

Historical Commentary

(Trinity Sunday - Year C)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 16:12-15 (Church Fathers, Calvin, and Luther)

*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen.

Origen: The Gospel shows him [the Paraclete] to be of such power and majesty that the apostles could not yet receive those things that the Savior wished to teach them until the advent of the Holy Spirit, who, pouring himself into their souls, might enlighten them regarding the nature and faith of the Trinity.

Gregory of Nazianzus: Our Savior had some things that, he said, could not be borne at that time by his disciples (though they were filled with many teachings) ... and therefore they were hidden. And again he said that all things should be taught by the Spirit when he would come to dwell among us. Of these things, one, I take it, was the deity of the Spirit himself, made clear later on when such knowledge should be seasonable and capable of being received after our Savior's restoration.... For what greater thing than this did either he promise, or the Spirit teach?

Augustine: Beloved, you should not expect to hear from us what the Lord refrained from telling his disciples because they were still unable to bear them. Rather, seek to grow in the love that is shed abroad in your hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to you so that, fervent in spirit and loving spiritual things, you may be able—not by any sign apparent to your bodily eyes or any sound striking on your bodily ears but by the inward eyesight and hearing—to become acquainted with that spiritual light and that spiritual word that carnal people are unable to bear. For that cannot be loved that is altogether unknown. But when what is known, in however small a measure, is also loved, by the same love, one is led on to a better and fuller knowledge. If, then, you grow in the love that the Holy Spirit spreads abroad in your hearts, “He will teach you all truth,” or, as other codices have it, “He will guide you in all truth”; as it is said, “Lead me in your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth.”¹² So shall the result be, that not from outward teachers will you learn those things that the Lord at that time declined to utter, but you will all be taught by God, so that the very things that you have learned and believed by means of lessons and sermons supplied from without ... your minds themselves may have the power to perceive.

Tertullian: The Lord sent the Paraclete because, since human weakness could not receive everything at once, it might gradually be directed and regulated and brought to perfection of discipline by the Lord's vicar, the Holy Spirit.... And so, he declared the work of the Spirit. This, then, is the Paraclete's guiding office: the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the reforming of the intellect and the progress in us toward "better things."

Ambrose: The Son of God says concerning the Holy Spirit that "he will not speak from himself," that is, not without the participation of the Father and myself. For the Spirit is not divided and separated but speaks what he hears.... This means he shall not speak without me. For he speaks the truth, he breathes wisdom. He does not speak without the Father, for he is the Spirit of God. He does not hear from himself, for all things are of God... Therefore what the Spirit says is the Son's, what the Son has given is the Father's. So neither the Son nor the Spirit speaks anything of himself. For the Trinity speaks nothing external to itself.

Augustine: He will make me clearly known by pouring love into the hearts of believers and making them spiritual and thus able to see that the Son whom they had known before only according to the flesh—and who they thought was only a man like themselves—was equal to the Father. Or at least, when his love filled them with boldness and cast out fear, they would proclaim Christ to men and women, and in this way they would spread Christ's fame throughout the whole world.... For what they were going to do in the power of the Holy Spirit, this the Holy Spirit says he does himself.

John Calvin: *But you are not able to bear them now.* When he says that, were he to tell them anything more, or what was loftier, they would not be able to bear it, his object is to encourage them by the hope of better progress, that they may not lose courage; for the grace which he was to bestow on them ought not to be estimated by their present feelings, since they were at so great a distance from heaven. In short, he bids them be cheerful and courageous, whatever may be their present weakness.

John Calvin: *For he will take of what is mine.* By these words he means that we receive the Spirit in order that we may enjoy Christ's blessings. For what does he bestow on us? That we may be washed by the blood of Christ, that sin may be blotted out in us by his death, that our old man may be crucified, (Romans 6:6) that his resurrection may be efficacious in forming us again to newness of life, (Romans 6:4) and, in short, that we may become partakers of his benefits. Nothing, therefore, is bestowed on us by the Spirit apart from Christ, but he takes it from Christ, that he may communicate it to us. (*note: Scripture references in original commentary from Calvin*)

Martin Luther: In this way Christ sets the bounds for the message of the Holy Spirit Himself. He is not to preach anything new or anything else other than Christ and His Word. Thus we have a sure guide and touchstone for judging the false spirits. We can declare that it surely does not indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit when a person proclaims his own thoughts and notions and begins to teach in Christendom something apart from or in addition to what Christ taught.

Martin Luther: For the Holy Spirit to glorify Christ, He must necessarily eclipse many other lights with His brilliance. When the dear sun rises in the heavens, all other fires, lights, and stars are obscured by its brightness, and we take no notice of them. Similarly, wherever Christ shines through the message of the Holy Spirit and it becomes known that we have God's grace and eternal life through Him, then all subsidiary lights that try to point the way to salvation in our night and our darkness must go out of their own accord.