

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## Is the Holy Spirit a Loser in History?

by Gary North

*But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me; Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more (John 16:5-10).*

When Jesus spoke these words at the Last Supper, He was announcing to His disciples: "I've got good news and bad news." He knew that they would be overwhelmed by the bad news. The bad news - His death - would be more than overcome by the good news: His resurrection. But there were two parts to His good news-bad news scenario. His death and resurrection would be immediate. After this, there would be another pair: His ascension, followed by the advent of the Holy Spirit. This was the focus of His words in John 17.

The modern Church has given up hope in the good news aspect of the second pair. This constitutes the burden of modern history - not evolutionism, not Marxism (more obvious today than half a decade ago), not the public school system, not drugs, existentialism, or the inevitable collapse of the Social Security retirement system. The essence of today's malaise is that the Church of Jesus Christ, two millennia after His birth, does not believe that the trade-off between the ascension and the advent of the Holy Spirit was positive. They desperately want Jesus to come back.

### Christology and Covenantalism

Jesus Christ's incarnation and life were expressly covenantal. That is to say, Christology is covenantal. I suppose I am the first person to discover this, so that means it has to be wrong, according to my many critics. But in a discussion I had recently regarding the resurrection, this insight hit me: the five-point covenant model matches the life of Christ.

**Transcendence/immanence:** one person, two natures, fully God and fully man, in union but without intermixture.

**Hierarchy/authority:** the son of man, the second Adam, the logos who perfectly spoke God's authoritative word in history.

**Ethics/law:** fulfiller of the Mosaic Law (Matt. 5:17-19).

**Oath/sanctions:** bodily death (negative) and resurrection (positive).

**Succession/inheritance:** bodily ascension to God's right hand and joint sender, with God the Father, of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26).

The Church's universally agreed-upon creeds have affirmed these five provisions. The Western Church has emphasized the joint procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son ("the Filioque").

Here I am concerned with point five: succession and inheritance. What is the nature of this inheritance?

### How Great an Inheritance?

The Bible is adamant: the inheritance is the whole world.

His soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth (Ps. 25:13).

For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth (Ps. 37:9).

But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace (Ps. 37:11).

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5).

This inheritance is the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom visibly manifested by growth in history. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar:

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth (Dan. 2:34-35).

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure (Dan. 2:44-45).

Modern evangelicals are pessimillennialists: premillennialists and amillennialists. They deny that the Church, prior to the bodily return of Christ, will not inherit anything like what the Bible explicitly prophesies. Premillennialists think that Jesus must be present to empower His kingdom. Amillennialists think that the kingdom of God will not be sufficiently empowered in history for Christians to collect the promised inheritance. In effect, they are arguing that **Satan holds the promised inheritance in trust for covenant-breakers**. Both groups deny that the presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to empower the Church to fulfill the Great Commission. The Great Commission is really a great burden – so great that no Christian should feel a more than twinge of guilt or remorse about the failure of the Church in his day – or any day – to fulfill it.

The doctrine of the ascension is systematically ignored because its implications call pessimillennialism into question. If Christ is now seated at God's right hand, why shouldn't we expect a victory in history for the Church, a victory whose magnitude is analogous to Christ's victory over the limits of history, yet nevertheless in history, at the ascension?

#### **The Ascension and the Holy Spirit**

The doctrine of the ascension is a widely ignored central creedal provision of the orthodox faith. The doctrine appears in the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The Apostles' creed, which came quite late (about A.D. 700), reads as follows:

On the third day he rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

To sit at God's right hand, Jesus had to ascend to heaven. To exercise this joint authority, He could not remain on earth and in history. He told His disciples that He had to leave them in order that He might send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit's arrival, Jesus would in fact be with them, He promised. "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:16-19). "I will come to you," he said. How? Representatively, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The Comforter would become the Church's source of truth, enabling the disciples to speak authoritatively of Christ.

"But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). They had seen Him, walked with Him, and worked with Him. This was not enough. They needed a Comforter.

#### **The Ascension and the Great Commission**

After His resurrection, Jesus returned to work for forty days with the disciples (Acts 1:3), who became the apostles only after His ascension. He gave them the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:18-20).

He gave them the Great Commission after His resurrection but before His ascension. His ascension verified that the Great Commission was possible to fulfill. But in between His ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost a week later, they were to remain in Jerusalem. Immediately before His ascension, He told them: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). These were His last words; the ascension followed. They returned to Jerusalem. The Spirit fell on them at Pentecost (Acts 2).

The presence of Jesus at the right hand of God the Father is the continuing judicial basis of the Great Commission. The sending of the Holy Spirit was the empowering of the Great Commission. Both events were mandatory for the Great Commission. With respect to the Great Commission, they represent one event. Jesus made this clear when He told them on the night of the Passover that unless He departed from them, He could not send the Holy Spirit. This departure did not refer to His death; it referred to His ascension. The good news was that He was going to leave. Then He left. This is still good news. But pessimillennialists see it as really bad news for the Church in history.

#### **Conclusion**

Modern evangelicals believe that the work of the Holy Spirit is to comfort God's Church for its failure to complete the Great Commission. The Holy Spirit remains more a Comforter than an empowerer. To put it as bluntly as I can – but no more bluntly than the facts attest – pessimillennialists believe that the Holy Spirit is a loser, the person of the Trinity assigned the pathetic task of comforting Church for its visible, eschatologically inevitable failure in history. Satan is the big winner in history. Tough luck, Holy Spirit!

If I were a pessimillennialist, I would occasionally wonder who comforts the Comforter. "There, there: you can't win 'em all, you know. Take comfort. Look at all the books that Hal Lindsey has sold." That should cheer Him up. Then again. . .

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