficient for salvation? For sanctification? For service? What more do we need? Nothing. It is sufficient.

Complete. Sufficient. And authoritative. As the Sunday School song so aptly puts it, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me . . . some may say that His Word's not true, but I've chosen to believe it, so how about you. God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me."

We have no need for extra words or signs from God today. We have the complete and sufficient and authoritative Word.

But I hasten to add that this in no way diminishes the extraordinary power or working of the Holy Spirit today. The miraculous is still happening – not in tongues and healings and prophecies, but in lives transformed from darkness to light, from death to life.

This is the second phase of the Holy Spirit's working. First, supernatural signs, second . . .

b. Salvation stories

Have you been saved? Have you experienced the liberty of knowing your sins are forgiven? Have you experienced the joy of knowing you are born again as a child of God? Have you experienced the wonder of knowing you will live forever?

And how did it happen? Not by any effort on your part. You know how unworthy you were. You know how blind you were. You know how distant you were from God and godliness.

But God intervened – supernaturally, mercifully – through the Holy Spirit. And He personally drew you specially to repent of your sin and trust Jesus Christ.

That is your story. And it is a story that is repeated by thousands and thousands and thousands of others.

God saved me.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, 'twas blind, but now I see.

Go and tell. The ascended Jesus delegates that role to us. And not to us alone, also to the Holy Spirit who indwells us, enables us, and guides us so that the Word we proclaim is confirmed by the lives that He changes.

Aren't you glad Jesus ascended? He ascended for us – putting the welfare of the whole above His own.

All glory to God.