



Introduction:

Making the Father known

This book is for anyone who is thirsty for a deep experience of the Spirit of God, who will not be satisfied by anything less than a full, lasting and authentic drinking from the life-giving waters of God Himself. It is about the Spirit of God and His relationship to the Word of God – Jesus the Eternal Word, but particularly the Bible as the written word. It is not about healings, miracles, speaking in tongues or other – sometimes controversial – subjects associated with the Spirit. It is very specifically about the relationship between the Spirit and the Bible.

FOUR CAUSES OF CONCERN

At some stage in their lives most, if not all, Christians are concerned, even anxious, about how the Spirit of God relates to the Bible. There are at least four reasons for this.

Personal anxiety

Soon after God brought me to a living faith in Christ, I met another equally young Christian and told him what had happened to me. 'That's good,' he said, 'but you need to realise that it's nothing compared to what the Spirit has done in my





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life'. He went on to tell me about some wonderful experience he had had since he first came to faith in Christ. The details are not important. But it seemed unrelated to the Bible. And it unsettled me. I worried that I might be missing out. Perhaps I was. He certainly thought I was.

We are especially prone to this anxiety, if we have been brought up as 'Bible Christians' with a strong emphasis on the centrality of the Bible in our churches and our Christian lives. Is there something more we are missing by focusing so much on the Bible? How does a living experience of the Spirit relate to our sometimes humdrum and pedestrian experience of reading or hearing the Bible? Surely there must be something more. There is, but I don't think it was what my friend was talking about. It is what this book is about.

Devotional longing

Anxiety that we are missing out is a negative emotion. But that can easily turn into something more positive, as we begin to long, thirst and hunger for more of God. I think of times in my Christian life when I have felt, as I often continue to feel, dry. And I long not to feel dry. I want to echo the Bible singer who cries out, 'my soul thirsts for you ...in a dry and weary land where there is no water' (Ps. 63:1). But how often is our thirst satisfied? From time to time I am deeply moved, even to tears, under the preaching of the Bible. But how often do you and I come to the Bible dry, and feel that we leave even drier? A young Christian spoke to me recently of how he longed for more reality in his walk with Jesus. The poet and hymn-writer William Cowper, in one of his many periods of depression, wrote in his hymn, 'Oh, for a closer walk with God',

'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and his word?'

Or perhaps we sing of Jesus in William Gadsby's great hymn, 'Immortal Honours',





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‘O that my soul could love and praise him more,
His beauties trace, His majesty adore,
Live near His heart, rest in His love each day,
Hear His dear voice and all His will obey.’¹

But how can we ‘hear His dear voice’ afresh today? What is the right level of expectation in a sinful world, with still sinful hearts? Can I – ought I – to expect and experience more? Is the Bible the right place to go, the only place to go?

Frustrated zeal

Then again, our interest in these questions may be at the level of frustrated Christian zeal. We live in a culture that doesn’t care about Jesus. And then perhaps we read the great twentieth-century Welsh preacher Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones writing about what he termed, ‘unction’, the felt anointing of the Spirit on a preacher. He is talking about some wonderful words in Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica, where Paul says,

‘our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.’
(1 Thess. 1:5).

Lloyd-Jones suggests there are times when a preacher senses that he is filled with the Spirit, ‘clothed with power and authority’, with ‘an awareness of a power not your own thrilling through the whole of your being, and an indescribable sense of joy’ as ‘the Spirit is using you, and you are looking on in great enjoyment and astonishment.’ And the people, he says, sense this at once; ‘they can tell the difference immediately. They are gripped, they become serious, they are convicted, they are moved, they are humbled...’²

Whether or not Lloyd-Jones is right to suggest that the preacher can really be sure when God is using him (and many

1 Quote from the *Praise* modernisation - *Praise: Psalms, Hymns and Songs for Christian Worship* (Darlington: Praise Trust, 2000) No. 305.

2 D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971) p. 324f





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will testify to times of utter felt weakness and inadequacy as the times when God has actually used them), what Lloyd-Jones describes sounds wonderful. How we would love to be like that, whether we are preachers or just trying to talk to our families or neighbours about Jesus. But how often does it happen?

Where do we go with this frustrated zeal? As I go on in the Christian life I am increasingly concerned that this good and natural frustration and zeal leads some to take a wrong turning in their discipleship and Christian service. Feeling the misery of seeming powerlessness, they hear voices calling them onto a different path. There, they are told, in addition to the Bible, there are other living waters to be found, and they need no longer trudge along their present humdrum way. And yet these may be siren voices. What looks like living water from a distance may turn out to be a mirage.

Church discontent

Lastly our concern may be at the level of a general discontent in a local church. A pastor friend of mine faced criticism because some in the church were saying, 'we aren't making space for the Spirit.' One church member said to him that they'd got, 'too much word and not enough Spirit.' Other church leaders may attract flak from the other flank. 'It is all very well having lots of "Spirit",' say their conservative critics, 'but where is the word?'

For church ministers or pastors who call themselves 'conservative (or classical) evangelical' such discontent can fuel our fear that the Spirit has moved away from our ministry or our church. In our waking dreams we see a hand writing 'Ichabod (the glory has departed)' over our church noticeboards.³ For every one of us prepared, with a cavalier wave of the hand, to dismiss our more charismatic friends as ignorant, immature or just plain wrong, there are ten of us who worry that it is we who are in the wrong. Even those of us who confidently think

³ 1 Samuel 4:21





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of ourselves as ‘charismatic’ sometimes worry that we are being bypassed by others, left behind by the wind of the Spirit as it blows somewhere else in some new move of God.

So whether it is personal anxiety, devotional longing, frustrated zeal or discontent in church, we need to think carefully about the Spirit and the Bible.

MAKING THE FATHER KNOWN

Some years ago a famous actor wrote, ‘I have to admit that my search for a father has been my constant speculation for 50 years.’⁴ Those words were written by the actor Alec Guinness, perhaps best known for his portrayal of Obi-Wan Kenobi in the early *Star Wars* films. He won an Oscar for his portrayal of the half-mad Colonel Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Guinness came from a very sad background. His mother was a high-class prostitute and he never knew who his father was. Our need for a human father, and for a father’s approval, echoes our deep spiritual need for the Father God.

I remember visiting an African friend leading a church in Soweto in South Africa. He and his co-pastor were leading a group of 25 men committed to live for Christ. He told me that not one of those 25 had been brought up with a human father. The heavenly Father is not a substitute for a human father, but He is the one to whom all our natural longings point. He is the satisfaction of our deepest human longings and needs.

Preaching during the closing stages of the Second World War, the German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke spoke of the happy times in the world as ‘like tiny islands in an ocean of blood and tears.’ ‘The history of the world’, he went on to say, ‘is a story of war, deeply marked with the hoofprints of the apocalyptic horsemen. It is the story of humanity without a Father – *so it seems*.’⁵

4 Quoted in Obituary in *The Week*. (12th August 2000)

5 Helmut Thielicke, *The Prayer that Spans the World: sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (ET London: James Clarke, 1965), p. 21 (his italics)





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Jesus came to make known the Father to men and women in a world of blood and tears. The defining event in the history of the universe was when Jesus of Nazareth made the invisible Father God known. In His prayer to the Father just before He died, these words bracket the main section of Jesus' prayer:

'I have revealed you...I have made you known.' (John 17:6, 26)

This revelation or 'making known' was right at the heart of all Jesus did. It was focused first on His apostles. 'I have revealed you *to those whom you gave me out of the world...* I have made you known *to them*' (which in both cases means the apostles) (John 17:6, 26). When His apostles watched Jesus, they saw the revelation on earth of all that it is possible for a human being to see of the invisible Father God. 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,' he said to them (John 14:9). John was so moved by this that he makes it the climax of his great Prologue: 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:18). Years later, in his first letter, he writes with awe of the fellowship that resulted from this revelation, 'our fellowship...with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 John 1:3). This is why Paul could say of Jesus Christ that, 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' are found in Him, and that, 'in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form' (Col. 2:3, 9).

It is a wonderful thing that this unique group of apostolic eye-witnesses should be drawn into fellowship with the Father God through Jesus. And yet there is a promise here which is even more wonderful. Jesus' prayer not only looks back ('I have made you known'); it also looks forward and promises,

'I...will continue to make you known.' (John 17:26).

For me this is one of the most moving promises in the Bible. Jesus commits Himself to continuing to make the Father known after He has left this earth. And this ongoing revelation of the Father is the only way that the love of God continues to break into a loveless





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and lost world. Jesus says to the Father that He will continue to make Him known, ‘in order that the love you have for me may be in them...’ The love the Father has for Jesus is infinite and eternal. It is the love for the Son who lived for all eternity ‘in the bosom of the Father’ (John 1:18 KJV). That love is the source of all love. There is nothing more significant for the history of the world than for that love to overflow into men and women on earth.

In his classic book *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer writes,

‘You sum up the whole of New Testament teaching in a single phrase, if you speak of it as the revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. In the same way, you sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, of having God as his Father.’⁶

Packer goes on to quote from the hymn Charles Wesley wrote when he came to a lively and vital faith in Christ, ‘Where shall my wondering soul begin?’ in which he wrote,

‘O how shall I the goodness tell,
Father, which thou to me hast showed?
That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called *a child of God*...’

This book explores how Jesus continues to make the Father known today. More precisely, it explores the relationship between the past, ‘I have made known’, and the present and future, ‘I will continue to make known’. It is a wonderful and vital subject. The answer is going to focus on the work of God the Holy Spirit and the purpose and function of the Bible. In contemporary jargon, you might say this book was about the sometimes controversial topic of ‘Word and Spirit’. But I have deliberately tied it to this question of making the Father known, and I have done so for two reasons.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), p. 224





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First, I want to headline the Trinitarian nature of the question. Emil Brunner has said that,

‘For every civilization, for every period of history, it is true to say: “Show me what kind of God you have, and I will tell you what kind of a humanity you possess”.’⁷

Christian people believe the One true God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But (partly because we do so little study of early church history) many of us neglect to speak and think of God in clearly Trinitarian terms. A Bible seminary student in the United States wrote, ‘I’ve professed the Trinity before, but now I see that I’ve basically worshipped and lived as a Unitarian. The church failed to explain to me what the Trinity is and why it matters.’⁸ He may speak for more of us than we like to think.

One of the reasons we drift into error when thinking about the Holy Spirit is that we tend to envisage Him – as Vaughan Roberts once put it – doing a little sideshow somehow only loosely connected to the main stage where God the Father and God the Son are doing the work of salvation. Whenever we do that we are on the road to error. For the Holy Spirit is not the black sheep of the Trinity, a ‘go-it-alone God’ doing His own thing. God the Holy Trinity always works in harmony. As theologians sometimes express it, everything the three Persons of the Holy Trinity do outside of their own relationships within the Godhead, they do together, cooperating in perfect harmony. We cannot understand God the Holy Spirit apart from God the Son and God the Father.

My second reason for tying this study of the Spirit and the Word to ‘making the Father known’ is that I want to signal at the start the profound pastoral implications of getting this right. This is not some abstruse theological controversy or debate we

⁷ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Cambridge, England: Lutterworth, 1939), p. 34

⁸ quoted in Daniel J. Trier and David Lauber (eds.), *Trinitarian Theology for the Church* (Nottingham: IVP/Apollos, 2009), p. 239





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may safely leave to the experts. Whether or not we know the Father depends on these truths. Every Christian ought to strive to understand them aright.

DON'T KEEP SPIRIT AND WORD IN BALANCE!

Before we launch into our main study, we need to guard ourselves against a common and wrong way of thinking. I recently looked up a church website and found that they described themselves as 'a word and Spirit church'. I take it that description was shorthand for something, and I got some idea what they meant by looking at the rest of the website; broadly speaking, that particular church meant that the Bible is not enough and we need the Spirit to give supplementary revelations from God. Others, for example the 'Fellowship of Word and Spirit' will mean something different.

But behind the use of the phrase can sometimes lie the idea that the ideal is somehow to have both word and Spirit in our church life, and ideally in some kind of balance. We see this in the disgruntled critic I have just quoted, suggesting there was 'too much word and not enough Spirit.' A book about the Holy Spirit had a commendation in it, which said, 'There are many who emphasise the word but neglect the Spirit. There are also many who emphasise the Spirit but neglect the word. There are few who keep both *in balance*...' (my italics). It almost feels as if a church is being watched by a kind of theological psephologist, with their Word/Spirit 'swingometer,' measuring to see if there has been a shift of a few points in one or other direction.

This must be wrong⁹. You cannot measure Bible and Spirit against one another. You cannot set Bible and Spirit side by side and say we need more of one or less of the other. It would be like saying, 'which is bigger, a metre or a litre?' Or perhaps – to use closer analogies – it would be like saying, 'That was a good

⁹ This point is also noted by John Woodhouse in 'The preacher and the living Word: preaching and the Holy Spirit' in *When God's Voice is Heard*, eds. Christopher Green and David Jackman (Leicester: IVP, 2003 edition), pp. 44-6.





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concert. I just wish we had had a bit less of the violin and more of the violinist'; or to visit a workshop and say, 'it seems to me you have too much of the carpenter and not enough of the saw.' The idea of keeping them 'in balance' is a confusion of categories. The Spirit is the Sovereign God, the personal eternal Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. No one and nothing can be measured or balanced against Him. We cannot ever reach a point where we say, 'Right, now we have enough of the Spirit. Let's have a bit more Word' or to say, 'I think we've got the balance wrong and we need a bit more Spirit.' We ought to see through the error of speaking of Word and Spirit in balance. We want to be joyfully unbalanced, setting no limits to the extent and depth of the Spirit's work for which we long. For knowing the Father depends upon Him. But let us be sure it is the Holy Spirit we seek, for He has many rivals waiting in the wings to dress up in His clothes and mimic Him.

OVERVIEW

Here is how we are going to come at the question. John's Gospel is going to be our main guide, with sideways glances at other parts of the Bible. I take it that John writes for the church as it will continue after he and the other apostles have died. And it seems that one of his great aims is to open up for us just how the Lord Jesus will continue to make the Father known. John's Gospel is perhaps the most self-consciously and explicitly Trinitarian of all the New Testament books, and I think it will be our best way in. This book is going carefully to develop a sustained argument, each part building on previous parts. It is important, therefore, patiently to follow the argument through in sequence.

In chapter 1, mainly from the first half of John's Gospel, we are going to think about Jesus the eternal Word (as John calls him in John 1:1-3) and the words He spoke. We shall see an intimate connection between the two, and see how Jesus made the Father known by words. Chapter 2 is also mainly from the





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first half of John's Gospel, and focuses on the weakness of Jesus' words and His paradoxical failure effectively to reveal the Father until after the Cross and therefore until the Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people. This will highlight for us how vital is the work of the Spirit. Chapter 3 explores the vital provision Jesus made for the continuation of His words through the Spirit-led teaching of His apostles. Then in chapter 4 we draw the line from the words of Jesus, through the words of His apostles, to the words of the Bible, both New Testament and Old Testament. We ask the question, 'Where do we find the words of Jesus today, since Jesus is no longer physically on earth?' It is all very well saying how wonderful were His words, but that does us no good unless we can still hear them. We shall see that every Bible word is Jesus' word, and that we cannot and must not separate Jesus the Eternal Word from Bible words. This is a vital link to establish, for – if it is true – it means we have access to Jesus' words today, and the Father can be made known to us too.

Chapter 5 is a harder chapter. You may prefer to omit this on first reading and perhaps come back to it later. It builds on the argument of chapters 3 and 4 to ask what principles ought to guide us in interpreting the Bible so we understand it aright. In chapter 6 we think about why it matters to be Bible Christians. We shall see that there are plenty of spirits out there just waiting to put on the Holy Spirit's clothes and pretend to be Him. It is an important cautionary study. Then in chapter 7 we take a good look at the wonderful work the Holy Spirit does both in the non-Christian world and in the Christian church. Finally, in conclusion, we ask how we today can listen to the Spirit, and how this relates to the Bible. In all our study, we must remember that knowing the Father depends upon these truths.





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STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Review the four common reasons why the subject of the Spirit and the Word is important. What experience do you have of any or all of them? What about the experiences of others you know?
2. Review the section about 'Making the Father known'. How important is it, in your actual Christian experience, to know God as your Father?
3. When you think and speak of God, to what extent do you consciously think of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
4. Why should we avoid speaking of keeping the Spirit and the Word in balance?

