

MISUNDERSTANDING JESUS:

DID THE DISCIPLES MISUNDERSTAND JESUS' MESSAGE AND MISSION?

BY

JEFF SCOTT KENNEDY

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus knew that his disciples would not fully understand his message or his mission until after he had risen and imparted the Spirit to them. To prepare them for his impending departure, Jesus promised to send them another Advocate, the Spirit of Truth (John 14:16-17). Jesus made it clear that after his departure, the Spirit would be *in* them and not just *with* them, explaining and revealing the truth to them. The shift to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is therefore critical in our understanding of how the disciples came to conceptualize and interpret the purpose of Christ and his teachings.

This study will endeavor to show that after Jesus was glorified, the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to understand and perceive the message and the mission of Christ. In order to do this, we will first track the various misunderstandings of Christ's hearers prior to his resurrection, offer an analysis of Christ's remedy for this by sending the Spirit who will guide them into all truth, and address the corresponding change in the disciples' understanding after receiving the Holy Spirit.

JESUS IS MISUNDERSTOOD BY HIS OPPONENTS

John portrays Jesus' opponents as having largely misunderstood his purpose and message.¹ At times, this lack of understanding is due to a faulty world-view (e.g. the prevalent view of a one-dimensional messianic theocracy).² In other instances, they fail

¹ D.A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel," *Tyndale Bulletin* 33 (1982): 68. Carson argues that because of the obvious uniqueness of the disciples situation prior to the resurrection and glorification of Christ, these "misunderstandings" would not be misunderstandings at the time of the *writing* of John's Gospel. It is therefore unwarranted to read an alleged anachronistic conflict back into the Gospel.

² Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1:285-290. Keener observes that the Messianic expectancy among Jews at this time was high due to their understanding of Daniels 70 weeks prophecy. Though the dominant view was that the Messiah would be a political savior,

to perceive the spiritual underpinnings of Jesus' language (e.g. "I am the bread of heaven" 6:32-24). They also fail to grasp the somewhat cryptic use of typological language (e.g. "tear down this temple, and I will rebuild it in three days" 2:19). On other occasions, they demonstrate a fundamentally flawed understanding of scripture altogether, as is the case with their misunderstanding of the Messiah's origin (7:27). In yet another place, John records that the crowd failed to grasp Jesus' use of a figure of speech referring to himself as the Shepherd (10:1-7).³ Lastly, not even the highly educated and accomplished rabbinic crowd was immune to misconstruing Jesus' words (3:9-11).⁴

This isn't to say that the unbelieving Jews could not understand *anything* they heard Jesus say. The quintessential example of this is Jesus stating that "Before Abraham was born, I AM" (8:58). The response of the pious Jews is to stone him for blasphemy. Jesus does not censure them for their accusation because they have correctly understood this as an overt claim of deity. Though they apprehend the meaning of Christ's claim, they fail to accept it because they are operating under a flawed messianic framework and they do not have a personal revelation of its truth by the Spirit.⁵

Keener notes that Jewish eschatology was flexible enough to accommodate Jesus' re-interpretation of what the Messiah ought to be.

³ William Bradley Simon, "The Role of the Spirit-Paraclete in the Disciples' Mission in the Fourth Gospel" (PhD. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 141.

⁴ As is the case with Nicodemus, whom Jesus chastised as "Israel's Teacher," yet he apparently could not grasp the most fundamental truth of participation in God's Kingdom. This was inexcusable to Jesus who challenges him with regards to re-birth. Inner transformation was a seminal theme in John's Gospel.

⁵ Simon, "The Role of the Spirit-Paraclete," 156. See also Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings," 82. It is puzzling that Carson does not include the giving of the Spirit as a possible solution to the disciples misunderstandings. He emphasizes the "passage of time" as the most critical component, but Simon strongly asserts that additionally, it is the giving of the Spirit-Paraclete.

The opponents of Jesus do not understand him, or at best have a partial understanding of Christ's teachings and mission and they refuse to believe. Jesus communicates to them that without a willing heart to believe, they can not possibly understand that he is in the Father and the Father is in him (10:38). Obedience to Christ was essential if they were to later receive the Spirit of Truth who would provide an explanation of "all things."

JESUS IS MISUNDERSTOOD BY HIS FOLLOWERS

To be fair, it is apparent that not even Jesus' closest followers understood his larger mission and message. The tendency to misread Jesus was a systemic problem among his hearers.⁶ The disciples' misunderstandings of Jesus fall into three categories: First, they simply fail to *fully* understand something he says or does. Such is the case when Jesus rides into Jerusalem. The Scripture in the NIV states that, "at first the disciples did not understand *all of this* [emphasis added]." The text makes it clear that they had a partial understanding at the time, and a fuller understanding later after Jesus had been glorified (12:15-17). Second, they fail to recognize the symbolic significance of Jesus' teaching and actions. This can be seen in the washing of the disciples' feet and the future understanding of its significance they will receive after receiving the Spirit (13:7-13). Third, they fail to perceive Jesus' real mission, namely, his passion and resurrection (16:18; 20:9). Thus, John points out in many places that even the twelve disciples were not immune to misinterpreting Jesus' teachings or his larger program of

⁶ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 545-546. Keener points out that Jewish sages often spoke in riddles, and the misunderstanding of a sage by both his allies and enemies was quite common in philosophical biographies.

atonement. The future resurrection of Christ and his subsequent explanation would provide the new conceptual framework for their understanding, and the Spirit would awaken their newly transformed inner man to the inescapable truth of Christ's claims.⁷

To conclude the matter, one narrative in particular appears to capture this issue of misunderstanding and response. John contains a scene in which Jesus cleanses the Temple, and answers his opponents by saying that if they tear down "this Temple" he will restore it again in only three days. His opponents do not understand and reject him. The disciples also do not understand but choose to follow him. Their faith in Jesus' unprecedented miracles is not shaken despite their apparent lack of understanding. As Carson states, "Thus, of these two groups which fail to grasp the significance of Jesus' temple saying, one explicitly misunderstands, and the other implicitly fails to understand until a specified time."⁸ Those who "explicitly" misunderstand are those in darkness to whom the light has shown, but have failed to comprehend it (1:5).⁹

JESUS PROMISES A REMEDY: THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

As has been demonstrated above, John has constructed his Gospel to show us that Jesus has been repeatedly misread. Jesus then pledges to remedy this situation by sending the Spirit to those who truly love him and obey his commands (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:1-17). After stating to the disciples that he himself is the truth (14:6), Jesus

⁷ Simon, "The Role of the Spirit-Paraclete," 143.

⁸ Carson, "Understanding Misunderstanding," 68.

⁹ C.K. Barrett. *The Gospel According to St. John; An Introduction With Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 158. Barrett affirms that regardless of the debate over the Greek καταλαμβάνειν, the word most likely has a dual sense. Barrett states that the translation "comprehend" makes sense of the unfolding misunderstandings in the Gospel, and the translation "overcome" fits the resilience of the Gospel motif, despite the ensuing opposition.

then assures them that he will send *another* Advocate who will be with them forever – the *Spirit of Truth* (14:16-17). The wording of this passage has been the subject of endless discussion and exegesis. It is therefore necessary to briefly provide a working definition of the terms “another” (Gk. *allon*), “Advocate” (Gk. *parakletos*), and “Spirit of Truth” (Gk. *ta pneuma tes aletheias*).¹⁰ We will then examine what this other Advocate will do once he is sent to them.

***allon*:** It is clear from the Greek text that Jesus does not promise to send them another Advocate who is completely foreign or alien to them. The fact that Jesus has told them that the Spirit had been “with” them, but not yet “in” them (13:7), demonstrates that they were familiar with the workings and power of the Spirit. Had John wanted to communicate that the Spirit was entirely “other” than Christ or “other” than what they’d already experienced, he would have used a word such as *heteros*, meaning “another of a different kind.”¹¹ Instead he uses *allon*, meaning “another of the same kind.”¹² Thus, while *heteros* primarily means another of a *contrasting* type, *allon* refers to another of a *comparative* type.¹³ Barrett suggests that either *allon* or *parakleton* may be translated adjectively, which slightly effects how we render the passage.¹⁴ Either it is rendered that Christ himself through the agency of the Spirit will be the paraclete (which would fit the

¹⁰ Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev.ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1994), 380.

¹¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Rev. by Fredrick W. Danker, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 315.

¹² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 500. Though Carson warns us against making too much of this, based on John’s usage of *αλλο* in the rest of his text.

¹³ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 40.

¹⁴ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 461-462.

epistolary usage in 1 Jn 2:1); or the Spirit of Truth is the paraclete who provides communion and continuity with Christ's presence (which would fit the successor motif of John regarding the Spirit).¹⁵ Arguably, both constructions allow Jesus to continue his ministry of truth through the Spirit.

parakletos: This term comes into English as “paraclete” and has been translated in various ways. The primary thrust of the term according to *Bauer (Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker)* is “one who appears in another’s behalf, mediator, intercessor, helper.”¹⁶ Thus it clearly has a defensive thrust. Though *BAGD* states that the forensic or legal use is more rare, *Liddell, Scott, and Jones* lists the legal sense as the first definition for the classical period and assigns it a secondary intercessory capacity.¹⁷ Though it is likely a forensic term, it is probably not as restrictive as the Latin *advocatus*, which appears to be the favorite of the Patristic Fathers starting with Tertullian.¹⁸ Keener argues that *parakletos* is used frequently in both classical and rabbinic texts and states, “Rhetors could function as advocates for their friends; while the image is not so specific as ‘friend-advocate’ here, the idea is consistent with the context.”¹⁹ Referring to the other passages regarding the Paraclete, he goes on to state:

A forensic reading of these passages fits the trial motif throughout the Fourth Gospel and is becoming increasingly popular. This is, as noted above, a quite

¹⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 965-967.

¹⁶ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 618.

¹⁷ Henry George Liddell, and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Rev. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1313. Though παρακλετος does not appear in the LXX, or the Pseudepigrapha. Also, we should be careful not to read some classical nuances into Koine Greek.

¹⁸ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 618. Carson mentions this in his commentary, and also affirms the basic forensic use of the term. *The Gospel According to John*, 499.

¹⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 957.

natural way to read the “Paraclete”; the problem is that some scholars find difficulty relating this as a forensic term to what appears to be nonforensic functions in the Paraclete passages. Shafaat admits the forensic connection of 15:18-16:7, which is inescapable once one recognizes that synagogues (16:2) also functioned as judicial assemblies.²⁰

Barrett recognizes that the primary meaning of the paraclete is that of “legal assistant, or advocate”²¹ and does affirm the forensic aspect in 16:8-11, yet he declines to press the legal nuance out of John’s other contexts. Instead he sees a clear connection with other cognates such as *parakalein* and *paraklesis*. Barrett argues that both words are important links and both may be taken in a dual sense. On the one hand, they may mean to “prophetically proclaim,” and on the other hand may mean, “to console or offer help.”²²

Keener, however, feels this type of interpretation leans too heavily on etymology, and does not put enough weight on the normal sense of the noun.²³ Brown also feels that the legal aspect of *parakletos* is very strong. Jesus is judged and convicted to die on a cross and then sends the Spirit to reverse that judgment and conviction of the world (16:8-11).²⁴ The trial motif is also found in the Old Testament text in Zech. 3. In this

²⁰ Ibid., 961.

²¹ Barrett, *The Gospel According to John*, 462. Barrett is quoting LSJ here. Though he affirms the word was widely used this way, he doesn’t see the prosecutorial nature of the Paraclete in all of John’s uses of it.

²² Ibid.

²³ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 955. Keener then provides a seemingly exhaustive background on the term as “legal advocate,” not withstanding Angelic mediation, various OT references, and rabbinic court examples. Keener readily admits that this sense would not be unrelated to the legal and forensic use of the noun, but does specifically address Barrett’s view here.

²⁴ Raymond E. Brown, “The Holy Spirit as Paraclete,” *St. Anthony Messenger*, May, 1999: 13. Though Brown also makes room for the comforting aspect of the Paraclete based on the context of John 14.

passage, Satan stands as the accuser while the Lord's angel takes on a defensive role. This passage has undoubtedly given rise to various non-biblical expansions of that theme. This trial motif of the heavenly courtroom is expanded in the Dead Sea texts and has clear ties to the imagery of Zech. 3. Neusner states:

In the construct of the two spirits, which pits two figures against one another in the heavenly court, the accuser (Satan) is opposed by a defending attorney who looks after the interest of the righteous by pleading their just cause before God and protecting them from evil in a variety of ways. In the Community Rule, 1QS 3:18-25, that figure is called the prince of light, the angel of God's truth, and the Spirit of holiness and is probably identified with the angel Michael.²⁵

In any case, the minimalist definition may simply mean “an advocate, or provider of mediatorial help.” It seems that whatever else the term might mean, we can not dial out its forensic and legal frequencies. Though it is clear that John may have meant *more* than this, he likely did not mean *less*. As is consistent with other places in his Gospel, John does not have the habit of pulling his meanings out of thin air. Rather in typical Johannine fashion, he uses terminology that is familiar to his readers and exercises the prerogative to expand the term to encompass his own objectives (e.g. *logos*). The phrase “another Advocate” then, assumes they already *have* an Advocate and anticipates that the coming Spirit is a worthy successor.²⁶

So far, John has told us that Jesus promised to send another Advocate-Helper to the disciples whose presence will abide with them in perpetuity.

ta pneuma tes aletheias: There are various conceptual parallels to the Holy Spirit found in extra-biblical literature. *The Wisdom of Solomon* (possibly contemporaneous to Philo and the NT and falsely attributed to Solomon) personifies Wisdom and calls “her”

²⁵ Jacob Neusner, ed. *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 15.

²⁶ Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 500.

the spirit, which is holy.²⁷ In addition to this, Philo portrays the Spirit as hovering over the waters as air, or an invisible force. Philo seems to fuse the idea of God’s Spirit to knowledge, wisdom, and power to create and understanding.²⁸ Some argue that the Qumran texts provide us with another possible background for the “spirit of truth” phrase in particular.²⁹ Here we have the most striking contrast between the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.³⁰ As noted above, Jesus may have drawn from the celestial courtroom imagery in the TANAK (Zech. 3), but that he borrowed his terms or concepts from Qumran is less clear.

In searching for a theological or conceptual backdrop for Jesus’ use of “Spirit of Truth,” or “Holy Spirit” in John 14-16, some potential candidates can immediately be screened out such as the impersonal view of Philo, or the exalted angelic view of certain strains of Judaism. In addition to thinning out various inaccurate concepts for the Spirit of Truth, we must also recognize that *all* of these possible backgrounds are at least inadequate. A far more useful framework to the disciples is the messianic passage of Is. 11:2 which states, “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of *wisdom and*

²⁷ C. K. Barrett, ed. *The New Testament Background: Writings from the Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins*. Rev. ed. (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 300-302. Also, see Wis 9:17

²⁸ Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 153. It is clear that Philo doesn’t have a personified view of the Spirit in the way that an advanced trinitarian theology would articulate. This is new meaning that the disciples will later come to realize.

²⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 969-970.

³⁰ Neusner, *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 40, 600. Neusner sees a clear parallel with the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, or *Jubilees 17:15ff*, *The Testament of Asher*, and *Testament of Judah*. et al. However, it is doubtful that Jesus borrowed his imagery from a strain of Judaism that is not consistent with his theology of the Spirit as co-equal, personal, and the successor of his mission. Also, there is some debate as to the date of those sources; if they post date Christ, then they can be ruled out as possible background sources for Jesus’ use.

of understanding [emphasis added], the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” The disciples have already come to believe that Jesus is ministering in the power and the wisdom of God’s Spirit. Now Jesus is promising the same to them as an extension of his messianic vocation. The assurance of the coming Spirit is a comforting promise of permanency and equivalency. But what did Jesus mean by referring to him as the Spirit of *Truth*?

THE SPIRIT WILL GUIDE THEM INTO THE TRUTH

In order to understand what Jesus meant by it, we need only to examine his usage of “truth” and John’s application of the term as it relates to Jesus. Twice in John’s prologue he refers to Jesus as “full” of truth (1:14, 17). He also repeatedly states that Jesus prefaced his teaching with “I tell you the truth.” (1:51; 3:3; 5, 11, 21, 33; 5:19, 24-25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53 et al.).³¹ Moreover, Jesus only speaks what he hears the Father say, thereby showing himself to be a man of truth (7:18). And lastly, Jesus claims to *be* the truth (14:6). Arguably then, the disciples already understand Christ himself as the specific parallel here, and the messianic use of Spirit in Torah as the broader context.³² At this time it is not critical for them to comprehend all truth. For now, the truth must *apprehend them*. They must embrace it *before* fully understanding it, or like the unbelieving Jews they will risk *never* understanding it.

Already familiar with the Holy Spirit’s “resume” from the TANAK, the disciples are introduced to his new job description as it relates to Christ’s ongoing mission through

³¹ This appears to be Jesus favorite preamble to his sayings, axiomatic or not.

³² Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 969.

them. The Paraclete will teach them all things and remind them of all Jesus previously taught them (14:26). The Spirit will teach them the significance of Christ's words. *panta*³³, in Greek literally means "all things," but here refers to all *relevant* things; i.e. Christ's spoken words.³⁴ Through the mediation of the Spirit's presence, Jesus would unlock their understanding of his plan and his person. This teaching will be "explanatory and applicational, like the exposition of the Jewish sages."³⁵ Yet there is a discontinuous aspect of the Spirit's teaching of the disciples. Regarding the Spirit's role in teaching and reminding, Carson observes:

One of the Spirit's principal tasks, after Jesus is glorified, is to remind the disciples of Jesus' teaching and thus, in the new situation after the resurrection, to help them grasp its significance and to teach them what is meant...the promise of v. 26 has in view the Spirit's role to the first generation of disciples, not to all subsequent Christians. John's purpose in including this theme and this verse is not to explain how readers at the end of the first century may be taught by the Spirit, but to explain to readers at the end of the first century how the first witnesses, the first disciples, came to an accurate and full understanding.³⁶

It is interesting that the Spirit will have to remind them of Christ's words. Typically, Jewish disciples would meticulously memorize their rabbi's teachings. Memorizing was critical to the educational system of both Jews and Greeks.³⁷ It is unlikely that Jesus here means mere recollection, and most likely is referring to "recollection with application."³⁸

³³ *The Greek New Testament*, 381.

³⁴ Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 505. Also Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, limits this teaching of all things to the "spoken words of Jesus" and their later relevance, 467.

³⁵ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 978. He notes that like haggadic midrash, the teaching could be expansive.

³⁶ Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 505.

³⁷ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 979.

³⁸ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 467.

The Spirit will enhance an already strong cultural ability to memorize, and will provide them with unparalleled retention and accuracy of interpretation. This interpretive recollection will be the basis for their later stories of Christ, and the future codification of that tradition.

The Paraclete will also “testify” (Gk. *marturesei*³⁹) of Christ (15:26). This is not a tepid affirmation, but a “bold counter-offensive”⁴⁰ against the world. Jesus’ application of *marturesei* in the immediate context is not in the sense of a friendly witness, reaching out to longing souls. Though this is certainly a function of the Spirit’s witness in other New Testament passages (1 Jn. 5:6-10; Rom. 8:16; Acts 9:1),⁴¹ the context that flanks v. 26 is that of the world “hating” Christ and the church. The “witness” aspect of the Paraclete, will be to turn the verdict of judgment back onto the world. His resurrection will vindicate his claim, and the Paraclete will authenticate this message through the ministry of the disciples as the Spirit convicts the world. The disciples will themselves be witnesses, but as yet are not spiritually fit for that vocation.

In 16:12, Jesus tells them that he has much more to divulge but at the time they can not “bear” it. Given the weighty nature of what Christ has already vocalized, this probably means that they are not spiritually fit to bear more. But when he sends them the Advocate-Helper, they will be able to carry a theologically weightier load. John’s text reveals clear trinitarian undercurrents, but the disciples may not be ready to go there just yet. Jesus completes his thought saying that the Spirit will guide them into all truth

³⁹ *The Greek New Testament*, 384.

⁴⁰ Keener, *The Gospel of John* 1021.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1022.

(v.13). Carson notes, “If there is a distinction between ‘in all truth’ and ‘into all truth,’ it is that the latter hints at truth the disciples have not yet in any sense penetrated, while ‘in all truth’ suggests an exploration of truth already principally disclosed.”⁴² There will be continuity between recalled truth, and newly revealed truth.⁴³ When the Spirit reveals future revelation, he will take from what is Jesus’ and convey it to them. This future revelation is typically interpreted as a matter of eschatology. Yet this approach is not entirely aware of John’s view of eschatology, which is typically more realized than anticipatory.⁴⁴ The spirit will reveal the significance of all that is to come likely referring to Christ’s death, resurrection and glorification, which they will later understand.⁴⁵

AFTER THE RESURRECTION, THE DISCIPLES STILL MISUNDERSTAND

After the farewell discourse, Jesus is arrested, crucified and resurrected. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the disciple who outran Peter (probably John) fail to make a connection between Jesus’ empty tomb, Christ’s extensive discourse on it, and the scripture. After seeing the tomb empty, verse 9 states that “They *still did not understand* [emphasis added] from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.”⁴⁶ The disciples returned to their homes, leaving Mary at the empty tomb sight. Mary, a close follower of Christ (though not one of the twelve), instantly misunderstands what has happened to

⁴² Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 539.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1040.

⁴⁵ Carson, *The Gospel of John*, 540.

⁴⁶ Barrett, Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 564. The singular of graphe is used, but may refer to the whole of OT scripture as the disciples came to understand later.

Jesus' body. She is confused, thinking that it has been simply moved to another more permanent grave sight. Jesus then appears to all the disciples except one (20:19-23) and Thomas still refuses to believe the disciples report until he sees Christ for himself.

AFTER THE RESURRECTION, THE DISCIPLES RECEIVE THE SPIRIT

We are lead to the defining moment of Christ's mission among them. He has been their rabbi, friend, advocate, their shepherd and messiah. Now he appears to them as the risen Lord of the world, and imparts to them the Spirit of which he had promised (20:22). The disciples will still need to have Christ open the scriptures to them (Lk. 24:7), they will still need the Spirit to come and empower them for service and witness (Acts 2), and they will still need to experience the unfolding program of the messiah as they take the Gospel into the Gentile world (Acts). But as newly transformed believers by the Spirit of God, they can perceive the truth of Christ at a level that they could not have before. Jesus gives their inner renewal a missional context saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then, reminiscent of Adam, in Genesis-like fashion the Son of God breathes into them new life and they experience new birth.⁴⁷

AFTER RECEIVING THE SPIRIT, THE DISCIPLES UNDERSTAND

John's Gospel itself is an implicit attestation that Jesus' promise came true. The disciples did remember all of Jesus teachings and their significance, and they did testify to the world of Christ. At the time of the Gospel's writing, John is able to reflect on previous ambiguities that later become crystal clear to him and the disciples (2:17, 22;

⁴⁷ Craig Keener, *Gift and Giver* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 143.

12:16; 20:9).⁴⁸ He is able to convey retrospectively, that apart from Jesus sending the Advocate-Helper to assist in their understanding and recollection of Christ's teaching, they would still be lost in confusion. This does not mean that the disciples never misunderstood *anything* again. Before John lets us out of the book, he recounts two trivial misunderstandings the disciples still faced. First is Peter's failure to follow Jesus' line of thought regarding feeding his lambs (21:15-17), and second is the popular rumor that spread about John remaining alive until Christ's return (21:22-23). Also, in other places we see the disciples' view was sometimes murky with regard to a direct course of action (e.g. the choosing of a replacement apostle in Acts 1, or the timing of Christ's "restoring the Kingdom to Israel" etc.). The disciples were not given complete infallibility in every respect. Their infallibility was fused with the Spirit's witness of Christ in them, reminding, teaching, and revealing to them the significance of Christ's teachings. This is why Paul states that the church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets (Eph. 2:20).

CONCLUSION

When the disciples began their journey with Christ, they couldn't possibly have anticipated the spiritual transformation that would take place in them. In confronting the inadequate Messianic views of his countrymen, Jesus was bound to be challenged and misunderstood. As rabbi Jesus declared himself to be the fulfillment of their typological religious structures, it was inevitable that he would be met with resistance. When Jesus broke their oral traditions to heal people on the Sabbath, his aim was to re-introduce them

⁴⁸ Simon, "The Role of the Spirit-Paraclete," 157.

to their God-given vocation of mercy over justice. To complicate things, Jesus is at times taken entirely too literally by both his opponents and his followers.

It is critical to *our understanding* of these events that the promise of sending the Holy Spirit was not merely a “patch” for their propensity to misinterpret Jesus. The Spirit is the eschatological gift of the Father for inner re-birth and transformation (John 3) so that the believer may offer true and spiritual worship to the Father (4:23-25). Therefore, the result of this inner transformation was that the disciples would have a more complete comprehension of the purpose, person, mission and message of Jesus. Sending to them the Spirit of Truth would have a curative effect on their failure to grasp Jesus’ meaning.

It is also crucial for us to grasp the uniqueness of the disciples’ change in perspective. Though it is true that our own understanding of Christ’s teaching is aided and assisted by the illuminating presence of the Spirit of Truth, this should enhance rather than take the place of practicing solid exegesis and honing our hermeneutical skills.⁴⁹ So then, as we seek to untangle various aspects of the promise regarding the Paraclete, we must keep in mind that there are discontinuous aspects of these events in our own pursuit of understanding.⁵⁰ In going from a state of misunderstanding to understanding, the disciples faced a situation that was particular to their experience. Every strata of society found some way of misreading Jesus’ message and his mission. But to those who loved him and obeyed his commands, who faithfully followed his way and deferred their

⁴⁹ Daniel P. Fuller. “The Holy Spirit’s Role in Biblical Interpretation,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 14, no. 2 (June 1997): 93.

⁵⁰ Carson, “Understanding Misunderstanding,” 82-83. Carson states that, “Many of the Johannine misunderstandings are singularly implausible, or even incomprehensible outside the historical framework of Jesus’ life and ministry.”

understand to a later time, he poured out his Spirit of Truth, and explained all things to them.

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