

## 2:1 WORD AND SPIRIT

**‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words which I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants – from this time on and for ever,’ says the LORD.**

*Isaiah 59:21*

**The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.**

*John 3:34*

The little circular pool had been formed by water dripping vertically through fifteen hundred feet of Grand Canyon rock. We were footsore and thirsty, and this water was pure and completely satisfying. It was a secret and almost sacred place which we were reluctant to leave.

The pair of verses above span the two parts of the Bible. They show with remarkable clarity how the heaven-sent gifts of word and Spirit centre directly on the person of Christ and so reach us today.

Like Mary of Bethany, we would abandon everything to listen to Christ. No wonder she was reluctant to leave her place at his feet (Luke 10:39). The words of God were Spirit dripping right down into her inner being, satisfying her, cleansing her through and through.

We need this secret place at the heart of God where he speaks to us. We can't travel on without it. The alternative is to believe that he doesn't speak to us, that even if he does we can't understand him, so we are left to drink from our own stagnant pools.

God however loves us too much to stop communicating with us. All he asks is that we make time in our hasty lives to listen to his Son, who has been listening to his Father from eternity.

*Lord, I choose to believe you can speak to me and to those who come after me. Without this certainty I'm lost. Without the reassurance and encouragement of your actual voice, I get upset and distracted by the noise around. I can't go on without you.*

## 2:2 WORKING WORD

**We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.**

*1 Thessalonians 2:13*

**My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.**

*1 Corinthians 2:4-5*

When Paul walked into cities like Thessalonica or Corinth and started speaking, what did he expect to happen, and why? Can we expect the same thing to happen today?

Well, first and foremost he expected people to hear God himself speaking to them. Most travelling orators brought a mixture of brilliant ideas, rhetorical language and shrewd psychology, plus gifts of character and humour. Paul was different. He wasn't attractive as a personality or talented as a speaker. He saw himself as an ambassador, tasked with delivering God's message in words that God gave him, particularly the written words of Scripture.

Then he expected the Spirit to get to work. He wasn't just delivering a lecture, or explaining a complicated train of thought. As he spoke about who Jesus was and what he had done, the Holy Spirit would convict folk of their error and unbelief, would testify to the goodness and greatness of Christ, would open eyes hitherto blind to the truth and kindle a desire for eternal life with God.

Finally he expected at least some of his hearers to come to faith. This might not be a fully-formed understanding of the whole sweep of God's purpose in Christ, but it would mean that they had come into a living relationship with him which could be demonstrated by publicly getting baptised and developed by further teaching.

*Where is this kind of preaching happening today? If it isn't going on in my area, what can be done about it? Word, Spirit and faith working together to produce a people for God. Bring it on!*

## 2:3 LIFEGIVING WORDS

**The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life.**

*John 6:63*

**Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.**

*John 5:24*

John 6:63 has been badly served by its English translators. Either they give 'Spirit' a small 's'; or they put in extra words like 'full of' which aren't there in the text. Consequently this totally key statement of Jesus is passed over, when it should be printed in letters of fire on the front of every Bible.

*The Message* brings out its true potency: 'The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen. Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.' Life, of course, means not biological existence but heavenly, eternal deathlessness.

But just hearing Jesus' words doesn't by itself convey this kind of life. The Lord's constant complaint is that people hear and don't believe. In three of the four scenarios in the parable of the Sower the word fails to generate a lasting crop. The Bible isn't magic potion – it needs to be mixed with faith and perseverance (Luke 8:15).

What is true spirituality? It isn't a dreamy mysticality; it's the capacity to respond to the Spirit of God. We need to be aware of our response-level. What amount of jumping around do Jesus' words generate in me? That's the measure of how spiritually alive I am.

*'In him was life' (John 1:4). An old saint lamented, 'I have not laid my pipe up to the fountainhead.' When I read the Bible, is it a time when I drink at the 'spring of living water' (Jeremiah 17:13) – or just something I've got to do like brushing my teeth?*

## 2:4 THE UNKNOWN BIBLE

**You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets.**

*Nehemiah 9:20, 30*

**Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.**

*Romans 15:4*

'It's all very well for educated Jews like St Paul to go on about the value of the Old Testament, but for the average church member it's completely unnecessary, apart from a few inspirational Psalms.' Why do we need this largely unread part of the Bible?

As I've said elsewhere, I was given *Daily Light* as a confirmation present. Each morning and evening you could read a little sequence of Biblical snippets on a particular theme. The passages freely switched between OT and NT and were by and large faithful to their original context. It gave me a vivid sense of the unity and 'from God-ness' of the entire Bible. I wish more people used it (perhaps in a modernised version) today. It's on the St Paul's website under resources.

The Old Testament isn't a waste of space. It's about a God who speaks and acts. A God who cares passionately about his creation. A God who is going to put everything right and doesn't mind how long he takes to do it. The same God who came to us in Jesus Christ.

It's also about people who were like us. Decent and nasty in equal measure. Idealistic yet falling well short of the highest. Paying lip-service to the One True God but unreformed on the inside.

Its voices are as diverse as the flawed people who wrote its pages; yet its consistent author is the Holy Spirit who knows God and humankind through and through. Its tone is upbeat, through all the pain and confusion of its narrative. Its subtitle is 'Hope, whatever.'

*If only I knew it better! It's there to teach me, but how teachable am I? The Bible is always going to be bigger than I am, because it's God's book. But it's meant to be my book too. Please give it back to me.*

## 2:5 SPIRIT OF FIRE

**He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**

*Luke 3:16*

**They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’**

*Luke 24:32*

The two disciples walking back to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day were joined by a stranger, who took them on a whistle-stop tour of the Old Testament. A treasure hunt for clues of Christ: Star, Lamb, Prophet, King, Branch, Servant, Son. Result: polite interest? stifled yawns? blank incomprehension? No – their hearts were set on fire. Their imaginations were kindled. They longed to hear more, to know more of this God.

This is the work of the Spirit. As we walk (or stumble) through the pages of the Bible, he draws alongside and walks with us. As a teenager I was given a copy of *Daily Light*. On each page was a leading verse, then a little string of passages developing the same idea. It demonstrated the thematic unity of the Bible to me and I couldn’t get enough of it. I was fired up!

Baptism is dipping something in an element until it is soaked through, like steeping a garment in dye or dunking a biscuit in tea. It is akin to the process of refining described in Malachi 3:2-3: ‘He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.’ Baptism with fire happens when the Refiner takes us into his word, soaking us in its cleansing and purifying power. Our part is to immerse ourselves in the truths of Scripture, looking for Christ in its pages, constantly asking the Spirit to create his own life within us and help us to love God more.

*‘He will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned’ (Luke 3:17, The Message). Lord, walk with me through your word, set my heart alight and keep it burning with your love.*

## 2:6 THE MIND OF CHRIST

**This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. We have the mind of Christ.**

*1 Corinthians 2:13,*

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**All your children will be taught by the Lord, and great will be their peace.**

*Isaiah*

*54:13*

How can Paul say that he and his fellow-apostles have the mind of Christ? Only because we can, all of us, be trained to think in the way Christ thinks.

Schools are tasked with delivering a curriculum. In a free state this has no sinister implications. Our children need to be taught, so teachers are necessary. I have been a teacher, and my principal task, as I saw it, was to explain the language, history and culture central to my subject. Explanation could take many forms, but its object was to open minds to think for themselves. It wasn’t ‘like it or lump it,’ it was ‘work it out for yourselves, and I’ll help where I can.’

So words mattered. They had to be appropriate both to the subject (telling it how it was) and to the students (enabling their comprehension). This happens as I study the Bible. I need God to show me how it is (‘spiritual realities’), using the words given by the Spirit. I need to be trained to think as Christ thinks.

The Bible is the handbook of the Spirit; the Spirit is the handmaid of the Bible. The Bible uniquely cross-references itself. It says the same things in different ways, again and again. The New Testament is constantly quoting and interpreting the Old. Light sheds light on light.

*Lord Jesus, I don’t want the world’s ideas or merely human wisdom. Show me how things are from your point of view. And give me your abundant peace as you help me to work it all out.*