

Simply Christian
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Course outline, book and other materials

[Simply Christian](#) by N. T. Wright
Also recommend [Simply Jesus](#).

Gathering, Prayer

Introduction

Review:

- Four echoes of a voice: justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty. Immanuel Kant concluded his *Critique of Practical Reason*, "Two things fill me with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry sky above and the moral law within. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence."
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/10/29/does-beauty-point-to-god/#comment-405915>
- God: Where is he? God's space is not the same as our space. How do they overlap: Pantheism, deism, and Christian view.
- The story of Israel: Exile and restoration. Four themes in the OT: King, Temple, Torah, and new creation.
- Isaiah (in line with some Psalms and other passages, spoke of God's kingdom as the time when:
 - a) God's promises and purposes would be fulfilled.
 - b) Israel would be rescued from pagan oppression.
 - c) Evil would be judged, especially the evil regimes.
 - d) God would bring about a new reign of justice and peace.
- What did Jews expect from their Messiah?
 - He would fight the battle against Israel's enemies, specifically the Romans.
 - He would rebuild, or at least cleanse and restore, the Temple.
 - He would reestablish the monarchy as in the days of David and Solomon.
 - He would be God's representative to Israel, and Israel's representative to God.
- The rise of Christianity

This week we will talk about the third part of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit by its very nature hard to define. Since as Covenanters we be-

lieve that the Bible is only perfect source for faith, doctrine, and conduct let's start by looking at what the Bible says about the HS.¹

In the OT the Holy Spirit is:

1. An agent of creation. (Gen 1:2, Ps. 33:6, Ezek. 37:1-10). The awesome power of God is depicted in an impersonal way. (Group 1)
2. A source of inspiration. (Is. 42: 1-10, 1 Sam. 10:9-13). In the judges, kings, and prophets, the Holy Spirit is vehicle for God's revelation to them. The leaders of Israel get wisdom, courage, and power as gifts from the possession of God's Spirit. (Group 2)
3. An indication of God's presence in the community. (Ezek 11:14-21, Ezek. 36:22-32). This is less frequent, and a bit more obscure, but still a theme in the OT. (Group 3)

In the NT, the Holy Spirit:

1. Is depicted like the in the OT. Jesus is endowed with power by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 2:13-17, Mark 1:9-11. Luke 3:21-22, Matt. 12:28, Luke 4:16-21). The church is empowered for its mission by the Holy Spirit. (Group 4)
2. Is depicted as coming jointly from Jesus and God. The Holy Spirit comes to represent the presence and activity of Jesus in the church.
3. Associated with the bringer of "gifts" necessary for Christian ministry (including ecstatic speech—tongues) (In Acts and the Pauline letters)
4. Makes Christians one in Christ and empowers them for the mission of the church and to lead the moral and ethical life appropriate for Christians.+

One might think that depicting the image of the Holy Spirit would be difficult. And, indeed it is. But, that doesn't stop people from trying <show slide of numbers and images>.

Chapter 9: God's Breath of Life

What images did the early Christians use to articulate the Holy Spirit?

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- Breath of air, a breeze, a powerful wind
- Fire—tongues of fire resting on them and transforming them
- Bird brooding over the waters bringing forth a new world or order and life

The disciples were puzzled. They didn't know what to do next. They even went back to fish—maybe they need some food or cash. The last time they

¹ Harper's Bible Dictionary

saw him they asked him what it all meant. Was this the time when Israel would receive the kingdom in the sense that the Jews had been hoping for?

As was often the case, Jesus didn't answer directly. <Why do you suppose that is?> "Many of the questions we ask God can't be answered directly, not because God doesn't know the answers but because our questions don't make sense." C. S. Lewis put it like this—many of our questions are, from God's point of view, like asking "Is yellow square or round?" or "How many hours are there in a mile?"

Here is how Mark records the conversation in Acts chapter 1, ⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <in other words, none of your business> ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And poof, in the very next verse, he is swept up by a cloud. So, what do you suppose the disciples did with that? I'm willing to bet they didn't have a clue what it meant.

So what did Jesus say the Holy Spirit would help them do—be witnesses to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit and the task of the Church are inextricably intertwined. The Holy Spirit was not given so we could have a spiritual high. As Wright puts it, "God doesn't give people the Holy Spirit in order to let them enjoy the spiritual equivalent of a day at Disneyland." The Holy Spirit, can of course, give you a lift, or a new perspective, and certainly a sense of God's presence. But, that is not point. With the Holy Spirit, we are called to help create God's kingdom on earth.

Just as important, the church can't accomplish its task without the Holy Spirit. Trying it leads to arrogance or burnout, or both. "Without God's Spirit, the church simply can't be the church." "Church" is a loaded word these days. Think about it as the "family of God's people", or "all those believe and follow Jesus". And try to block out the images of buildings and the negative images.

God's Spirit and God's Future

The Spirit is given to begin the work of making God's future real in the present. This is an important point. We need to learn to live the life, and by the rule, of God's future world, even as we are continuing to live within the present one. Jesus calls the present world "this corrupt and sinful generation".

Paul calls it “the present evil age.” I’m none of us would argue too hard about those descriptions of our time. While progress has been made, there is still corruption and sin and evil.

Paul speaks of the Spirit as the guarantee or the down-payment of what is come. The word he uses is “engagement ring”. He isn’t speaking about an inheritance the way we think of leaving our assets to future generations. He evokes the Exodus story which begins with the Passover and ends with the Promised Land. In effect he is saying we are the people of the true Exodus, on our way to the Promised Land. This Promised Land is not a small section of the Middle East. Indeed the whole world is now God’s holy land, and be extension the Promised Land.

Paul says repeatedly “in the Messiah” as a way of describing those who belong to Jesus. In 2 Cor. 5:17, Paul says, “¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ <in the Messiah>, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Everything about us is new.

So, where does the Holy Spirit fit into this. The Holy Spirit plays the same role that the pillar of cloud and fire played in the first Exodus. The Spirit leads, guides, warns, rebukes, grieves when we fail, and celebrates our small victories.

So, here is image. As a result of Jesus’ death, we have been freed from our slavery to sin and death. We are on an Exodus towards the Promised Land, God’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit is our pillar of cloud and fire leading the way for us. Thinking this way would have been natural for the early Christians, especially those of Jewish descent.

God’s Spirit Between Heaven and Earth

The Holy Spirit also joins heaven and earth together. Remember we talked about heaven and earth interesting. Let’s review that concept for a minute. We talked about three options:

1. God is everywhere. Pantheism or Panentheism. Wright recall this conversation with a pantheist (although she probably wouldn’t have called it that), “Of course Jesus is divine. But so am I. So are you. So is my pet rabbit.” As a Christian, this statement is clearly absurd. In pantheism, you are what you are. There is no future beyond.
2. Deism. God’s sphere and our sphere are separate and different places. If God’s power does show up, it is via the supernatural. Our sphere is the natural world, following the laws of physics. God’s sphere is supernatural. So, if you believe in option 2, you look for spectacular events as evidence of God’s work. Warning—spectacular events do happen

and they do matter. Wright just believes that it is not the right framework to think about God's presence. Neither option works as a paradigm for understanding what the NT says about the Holy Spirit.

3. Somehow, God's dimension and our dimension, heaven and earth, overlap and interlock. All the questions we want to ask about this are, and will remain, mysterious until the two are firmly joined. Nevertheless, the point about the Holy Spirit in this option is because of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, we become God's new Temple. Individually and corporately, those in whom the Holy Spirit comes to live are where heaven and earth meet! Ponder that a moment and think about that concept would change your idea of who you are and how you should behave.

The obvious retort—well, I sure don't see much evidence of that. Paul saw those failings as well, and in spite of them, he says you to the church in Corinth, that they can be the place where the Holy Spirit dwells. And, he goes on, that is why bodily holiness and unity matter so much.

Chapter 10. Living by the Spirit.

Now at this point, we should be quaking in our boot. If we are really the Temple of the living God, the place where heaven and earth intersect, we should be taking our shoes off because we are on Holy Ground. It is enough to make you turn into a desert hermit and sit on a pole for the rest of our lives. <Show slide of Simeon Stylites>

We are called to be holy, and early on, Christian writings emphasized fulfilling the Law, that is the Torah. Now, before you get your knickers in a bunch, let's be clear. Jesus made it pretty clear that the food laws were to be set aside in favor of a different kind of holiness or identification. Paul makes it clear that circumcision is no longer necessary. Hebrews insists that Jesus' death makes the sacrificial system pointless. Early Christians were quite clear that following the Sabbath was not mandatory, even though it is one of the Ten Commandments. In spite of all this, they still talked about fulfilling the law. The point is not that the Law is a convenient moral guide. The Torah, like the Temple, is one of the places where heaven and earth meet. Some Jewish teachers suggest that studying and keeping the Torah is akin to worship in the Temple. Now, fulfilling the law sounds not just difficult, but impossible. But, it is hard to read the NT without coming to the conclusion that it is our duty to fulfill the law.

In Acts 2, the story of the day of Pentecost, one of the themes is the Holy Spirit fulfills the Torah. And, it is interesting that to this day, Pentecost is observed in Judaism as the feast of the giving of the Law. Fifty days after the

Passover, Moses goes up the mountain and comes down with the Ten Commandments.

We should have this in mind when we read Acts 2. Jesus dies just after Passover freeing us from sin and providing a new start for the entire world, especially his followers. Fifty days later, Jesus is taken up into heaven (God's dimension of reality). He come down again in the form of the Spirit in the remarkable story in Acts 2. The Torah and the Temple are completed (fulfilled if you will) by the Holy Spirit.

Spirit, Word, and Wisdom

The disciples must have been a little reluctant to go out and spread the word about Jesus. After all, when they told the Jews, where they must have started, that Jesus was the true Messiah and that he had been crucified by the Romans (at least partly at the wishes of the Jewish establishment), and that he rose again. What response would they have gotten? Laughter? Derision? Persecution? When then went to the Gentiles and told them there was a single true God who was calling the entire world into account through a man whom God had sent and whom God had raised from the dead. How absurd is that? It must have sounded a bit like this snippet of dialog from Monty Python's Life of Brian:

[The audience members at the back of the crowd are having trouble hearing the Sermon on the Mount.]

Man: I think it was, "Blessed are the cheesemakers"!

Gregory's wife: What's so special about the cheesemakers?

Gregory: Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.

Yet, the message had traction. It had power. The early Christians associated that power with the Holy Spirit, often referred to simply as the "the word".

- ^{Acts 4:31} When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.
- ^{Acts 6:7} The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

When you announce that good news that the risen Jesus is Lord, that very message is the word of God, a carrier of agent of God's Spirit. I know this sounds esoteric, but it is clearly what the early Christians believed.

What about wisdom? Wisdom (personified) was thought within Judaism to be God's agent in creation, through whom the world was made. Paul, like the

book of Proverbs, speaks of this wisdom being accessible to us through the power of God's Spirit. This is not the wisdom of this world. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 2: 7-ff, "7But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

9But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,

what God has prepared for those who love him"—

10these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. 13And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual."

God has given us access to a new kind of wisdom through the Spirit.

In Acts Luke writes that in his earlier volume (the Gospel of Luke), he described "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach." The implication is clear. He didn't finish, and we are called to continue that work with the leadership and help from the Holy Spirit.

Towards Christian Spirituality.

As Christians we believe that God's Spirit is the answer to the four questions that we talked about in week one. Where do the yearning for justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty come from.

Two things stand out about characteristically Christian spirituality.

First, It combines a sense of the awe and majesty of God with a sense of his intimate presence. This not an easy concept to describe. We are encouraged to address God as Abba, Father or Daddy, just the way Jesus did. At some level, having at least a hint of the intimate knowledge of the awesome and majestic God is an inherent part of being Christian. Jesus says the Holy Spirit will not be denied to those who ask. Luke 11:7-13 from *The Message* says, "9"Here's what I'm saying:

Ask and you'll get;

Seek and you'll find;

Knock and the door will open.

10"Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. 11If your little boy asks for a

serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? ¹²If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? ¹³As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing—you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?"

Second, Christian spirituality normally involves a measure of suffering. You often hear that suffering builds character. I react to that statement, partly I suppose because I don't believe I have suffered all that much and also believe I am a person of character. <WDYT—does suffering build character? Is it necessary to suffer to have character?>

Jesus prayed to Abba in Gethsemane and asked his Daddy if there was another way, if he had to go through the horrible fate that was ahead. The answer to that prayer was no, there is not another way. If Jesus had to pray that, why should we expect to not have to pray it ourselves? This is theme in both Jesus' teaching and Paul's letters. As followers of Jesus we are called to live by the rules of the new world rather than the old one, and the old world won't like that. Suffering might not entail actual persecution in our world. In fact, it almost certainly won't. But we can suffer discrimination because of their commitment to Jesus Christ. People who live in non-Christian countries (lots of example about in the Middle East today) will suffer more directly. But suffering takes many forms—sickness, depression, bereavement, moral dilemmas, tragedy, etc. The point is this: "it is precisely when we are suffering that we can most confidently expect the Spirit to be with us."

Glimpsing the Triune God.

So how do we understand God? How can we, to use an earlier metaphor, stare at the sun? Three or four centuries after the time of Paul, the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated. If you read about that development of Trinitarian theology, it was quite contentious and caused disruptions in the church. In hindsight, it is easy to see that Paul, John, Hebrews and other NT books have the understanding of the Trinity, even though it is not explicitly called that. This is not a clever intellectual exercise in word play. This is about a way to understand God's love for us and our love for him. The Spirit intercedes for us with God and searches our heart. And, it all because of God's son, Jesus. Jesus is was not a great teacher of timeless truths, or a moral example, both the one through whose life, death, and resurrection God's rescue operation was put into effect and the cosmos turned its great corner at last.

All worldviews are challenged to the core by this claim.

When challenged back, Christianity stands up remarkable well.

Finish with the quote on page 140.

The next 3 weeks we will talk about what our response to this should be as Christians. Next week we will discuss worship and prayer. Read chapters 11 and 12.

End in prayer.