

Justified in the Spirit

by G.W. North

The sermon explores the meaning of the phrase 'justified in the Spirit' and argues that it refers to Jesus' human spirit being in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:35, John 4:24, Acts 10:38, Romans 1:4, Romans 8:11, Colossians 2:9, 1 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 9:14, 1 Peter 3:18

Topics: "The Holy Spirit", "The Nature of Christ"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the connection between Christ and the Holy Spirit, arguing that the phrase 'spirit of holiness' should be understood as referring to the Holy Spirit rather than an abstract concept. He critiques the translators' choice to use a lowercase 's' for 'spirit,' suggesting it undermines the clarity of Paul's message about Jesus' divine and human nature. North asserts that Jesus, in His humanity, was justified in the Holy Spirit, not in the sense of needing salvation from sin, but in affirming His divine calling and nature. He concludes that the unity of Christ's human and divine spirits is essential to understanding the gospel's fundamental truths. This understanding reinforces the belief that holiness is a characteristic of the divine Spirit, not a separate entity.

Transcript

The reference to the Spirit is made in direct connection with Christ. He was 'declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead'. It is noticeable that the translators had difficulty with this verse; they thought the Greek word 'pneuma' should not be given a capital 'S' but a small one ('viz, spirit') Their reason for so thinking rests solely upon the fact that there is no direct mention of the person of the Holy Spirit in the verse. This is a most unfortunate position to adopt, for it could cause uncertainty to spread among the children of God, and perhaps make them suspect that, when writing the letter, Paul was not being led by the Spirit. It further confuses the issue by allowing the suggestion that Paul imputed spirit to abstract things as though they have living being. Holiness is a quality of life -- it is abstract; of itself it has no life, and therefore cannot have a spirit. To suggest that Paul was being imprecise and was following poetical fancies instead of dealing in exactitudes on such important subjects is, to say the least, alarming. If this indeed be so, how then shall we be able to trust him on any matter?

It is not uncommon to hear or read of 'the spirit of something or other, (whatever it may be). By the phrase we understand the person to be referring to something intangible which cannot be explained or properly

understood. When used in this manner it does not precisely mean spirit; in fact there is nothing of precision about the word at all when used in such contexts. It can mean 'an air of' or 'an attitude of' or 'general pattern of' or 'likeness to' or 'inner workings of' or 'the drive or force of'; so unclear is its meaning, that in such cases it would be totally impossible to use it with exactitude. Should that have been Paul's intention here, we may well be in some doubt as to its meaning, and ask what is the spirit of holiness? Has holiness a hidden intangible meaning, a kind of inner life and power that may be referred to as spirit? Are virtues themselves a kind of outer clothing of an indwelling spirit? Do abstract virtues and characteristics have personalities of their own? The answer to that is a resounding 'NO'. To kindly say that we know what is meant by 'the spirit of the race' or 'the spirit of the thing' is no answer; these phrases can be interpreted in too many ways, they are far too general; we need to be specific. This whole matter will be discussed in another chapter later.

There is of course another interpretation of the phrase, which is felt to be more in keeping with the content of the chapter. The main emphasis of this paragraph is upon the person of the Son; as stated, the gospel of God concerns the Son. It could therefore be argued that Paul is speaking exclusively of Him, and is not making reference to the Holy Spirit at all. This position could be briefly presented in two statements as follows:

(1) God, as promised, brought His Son into the world through the royal line of David; (2) He was a holy man in spirit, and was therefore raised from the dead because of His holiness. This position could be amply illustrated and reinforced by many scriptures testifying the same thing, and is perfectly acceptable to all. But somehow this interpretation does not quite seem to do justice to the phrase 'the spirit of holiness', so let us turn elsewhere to find help in interpreting his meaning. Speaking to Timothy of the great 'mystery of godliness', Paul says, 'God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit', and it seems to be agreed by all that he is here referring to the Holy Spirit. Actually there is no more grammatical ground for capitalising the letter S in this phrase than for printing 'spirit' with a small s in the other; it is simply a matter of opinion and interpretation. If the Holy Spirit is meant in Timothy's letter, then there is no reason for doubting that He is the one spoken of in the Roman epistle.

It is possible to understand, and correct to think, that in His personal spirit (that is in His human spirit), Jesus needed to be justified in the Holy Spirit. Justification in this sense, presumably, is not to be thought of as justification from sin, for He never had any, but of His birth and nature and calling. It means that, while in the flesh, He never once for a moment deviated from a clear life and perfect walk and faultless ministry in the Spirit. If we sought to refer to Jesus' humanity in this context we could speak of His human spirit; if on the other hand we were to speak of His essential self -- that is of His Deity -- we would speak of Him always as Spirit, for God is Spirit, pure original Spirit. But Jesus' human spirit and divine Spirit synthesized; in this case the lesser is included in the greater, so that human and divine become one; therefore His spirit was Spirit. We therefore think properly when we think of Him as Spirit, that is God the Spirit; in whatever person or form He is manifest, He is Spirit. It is therefore absolutely respectful, grammatically correct and doctrinally true, as well as theologically sound, to write 'Spirit of holiness'. To whichever person of the Godhead we are referring, He should be called or spoken of as God. There is no such thing as 'a' or 'the' spirit of holiness; holiness is a spiritual virtue, not a virtuous spirit; the virtuous One is the virtuous Spirit. We see then that, right at the beginning of his epistle, Paul has laid down one of the most fundamental truths of the gospel, namely that the human spirit and the divine Spirit in Jesus remained undivided to the end. Throughout His life, and especially in His death, His spirit corresponded at all times in holiness to the holiness of the Holy Spirit, and therefore earned the right to be raised from the

dead.

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