

## One In the Spirit: The Redeeming Spirit

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“Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”  
– Matthew 16:17

The text for this second sermon about the Holy Spirit comes from Peter’s so-called confession at Caesarea Philippi. I say “so-called” because generally only theologians and New Testament scholars call what Peter says about Jesus a confession, meaning a statement of faith. We use the word confession to mean an admission of wrongdoing, and those two meanings are linked in the sense that they both refer to something which is not seen. A confession of faith refers to what people believe; a confession to a crime refers to what the person did which nobody else witnessed and for which there is scant evidence. So let’s continue to use this traditional language about Peter’s words because, when it comes to the Holy Spirit’s role in Jesus’s work of redeeming the world, there is much that is vital but unseen.

At first hearing, you might not think that the Spirit plays much of a role in Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. The Spirit isn’t even mentioned in this passage. People in general are, Jesus is, Peter is, the other disciples are, John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah are, the Messiah is, the Human One is, the Son of the living God is, the Father in heaven is, even Peter’s father is. But no mention of the Holy Spirit; why not?

Because it wasn’t necessary to make explicit what is implicit in Jesus’s telling Peter how Peter came to recognize Jesus as the Messiah: “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

According to Jesus, God had granted Peter the gift of sufficient spiritual insight for Peter to see in Jesus the Messiah. Flesh and blood didn’t do that. Flesh and blood couldn’t do that, because flesh and blood tells us things about the world that do not support our Christian belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who can deliver us out of the sin, brokenness, pain, and suffering of the world. That’s what Peter is saying when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, and it wasn’t flesh and blood who had revealed that insight to him. Who, then, had?

God the Spirit had. It was God’s Holy Spirit, that third person of the Christian Trinity whom we don’t readily associate with the work of redemption, who had allowed Peter to see in the life and teachings of Rabbi Jesus the embodiment of that deliverance for which the Jewish people had been longing for centuries. Peter saw in the self-sacrificial love of Jesus – a love daily manifest in his words and in his deeds – the path that leads to eternal life. The path that leads us from sin to redemption. The path that takes us from where we are to where God wants us to be, namely, with God.

That’s what the Spirit revealed to Peter about Jesus, and that’s not what most of Peter’s Jewish contemporaries were expecting. Jews at the time of Jesus, like most people everywhere

throughout history, were look for deliverance from a messiah in the mold of earlier deliverers of Israel: Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, David, Solomon. Warrior-kings, men of valor, strong and decisive leaders. We still do this. We don't want reflective leaders. We don't want gentle leaders. We don't want leaders who renounce violence. We want decisive leaders, leaders who know how to exercise authority and wield power and thrust and parry to outmaneuver their opponents and, if it becomes necessary, wreak violence against enemies. These are the kinds of people we trust, people of much tougher stuff than Jesus appeared to his contemporaries and as he continues to appear to many of us. Jesus – nice guy, but much too weak for the ways of the world.

So when Peter confessed him to be the Messiah, Jesus recognized that flesh and blood had not revealed that reality to Peter. Peter saw in Jesus what flesh and blood does not reveal – that the path to true deliverance comes not from destroying one's enemies, but rather from praying for them. That freedom from sin comes not from perpetuating the cycle of violence, but rather from renouncing it and working actively against it. That salvation, finally, comes not from seeking to preserve our lives, but rather from laying them down in order for God to take them up again in eternal, triumphant love.

Flesh and blood does not reveal that kind of truth. Flesh and blood reveals the lessons of history, lessons which we never seem to learn. Years ago, someone asked a member of Harvard's Hillel why the Jews persisted in observing the High Holy Days, why the Jewish people, so long persecuted and so often the target of others' hatred, persisted in believing in a God of justice, mercy, and peace who loved them and chose them. "The evidence that God loves you is so much against you," the person said, and the Hillel member replied that Jews don't believe in God because of the evidence, they believe in God in spite of the evidence.

We Christians are the spiritual descendants of a Jew who shared that belief. The world of flesh and blood does not provide the data to support our belief in God or God's will that all should be saved. The data do not support a view of the world that says we gain our lives only when we lose them. The data do not support a view of the world that says surrender is the path to both freedom and victory. The data, on the contrary, support a view of life as Thomas Hobbes described it: "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." That's the so-called real world. That's what flesh and blood reveals.

But the Spirit reveals something different. The Spirit reveals a different reality, a different world, a different and better way to exist. We see that way in the way of Jesus. We see in his way THE way – the way to break sin's control over us, the way out of the cycle of violence, the way out of WYSIWYG despair – the implicit despair that says what you see is what you get. Flesh and blood reveals the **world** to us, but the Spirit reveals the WAY to us, as it did to Peter, and that's the Spirit's power to redeem.

One of our biggest mistakes as Christian people was to turn the religion of Jesus into a religion about Jesus, because that move shifted Jesus's emphasis on bringing God's realm on earth while we live to an emphasis on getting ourselves to God's realm in heaven after we die. In my view, that was one of our first, greatest, and most disastrous mistakes. If you actually read what Jesus said and did, you will find very, very little about getting ourselves to heaven through belief in him, and instead you will find a very great deal about manifesting in our behavior the realm of heaven while we're still very much alive.

Heaven, for Jesus, is not primarily for the hereafter; heaven, as he taught and lived it, is for the here and now. That's why he taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN."

It's nothing more than Christian silliness and hypocrisy to pray for God's will to be done on earth while we live as though it's our wills that matter here and God's will that matters later, in heaven. That view of salvation is magical thinking, and I left the religious tradition of my upbringing because, among other reasons, of just that sort of thinking. The world doesn't need redemption later; the world cries out for redeeming now, and Christians believe that redemption comes from surrendering our wills to the will of our creating, redeeming, and sustaining God. We call ourselves Christians because we are followers of the Christ, the one revealed to Peter and to us not through the flesh and blood record of history and experience, but rather through the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new, including – if we will let it – us.

Friends, I have never encouraged any of you to embrace magical thinking in any aspect of your Christian faith, and I do not do so today. Rather, I urge you to heed the advice of the British historian Herbert Butterfield – advice which I have tried to make my own – who said, "Cling to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted." The Christ to whom I urge you to cling is not the Christ of Paul or the church or the United Church of Christ, but rather the Christ of the gospels, the Christ who opens the New Testament as God incarnate, and the Christ who closes the New Testament as the Lamb of God who was slain for the world's redemption. The Christ of the cross is – or is supposed to be – the Christ of Christians, but I'm sad to say that history – flesh and blood history, our history – reveals us Christians to be more in the tradition of those who put Christ on the cross.

If we are to be saved, it will not be through the revelation of flesh and blood. Rather it will be through the grace of God, given to us through the Holy Spirit, who allows us to see in the way of Jesus and to say, with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Child of the living God."