

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒THE HOLY SPIRIT⇐

We have seen how Jesus initiated the New Covenant through his death and how, in the upper room before his death, he told us to remember it through the bread and wine. We saw that the terms of the contract are that God will forgive our sins, but expects that we in turn will repent and turn to him. But after that we are not left to fend for ourselves. We have in an earlier chapter seen the failure of the tribe of Israel to keep their covenant, and noted the promise given through Jeremiah that God would pour out his spirit on all men.

Christ repeated that promise while he was with his disciples in the upper room. John recorded this in his gospel. Jesus said, "If you love me you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth." (John 14:15-16). This happened a few weeks later, on the Jewish day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God descended upon the disciples. Luke, in the Book of Acts, recorded the event in this way: "While the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them and resting on each one. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance."

These chapters will concentrate on two aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals and in the life of the church. The first is generally referred to by Christians as "the fruit of the Spirit" and the second as "the gifts of the Spirit".

The phrase "fruit of the Spirit" comes from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. In that letter Paul wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22). I am sure all my readers have heard many sermons, or talks on radio or television, about these characteristics of a good life, even if the Holy Spirit is not specifically mentioned. As the purpose of this book is not so much to repeat what is well known, but to look at what is not so well known, I will not spend much time here. I do, however, wish to make a few points.

Anyone who has felt this work of the Holy Spirit in his life will I am sure know how much he falls short of the level required. The work of the Spirit in this field will continue throughout his life, at times more active than others. The Arabs have a saying, "The camel cannot see the bend in its own neck". How true that is. We are well able to see the bend in other camels' necks! If, however, we look at the good things in other people we will see readily how far we fall short of their behaviour, let alone the ideal.

We all start from different places. Our personalities and lives have moulded us to behave in certain ways. The Spirit comes to us to change and improve, whatever the starting point. And we do all start at different points. Some are naturally better endowed with the characteristics described. The question we need to ask ourselves is, "How much have I changed and improved recently?" In politics, in the church, and generally in life, people try to convince themselves and others that they have always had the right idea or been on the right track. They look backwards. But Christianity is about openness to new ways and doing better.

When we think of love, we should think of who we do not love well enough. Our parents? Our children? Husband or wife? That neighbour? That person at work? We should not be giving ourselves nine out of ten "for a good effort in the circumstances", but asking God for greater love for that person through his Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can give joy, even in the worst of circumstances, but we need to accept his presence in our lives to a greater degree. With joy comes peace.

Patience is required in many circumstances in our daily life. With it goes gentleness with the weak, and tolerance. But this should not be an excuse for cowardice. Jesus was far from silent in the face of those religious leaders who hindered the work of God by their backward-looking traditions, rules and prejudices. He singled them out for extensive criticism.

Perhaps this could be our prayer: “Father, send us your Spirit in greater power to fill us with the fruit of your Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control”.