

# Hearing the Spirit of Truth

## In Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience

*Summary:* How good it is the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a multitude of ways and through various people, to help us know and understand and apply the word and will of God in our unique personal situations, as much as in our shared collective situations.

*Scripture:* Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5; John 14:23–29

*Date:* Sunday, 22 May 2022 (Narellan CCC)

### Introduction

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#### **Eureka!**

If you're anything like me, then you have probably wondered how much your head weighs. The difficulty is figuring out what is the best way to weigh your own head.

The most obvious answer would be self-decapitation. But, of course, you would only be able to enjoy your knowledge for about 5 seconds.

Putting your head on a bathroom scale is not only uncomfortable, but not very accurate because your neck is always holding up your head, no matter how hard you try not to.

Not all of us have access to modern technology, like a CT scan, so the best way to find out how much your head weighs is to stick it in a bucket full of water and to measure how much water is displaced.

This wonderful insight was apparently discovered by the ancient Greek mathematician and physicist Archimedes (ca., 287–212 BC), who noticed how the water in his bath was displaced when he slipped in. The insight of this displacement's relevance to body mass so excited Archimedes that he allegedly ran through the town of Syracuse naked, yelling "Eureka!"

By the way, the answer is your head weighs between 4.5 and 5 kilograms, according to Sydney University researchers.

#### **What & Why?**

Gaining new knowledge is a joy, especially when that knowledge is relevant to life, making it better in some small way. You can almost feel truth in your bones, when you encounter it—which makes media coverage during election cycles particularly painful.

This is precisely why Jesus calls the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of Truth" (Jn 14:17). How good it is the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a multitude of ways and through various people, to help us know and understand and apply the word and will of God in our personal lives, as much as in our community.

The Holy Spirit speaks truth to us and reminds us of what is true. Let us keep in tune with the Spirit as we make our way in this world.

## Explanation

### Passages Revealing Jesus' Heart

In this liturgical season of Easter, we are considering the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension, when he returned to the side of God the Father.

Surprisingly, there is very little in the Bible about these 40 days. But inquiring minds want to know!

This lack of information tells me Jesus likely did not introduce anything new to the disciples during this time. He most likely used this time to reaffirm and remind them of all he had already taught them. He also likely used this time to prepare them for the work ahead, when they would be taking his message and mission to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). They would do this without him physically present, which would have led them to worry, yet is precisely why he spent 40 days completing their training.

Jesus trusted them, as friends and co-workers, to take on his message and mission themselves, to advance the kingdom of God into the world.

In the few biblical passages that cover this time period, we see Jesus' heart for his disciples and for those who would place their faith in him through them. This then is the reason why, during this season we focus on biblical passages that similarly show Jesus' sensitivity to and affection for his disciples.

Our scripture focus passages today highlight Jesus' affection.

### From Revelation

The reading from *The Book of Revelation* has John the Revelator being granted an apocalyptic vision.

He then carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,  
(Revelation 21:10)

John was "carried away in the Spirit, to a great, high mountain and shown the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:10).

Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those written in the Lamb's book of life. (Revelation 21:27)

John was shown how God will dwell among his people and they will feel the warmth and light of his presence perpetually. There will be nothing unclean, detestable or false there because God's people will be finally and fully holy (Rev 21:27).

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city's main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him.  
(Revelation 22:1-3)

The water of life will flow freely and blossom abundantly, and Jesus' friends will be able to find healing and comfort and enjoy eternal life (Rev 22:1-3a).

This vision describes the final destination of human history, but it actually also describes God's intention for creating in the first place. This was always God's Purpose and it is beautiful to imagine. Our creator God wants to dwell amongst his people.

This too is the hope of all those who place their faith in Jesus and seek to live a Christian lifestyle.

### **From *The Gospel of John***

The reading from *The Gospel of John* shows how that Purpose can be experienced and realised even now.

Jesus answered, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

The kingdom of God is experienced by those who love God and keep his commands. The experience of such is akin to being at home with loved ones and is truly beautiful.

You have heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens so that when it does happen you may believe. (John 14:28-29)

It is one thing to speak of an experience of home, but Jesus was about to leave his disciples. What can he say to make this all right for his friends? He could prepare them for their grief.

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful. (John 14:27)

Jesus would leave them, yes, but he would leave them with his peace, so that their hearts need not be troubled nor fearful.

However, if we were them, this probably would not be quite enough, would it?

But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you. (John 14:26)

Jesus eventually left the presence of his disciples and returned to God the Father's side, from whence he came. However, he left behind the Holy Spirit to comfort them and empower them.

Additionally, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit will "teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you" (Jn 14:26). Now THIS is a game changer!

## **Application**

### **Following the Bad Example of Charles Taze Russell**

To explain how this works I need to tell you first a story about how the Holy Spirit does not work.

The *Jehovah's Witnesses* Christian sect traces its origin to Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916 AD).

After periods of being a Presbyterian, Congregationalist, skeptic, and Adventist, Russell organised a Bible study group in Pennsylvania in 1870. The group's intense examination of the Bible caused them to reject traditional Christian teachings on the nature of deity and the immortality of the soul.<sup>1</sup>

After almost 2000 years of Christian history and teaching, Russell was the only one who could interpret the Bible correctly, according to him at least.

By 1880, 30 congregations had been formed in 7 American states. In 1931, the organisation became known as *Jehovah's Witnesses*.

In June 1912, Rev. J.J. Ross (1871–1935), Pastor of the James Street Baptist Church in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (my home town), published and widely distributed a four-page leaflet titled, "Some Facts about the Self-Styled 'Pastor' Charles T. Russell". He denounced Russell's qualifications, legitimacy and moral example as a Pastor. Russell, in turn, sued Ross for defamatory libel.

It was only during cross-examination that Russell admitted he had only attended public school for seven years, having left when he was about fourteen years of age. He admitted he was only versed in Latin terms "to an extent" and that he did not know Hebrew or Greek. Russell also admitted he had never been ordained by any bishop or minister and had never attended a theological seminary or any schools of higher learning.

Having no training in or qualification for Biblical or language studies, how then could Russell form the opinion that he was the only one capable of interpreting the Bible correctly? To make matters worse, modern day Jehovah's Witnesses adherents are prevented from reading the Bible on their own, but must only read it alongside the approved commentary based on Russell's teachings, lest they fall into falsehood.

There is no room for the Holy Spirit to "teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you" (Jn 14:26). Instead, Jehovah's Witnesses must rely on the false teaching of their founders and those who perpetuate his falsehoods.

### **What Exactly Does the Holy Spirit Teach?**

But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.

*(John 14:26)*

We must be very careful how we understand the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, for commentators note,

Too often, people read the first half of the verse and ignore the second. This is a mistake because Hebrew, and its cousin Aramaic, rely on repetition. It's a mark of the best Hebrew literature. Jews of Jesus' day, like the prophets of earlier centuries, emphasized and clarified their statements by recasting them in different words. In this verse, the second half of Jesus' promise clarifies the first. Teaching and reminding are two aspects of the same process. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would keep what Jesus had taught them fresh in their minds, calling it forth when needed.

*(David E. O'Brien)<sup>2</sup>*

Verse 26 then is not describing two aspects of the Holy Spirit's ministry but one, which is to remind us of everything Jesus taught. The Holy Spirit does not give us new information, but makes sure we understand and apply Jesus' commands, and that we follow his example well and appropriately in our day and age.

There are other biblical passages that highlight this teaching and reminding ministry of the Holy Spirit:

You sent your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst.  
*(Nehemiah 9:20)*

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you don't need anyone to teach you. Instead, his anointing teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie; just as it has taught you, remain in him.  
*(1 John 2:27)*

If you respond to my warning, then I will pour out my spirit on you and teach you my words.  
*(Proverbs 1:23)*

The focus of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to make sure we understand there is a God and what he expects of us.

The Holy Spirit teaches and reminds us of the truth about God...<sup>3</sup>

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come.  
*(John 16:13)*

The Holy Spirit guides us into the truth about God, speaking God's very own words, and revealing things yet to come...

I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come.  
*(John 16:12–13)*

The Holy Spirit reminds us of the word and will of God, and the promises of God...

The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, "Have courage! For as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so it is necessary for you to testify in Rome."  
*(Acts 23:11)*

The Holy Spirit reveals Christ Jesus...

When the Counsellor comes, the one I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.  
*(John 15:26)*

The Holy Spirit brings people to conversion...

When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment:  
*(John 16:8)*

All of this together tells us that whatever truth we know about God has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit of God.

It is imperative, therefore, when you begin to read the Bible, be sure to always start with prayer, prayer of thanksgiving that you have this revelation available to you at all and a prayer of discernment that you may learn the truth about God as you read and reflect.

### **The Wesleyan Quadrilateral**

There is a danger here I want to highlight before I conclude this morning because not all we believe to be true about God is, in fact, true. This can be traced back to the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of All Saints' Church at Wittenburg, Germany, in 1517, he was challenging the power and efficacy of the sale of indulgences. Indulgences had been allowed by papal decree since the 1300s. Luther's protest was the first step in rejecting such decrees in favour of *sola scriptura*, by scripture alone, which is a theological doctrine describing the Bible as the only source and authority for Christian faith and practice.

Fast forward a couple hundred years to The Age of Enlightenment, which was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment included a range of ideas centered on the value of human happiness, the pursuit of knowledge obtained by means of reason and the evidence of the senses, and ideals such as liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state.

Keep fast forwarding to our current postmodernity, which challenges institutional authority in favour of a radical therapeutic individualism.

One consequence is, in Protestant Evangelical churches, for instance, there is an observable distrust of academic institutions.

What does all this have to do with the price of tea in China? Absolutely nothing, but it does help us trace the current belief that an individual is perfectly capable of reading the Bible on his or her own, and forming his or her own beliefs without anyone else's help, thank you very much.

While this is mostly true, it neglects to recognise that when you or I pick up and read the Bible for and by ourselves, we bring to our reading our own hurts, hang-ups and habits, caused by our own fallenness and sin. We don't just read the Bible as if we are neutral; we read it with biases and preconceived assumptions which are often hard to let go of.

Yes, the Holy Spirit can break through this, but what if we don't really want her to? What if we are already perfectly happy believing what we do because those beliefs are perfectly comfortable and have perfectly suited us for however long, perpetuating whatever ~isms we have held onto for far too long—for example, the isms of racism, sexism, nationalism, and many more besides.

We are *sola scriptura* Christians, thankfully, but we need to be honest and admit we come to understand what God has revealed to us using other means as well.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a method for biblical and theological reflection that is credited to John Wesley, an Anglican minister and founder of the Methodist movement in

the late 18th century. It is a term coined by 20th century American Methodist scholar Albert C. Outler.

According to theologian and pastor Greg Boyd,

The quadrilateral, as the name suggests, presents theology as rooted in four sources: Scripture, Church tradition, reason, and experience. Scripture is viewed as the foundation of theology, with each of the other three aspects helping to clarify and interpret Scripture in a faithful manner for the purpose of doing theology. (Greg Boyd)<sup>‡</sup>

To keep it simple—and not bore you—the quadrilateral recognises the Holy Spirit teaches and reminds us about God when we read the scriptures, but the Holy Spirit also teaches and reminds us through the history and traditions of the Church, as its leaders and thinkers have struggled together, and sometimes even against each other, in discerning God's will and word for their generations and challenges. We can see examples of this even in the Bible—e.g., 1 & 2 Chronicles vs. 1 & 2 Kings; the four gospels.

The Holy Spirit also teaches and reminds us through our own reason, being our capacity to work out what is right and wrong in any given situation. For example, the Bible does not provide instruction for each and every topic or issue we need guidance on (e.g., musical styles in worship, legal use of hallucinogenic drugs, birth control). We are free and responsible to use our reason toward discerning a God-honouring perspective on these and other issues. Let us do so in community and with prayer.

The Holy Spirit also teaches and reminds us through our experiences and that of others. For example, there are many passages in the Bible which clearly describe the consumption of alcohol in a positive light, with self-control (e.g., Dt 7:14; 14:26; Isa 24:6-7). Yet many well-meaning Christians have adopted a stance of total abstinence with good reason—the church of my conversion was The Salvation Army and its leaders felt the consumption of alcohol would interfere with their ministry. Some choose to abstain due to personal experience of alcohol abuse, by themselves or others. Those experiences make it clear to them it is best for them to stay away, and that is okay. Yet, for others, alcohol does not interfere with life but enhances it. As a community, we share our experiences and then choose our Christian lifestyles accordingly.

How good it is the Holy Spirit speaks to us in a multitude of ways and through various people, to help us know and understand and apply the word and will of God in our unique personal situations, as much as in our shared collective situations.

## **Conclusion**

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to teach and remind us of the truth about God and the commands of Jesus that lead us into the free, full, and forever life he promised to his friends. May the Holy Spirit use everything at her disposal to lead us to this water of life and may what we know about God overflow and bless others.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Jehovah’s Witnesses: Introduction: overview, history, religious texts, organizational structure”, *ReligiousTolerance.org*, <https://bit.ly/3wrQhco> (accessed 19-May-2022).
- 2 David E. O’Brien, *Today’s Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties* (Minneapolis, MN, USA: David E. O’Brien, 1990), pg 419.
- 3 Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles, CA, USA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983), pg 284-90.
- 4 Greg Boyd, “How Should We Do Theology?”, *ReKnew.org*, 10-Jun-2014, <https://bit.ly/3luPl0m> (accessed 20-May-2022).