

## **From Ed Clowney on “The Biblical Theology of the Church”**

### **C. Mission in the Spirit 1. Missio Dei**

The mission of the Spirit is the mission of God who draws men and women to himself through Jesus Christ. By the work of the Spirit Jesus was incarnate in the womb of Mary (Lk. 1 :35). The Spirit descended upon Christ at his baptism, enduing him for ministry as one filled with the Spirit (Mt. 3:16; Lk. 3:22; 4:14). The mission of Jesus was fulfilled in the Spirit. When the time came for Jesus to leave his disciples, he promised the coming of another Friend and Advocate, who would be sent by the Father and the Son (Jn. 14:16; 15:26). The Holy Spirit would continue the divine mission. After the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father. This was the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus alone could provide. It was the blessing that he would send from the throne of glory (Acts 1:4, 5; 2:33).

In the introduction to the Book of Acts, Luke refers to his Gospel, the first volume of his account about Jesus. Luke says that in the Gospel he recounted the things that Jesus 'began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). He evidently intends in his second volume to tell about what Jesus continued to do and teach. Jesus no longer appears in his resurrection body in Acts, except for his meeting with Saul on the Damascus road. Instead, Luke's second book is filled with references to the Holy Spirit. From the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost the great movement of the mission of the Spirit is evident. The initiative is always with the Spirit, who calls, empowers, and directs in the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem (where Peter preaches to the Jews), to Rome (where Paul teaches the Gentiles).

The Spirit uses believers as his instruments, but he shows his sovereignty in the whole mission enterprise. Peter well acknowledges, 'We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him' (Acts 5:32). Peter's own understanding had to be enlarged by a special vision before he was prepared to go to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:9-16). The leaders of the Jerusalem church were shocked when they heard that Peter had baptized the uncircumcised Gentile centurion and his household. But the Spirit had again taken the initiative. He had fallen on those Gentiles as they heard the preaching of Peter. 'They had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repent-ance unto life' (Acts 11:18).

The Spirit guides the church in choosing Spirit-filled men for its ministry (Acts 6:3), but the Spirit also intervenes directly in choosing whom he will. Jesus meets Saul the

persecutor; Saul is filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:17), and the Spirit commands that Saul and Barnabas be separated as the first mission task-force to carry the gospel overseas (Acts 13:1-4). Luke tells us how Paul's journeys are directed by the Spirit (Acts 16:6, 7). Even through opposition and persecution the Spirit guides in scattering the church and thrusting forth witnesses to Christ.

### **The Mission of the Spirit for the Glory of God**

The Spirit reveals divine power in accomplishing his mission. His task is to exalt Jesus Christ and to glorify the Father. The disciples, as they fulfil the Great Commission, are to baptize into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. In mission, the Spirit is one with the Triune God.

The work of the Spirit in oneness with Christ is pictured in the Book of Revelation. There John beholds seven Spirits before the throne (Rev. 1:4). But the seven Spirits belong to Christ (Rev. 3:1); they may reflect the seven-fold enduing of the Messiah (Is. 11:2). In the intricacy of the vision, the seven Spirits are also the seven eyes of the Lamb, seeing and directing all things (Rev. 7:5). By the Spirit, Christ's work will be brought to consummation glory.

The Spirit, as the Spirit of glory, leads the mission of Christ's kingdom forward as well as heavenward. Jesus has returned to heaven, as Peter declared, until the 'time . . . for God to restore everything' (Acts 3:21). The outpouring of the Spirit points to the final cosmic renovation that will accompany the coming of the great day of the Lord (Acts 2:19, 20). The fire of the baptism of the Spirit signifies that renovation (Lk. 3:16, 17). If the disciples are endued rather than consumed by the flame of heaven, it is because the fire is the baptism of their Lord. He has borne the searing flame of judgment, having been baptized in that fire (Lk. 12:49, 50). Now his baptism of fire upon them cleanses and renews, but does not destroy.

### **Vindication by the Spirit's Mission**

The Spirit's purpose in glorifying Christ is accomplished in a mission that brings judgment as well as blessing. The Spirit as Advocate brings the case for the prosecution against the world (Jn. 16:8-11). [34] The world stands convicted for the sin of unbelief.

The Spirit also brings a verdict against the world with respect to Christ's triumphant righteousness, sealed by his ascension. Satan, the Prince of this world and the Accuser of the brethren, is also convicted and condemned. In Paul's confrontation with Elymas the power of the Spirit in judgment is evident. Ananias and Sapphira are judged for lying to the Spirit (Acts 5:3); Stephen accuses his hearers of resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51). The mission of the Spirit of glory in a rebellious world brings conflict, as the history of missions after Acts continues to show.

## **2. The Mission of the Church in the Spirit**

The mission of the church is carried out through ministries of the Word, of life (or order) and of mercy. In all of these areas the church witnesses through the Spirit. The witness of the Word is required of every believer, for every Christian must confess the name of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9, 10; Mt. 10:32f.). This confession must often be made before sceptical or hostile audiences. Every Christian must be prepared 'to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15). The questioner in such a case may well be a magistrate before whom the Christian stands accused. In such circumstances, the Holy Spirit will be the teacher of the accused, fulfilling his role as Advocate (Mt. 10:20; Mk. 13:11; Lk. 12:12; 2 Cor. 13:3). The New Testament never suggests that all Christians have the gifts of an evangelist, a pastor, or a teacher (1 Cor. 12:29). Skill in presenting the claims of the gospel, wisdom in expounding the Scriptures to show their testimony to Christ: these are special gifts of the Spirit. But, significantly, no Christian may be ashamed of Christ. The greatest obstacle to the spread of the gospel is not the limits of the believer's understanding or powers of expression. It is the limits of his courage and faithfulness. Faithfulness will often be put to the test in the life of the church and the experience of the Christian. For that reason, the witness of every Christian is put in the context of confession under scrutiny and duress. In the Book of Acts we have records of the witness of gifted men on trial, speaking as the Spirit gives them expression (Acts 4:8; 5:29-32; 22:3-21; 24:10-21). The filling of the Spirit endues Christians to speak the Word with boldness (Acts 4:31).

### **The Witness of Life**

The verbal witness of the church is supported and extended by the witness of the life of

the believing community. The apostolic church, 'encouraged by the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord' (Acts 9:31). The grace of the Spirit that built up the church became the ground of the growth of the church. Barnabas, 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith', was called to mission after he had manifested his gifts in encouraging the saints in their walk with the Lord (Acts 11:23f.). As in the Old Testament, the very separation and holiness of the people of God (2 Cor. 6:17-7:1) becomes a witness, like that of a city set upon a hill. Seeing the good works of the Spirit-filled church, the nations will be brought near, will fall down and declare that God is in the midst of his people (Mt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 14:25). As the last cited passage shows, the gifts of the Spirit for worship and for edification have their own attractiveness with respect to witness. The spiritual holiness of the church, by its contrast with the corruption of a heathen world, will shine as a light of witness (Phil. 2:12-18).

As we have seen, the Spirit perfects the church in holiness through a godly discipline. The order of the law of love structures the life of the church. That self-denying love must also reach out to others (1 Thess. 3:12). Christians must be concerned for the peace of the city where they are passing residents. They pray for those in authority to this end, knowing the importance of a context in which the gospel can be spread (1 Tim. 2:1-4). It is part of the mission of the church to witness to God's standards of righteousness in the midst of a world where they are defied. Especially the lay members of the church must penetrate with their witness the spheres of work, government, and leisure where they are involved. The church penetrates like salt or leaven, not with physical force; it is the work of the Spirit that enables this penetration. The weapons of our warfare are not physical, but spiritual, as Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

### **Witness of Mercy**

The witness of the church is extended through the ministry of mercy. This appears clearly in the ministry of Jesus Christ. The miracles he performed were not wonders of judgment, but of healing and forgiveness. Jesus identified his own ministry in terms of the prophecy of Isaiah 61. He was anointed of the Spirit to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the bruised and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:18, 19). The year of the Lord is God's own fulfilment of the year of Jubilee in the law of Moses (Leviticus 25). It was the fiftieth year in the sacred calendar, the year when all debts were to be cancelled, all

Israelite slaves set free, and every man restored to his own inheritance. God's great day of restoration and renewal would accomplish all that was symbolized in the year of Jubilee. Jesus announces the fulfilment in himself, and pro-claims that he is the Anointed One who will do all that the oracle promises. In his ministry of healing Jesus revealed the mercy of God's salvation. His miracles were signs of hope pointing to the final blessing in store for those who trusted in him. Again, the work of the Spirit is an anticipation of glory, an intrusion into the present of the joy that will come at last.

In the early church the work of ministering to the poor and afflicted took on such large proportions that the apostles were overwhelmed, and sought relief so that they might give priority to prayer and the ministry of the word. Those who were chosen to assist the apostles were men 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' (Acts 6:3). The involvement of others in the administration of benevolence did not end the ministrations of the apostles themselves. Miracles of healing were performed by Peter, John, and other apostles. The 'signs of an apostle' given of the Spirit were signs that conformed to the ministry of Jesus, who was anointed with the Spirit, and who 'went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil . . .' (Acts 10:38; cf. Heb. 2:4; Acts 5:12-16). Peter speaks of the stewardship of the gifts of the Spirit as benevolent sharing of what we have received, shown for example in the grace of hospitality (1 Pet. 4:10). Those who sow to the Spirit will be eager to show kindness to all men as they have opportunity, especially, of course, to the household of faith (Gal. 6:8-10).

### **3. The Missionary Gifts**

The Spirit moves the whole church to witness to Christ in word and deed, but the Spirit also structures the church for witness according to the gifts that he imparts. The gifts and office of the apostle are first in the church, because the apostles, as we have seen, are foundation stones. Inspired apostolic teaching is the foundation upon which the church rests. But the apostles are also those who are sent into the world with the message of the gospel. Barnabas, who shared the missionary task, is called an apostle along with Paul.

Barnabas did not share the foundational calling of the twelve, but he did share their evangelistic labours (Acts 14:14). If the first office in the church, supported by unique gifts of the Spirit, is a missionary office, we are reminded again that the church itself is a missionary organization. Its missionary calling may be blunted by worldliness or smothered by worldly institutionalism, but the gifts of the Spirit do not move it in that

direction. Unfortunately, the foundational aspect of the apostolic office, the authority of the apostles in delivering to the church the teachings of Christ, has been emphasized to the detriment of the missionary calling that they fulfilled. This may seem strange in view of the extensive information that we have in the New Testament about that apostolic missionary par excellence, the Apostle Paul. Still more unfortunate is the obscurity that has been allowed to surround the New Testament record about the office of the evangelist. At the time of the Reformation, the vast number of clergy at all levels in the hierarchy without pastoral charges was rightly seen as an abuse in need of correction. Appeal had been made to the office of the evangelist to justify ordination to hierarchical position (on the ground that Timothy and Titus were evangelists who ordained elders: 1 Tim. 5:22; Titus 1:5). [35] To avoid this possible conclusion, the Reformers linked the office of the evangelist to the office of the apostle so closely that both were held to have ceased with the apostolic age. [36] As a consequence, the missionary character of the church itself was diminished or lost from view for a large segment of Protestantism. When the church was reawakened to its missionary calling in the latter part of the eighteenth century, much of the organization of the mission was assumed to be unconnected with New Testament teaching regarding office. To this day the tendency persists. Missionary structure has been adapted to para-ecclesiastical forms that may be shaped more in the model of a business or political organization than the order of Christ's church.

Of course, the office of the evangelist is not the only missionary office in the church, although it has a distinctive missionary focus. Pastors and teachers are necessarily involved in proclaiming the gospel. Paul writes to the church at Rome and speaks of his desire to preach the gospel to them: something that he does in his epistle (Rom. 1:15). Deacons, particularly, are involved in witness as they exercise their gifts of helping and healing. As we recognize the missionary dimension of all church office, the outreach of the church can be seen to include not only the evangelist to preach the gospel, but the use of every gift of the Spirit by the widest range of gifted Christians. The fellowship of the Spirit that binds Christians together also calls and equips them to be Christ's envoys to the ends of the earth.