

2:1 SPIRIT OF TRUTH

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.
John 16:13

Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me and teach me your law.
Psalms 119:29

The TV panel game ‘Would I Lie to You?’ celebrates the art of devising a story that holds water and survives probing questions while still being thoroughly false. The key to acting out a lie successfully is to believe it oneself. What if I am so fundamentally self-deceived that my whole Christian profession is a skilfully constructed falsehood? I can’t move on till I’ve sorted this out.

The Spirit of truth and the word of truth (James 1:18) act in partnership to safeguard our integrity. When King David spent many months covering up his sin, he found the Lord’s hand heavy upon him (Psalm 32:4). He realised that the pathway to spiritual and indeed physical health was to acknowledge his guilt before God.

So does this mean continual introspection and sifting through my motives like a ferret looking for rabbits down a hole? Probably not. At our best we are a complex mixture of psychological motivation, and we may not ever be able to nail precisely why we choose to do this or that, or believe one thing and not another.

In the 1960s Bishop John Robinson wrote the best-selling book *Honest to God*. In it he refers to the process whereby the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable first ‘came to himself’ then ‘came to his father’ (Luke 15:17, 20 KJV). Though theologically controversial, the book’s title and the author’s desire to be ruthlessly real before God led many Christians to examine the foundations of their belief. Had they been trying to get grace ‘on the cheap’ (as Bonhoeffer put it)?

The great reassurance is that God knows me, that he is ‘gracious’ and merciful, and that his Spirit lives in me to guide me into the ways of truth. Help me, Lord, to ‘come to myself’, but also to ‘come to the Father’ through faith in Christ – not as a one-off moment in the past, but as a continual and habitual ‘walking in the light’ (1 John 1:7).

2:2 FRIENDS OF THE WORLD?

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives more grace.
James 4:4-6

Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives among you?
1 Corinthians 3:16

There was intense opposition to closing down the village church. The more influential inhabitants formed ‘The Friends of St Aloysius’ and their money and prestige carried the day. The price was that the Rector had to defer to them in the way the church was run, with the result that nothing was ever allowed to change.

When we became Christians, God put his Spirit in us, to change us from being friends of the world to being friends of God. Our lives are to be run the way God wants, when we may previously have deferred to the rich or powerful or attractive people around us.

Just as Jesus had to cleanse the Temple at Jerusalem, so he will demand that our hearts be solely dedicated to his worship and service. The blazing anger he displayed on that occasion was entirely consistent with the ‘jealousy’ of the God of the Old Testament for the undivided love of his people (Deuteronomy 32:15-18).

Perhaps I’ve had it too easy. People may think me a bit ‘religious’ but they tolerate me as long as I don’t go too far. Certain people’s opinion (in my family, community or job) matters to me. Has this prevented God’s Spirit from doing the life-changing work he wants to do in me and through me?

‘But he gives more grace.’ I am made for God, not for this world or its comfortable compromises. Yet I so often fail to stand for the unpopular option. Well then, apply to him for grace, more grace. His promise is delivered by return, through his Spirit. He is my best friend.

2:3 TRANSFORMED

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (or reflect) the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2

We are told that Moses used to go into a tent and 'the Lord would speak to him face to face'; when he came out, his face was so radiant that he had to put on a veil or hood to avoid blinding the Israelites (Exodus 33:11, 34:29-35). Paul uses this to illustrate the way the Holy Spirit irradiates our whole beings when we gaze into God's word, changing us bit by bit into Christ's likeness.

Not that Moses actually saw God – that wasn't allowed (Exodus 33:20). But as he peered into the old covenant of the Sinai Law, he received encouragement, hope, guidance and a sense of God's utter goodness, which gave him joy and serenity. Paul's point is: if this could happen for Moses with words which led to condemnation and death – because the people could never keep this law of love – how much more will it happen for us as we meditate on the Lord Jesus Christ through his word, and the Spirit helps us to work it out.

But just as science reaches its conclusions through repeated practical experiments, testing the truth of a theory until it is fully established, so mere Bible knowledge won't transform us into the image of Christ. Our whole mindset has to be lined up experimentally with the revealed will of God. Here is J B Phillips' version of the Romans passage above, adapted as a prayer:

'Dear Lord, please don't let the world around squeeze me into its own mould, but would you remould my mind from within, so that I may prove in practice that your plan for me is good, meets all your demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.'

2:4 STIRRING UP

'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

Haggai 2:4-5

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 2:1

The mood of apathy and despair gripped the whole nation. The Persian emperor Cyrus had encouraged the exiles to return home, and a start had been made on rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem, but Cyrus' successors had lost interest, and the work had been at a standstill for ten years. Two Jewish leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, had no idea how to proceed in the general confusion and discouragement.

Some centuries later, a young man named Timothy is similarly discouraged. He has been appointed to head up the growing church at Ephesus, but his comparative youthfulness and inexperience have met with criticism, and he feels like packing the whole thing in.

They need stirring up. God's word comes to Joshua through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and to Timothy through his spiritual father and mentor Paul. 'Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands,' says Paul (2 Timothy 1:6).

Is there some work we are involved in that needs galvanising? Some half-finished task that will peter out if there is no injection of fresh energy? A call of Christ that stirred us once but now seems a pipe-dream and a delusion? God's double answer is 'covenant' and 'grace'. His presence assured by his promise; his saving power let loose by the gift of his Spirit. No terms or conditions apply.

Lord, I depend utterly upon you for guidance and strength. Yet you are telling me to 'be strong' as if it all depended on me. Maybe there are others who similarly need to be stirred up. Please turn up the volume so we hear your call more clearly. Then just turn up the power of your Spirit so that the work gets done, to your glory not ours.

2:5 FERTILITY

Till the Spirit is poured out on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.

Isaiah 32:15

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure for ever.

Isaiah 55:11, 13

Two thousand years before Christ two huge cities flourished on the banks of the river Indus: Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. The Indus, fed by the snows of the Karakoram and Himalaya, then either changed its course or deposited masses of mud, and the cities were abandoned, to be excavated millennia later by archaeologists.

The Holy Spirit is tasked with delivering the loving purposes of God as declared in his word. These include spiritual richness, with life and fertility in abundance. The word promises, the Spirit provides.

Why then do churches which have previously shown vigorous life decline or become dry and ineffective? Why do individuals who show a hunger for God and make good progress in the Christian life then lose interest and fall away? Can this have been God's will for them?

There is no easy answer, but the cause surely lies in a failure to maintain contact with the sources that bring us the knowledge of God: the daily presence of Jesus Christ and the constant inspiration of his word. The modern Indus is still the major source of drinkable water in Pakistan. The Bible and the Holy Spirit are still the mainstream providers of Christian faith and fruitfulness.

'You have lost the love you had at first' says the Spirit to the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:4). Lord, I don't want to silt up or dry up. I want to stay fresh and fertile in your service, whatever age I am. Please show me how to irrigate my soul by your word and your Spirit, so that you may be glorified.

2:6 FALLING AWAY

Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

Luke 8:13

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance.

Hebrews 6:4-6

It is a matter of sad experience that some who start the Christian journey apparently in good faith, subsequently abandon the enterprise. Many of Christ's own disciples turned back and no longer followed him (John 6:66). In the Parable of the Sower he envisages this possibility; yet he also says, 'I know my sheep and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand' (John 10:27-28).

Given that some undoubtedly do fall away (or 'backslide'), what happens to them? The letter to the Hebrews has some very fierce passages about facing judgment for having crucified Christ afresh and having insulted the Spirit of grace. But equally God promises, 'I will heal their waywardness (backsliding KJV) and love them freely' (Hosea 14:4), and Paul is adamant about the permanence of justification and how nothing that happens can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:31-39).

We must be very careful not to do God's judging for him. If someone departs from the faith we are encouraged to pray for them and try to bring them back (James 5:16ff). Nathan brought David back; Jesus restored Peter. Yet others like Pharaoh, Judas and Simon the sorcerer never found a way to true repentance. Prayer works; mountains can be moved and ways opened; but the miracle is God's.

'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness' (2 Timothy 3:19). Lord, where would I be without your grace and mercy?