

THE OTHER COMFORTER

by Ray C. Stedman

Jesus' relationship with his Father would be called, in modern terms, his basic identity. I don't suppose there is any more basic problem in human life than the need to discover who you are, to discover your identity. We hear a great deal these days about an identity crisis, and the need to find oneself. This reflects a tremendously important psychological fact. It is important to know who you are.

A friend was telling me recently that as he has grown older he has come to see how important it is to him to find out more about his father, to know and to understand him. You cannot really know who you are and what causes you to act the way you do without some knowledge of your heritage and the family from which you come. Many times the solution to your problems will lie in that discovery and you will come to understand yourself.

This is because who you are determines what you do. If what you do doesn't grow out of who you are, then you are living a fraud, a false life. You are putting up a front, a facade which is not real. You may think that you are getting away with it, but you're not! Somebody sees through that front, sees that it is false. This is a problem with our world, isn't it? It is true that we pass through identity crises, that we don't know who we are. And that is why Jesus is unveiling his identity to his disciples.

Jesus knows who he is, and he says it to the disciples again and again. As we have seen, everything he says and does grows out of a basic identity with his Father. He says: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" (John 14:10 {RSV}). That is the key. "My Father and I are together always. He works in me, and I depend on him. That is the secret of life." Then again in Verse 11 he says: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me:" {John 14:11 RSV}. This is the great truth which needs to be apprehended, the revelation of our Lord's own secret of identity.

It will help us to pick up the train of his logic if we move on to Verses 18-20 and then return to the intervening verses. Jesus says to his disciples:

"I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me, because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." {John 14:18-20 RSV}

That is the secret of our identity as believers. The most fundamental fact of our life as Christians is there: You in me, and I in you.

Jesus says that he is not going to leave them as orphans. These men are frightened. They know that he is going away. They remember the intimations he has given that it will be by violence, by being taken and beaten and ultimately crucified. And they are fearful -- not only for him but for themselves. But now he reassures them, "I'm not going to leave you orphans, I'm not going to abandon you. I will come to you."

Obviously he is not talking here about his second coming. His reference to that is in Verse 3 where he has said that he will come again and take them to himself. At his second coming, John tells us, "every eye shall see him" (Rev 1:7 {KJV}). But here is a way of coming which the world will not see, but in which the disciples will not only see him but live by him: "Because I live, you will live also."

I take that to be more than merely a reference to his resurrection, and the promise of our resurrection some day. It is really a reference to his coming by the Spirit, the result of which will be "you in me, and I in you." And that is to be the secret of our lives, as his relationship with the Father was the secret of his life. Earlier, Jesus

has told his disciples: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me," (John 6:57 {RSV}).

Notice how he develops this idea, he uses a phrase which he will use repeatedly throughout this discourse: "In that day." In what day? In the day when he comes again to them in this remarkable and unique way by which they know him and live by him, but which the world cannot see. He is speaking of a new day about to begin, a fresh dawn beyond the night of crucifixion and death, beginning at his resurrection, but continuing on. And it will be characterized by new knowledge on their part: "you will know [the Greek word means *know by experience*] that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." This day, unquestionably then, is the day of the Spirit's coming, when they will be given a new identity.

I find Christians all over this country who do not understand this truth about their new life in Christ. The truth from which they get their identity is this fact, that Jesus is in them, and lives in them. It is to this fact that they should return whenever there are pressures and problems and difficulties and heartaches and troubles and demands made upon them, because it is from this fact that the secret of life will flow to them. That is why Jesus places it so centrally in this passage.

As we now know, the day of the Spirit began on the Day of Pentecost, when suddenly the Spirit of God was poured out upon these believers, and they became changed men. And that day is still with us. It began two thousand years ago and it hasn't ended yet. In fact, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and bracketed its extremes -- the events which would mark the beginning and the end of the day of the Spirit. It begins with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as prophesied by the Prophet Joel. Peter quotes that prophecy. He says, "but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" {Acts 2:16 RSV}, this pouring out of the Spirit upon men. And it ends, he says, when: "The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes," {Acts 2:20 RSV}. (See Acts 2:16-20 and Joel 2:28-32).

But in between is the age of the Spirit, the day of the Spirit.

As we work back through this passage, we can see that four tremendous characteristics of the Holy Spirit are outlined for us in Jesus' words:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither seen him nor known him, you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." {John 14:15-18 RSV}

First, the One who is coming would be another Counselor. The word translated "Counselor" is *parakletos*. It means "one who is called alongside of," one who will be your companion, your strengthener, your guide. In the King James Version it is translated "Comforter" -- One who is with you to strengthen you, to fortify you. And this Spirit will be another Comforter. Another than whom? Who was the first Comforter? It was Jesus himself. Jesus had been their Counselor, their Comforter, their Strengthener. He was the One who had guarded them and kept them and empowered them and taught them. Now there would be another who would come, another of the same kind.

Later on in this discourse, Jesus says: "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you," (John 16:4b {RSV}). They didn't need to know these things then. But now, as he is going away, he tells them that he has provided another Counselor who will strengthen them and minister to them. So the primary mark of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is that he does with us what Jesus did with his own disciples -- he strengthens us.

The second characteristic is that he would be the Spirit of truth. What does that mean? Truth, of course, is reality. Truth is what exists, what really is there.

The Spirit of God has come into our lives to lead us to understand what is there. There are many illusions in life, things that we think are true but which aren't true at all, principles upon which we act, expecting certain results, which don't appear. But the Spirit of truth has come to help us to understand life as it really is, to

dispel these illusions and strip off all the falseness. He is the unending foe of every pretense, of every fraud, and of every bit of phoniness.

As Jesus says a little later on, he will also reveal the secrets of God, the hidden facts about life that we desperately need to know in order to live. Paul develops that idea strongly in First Corinthians, where he tells us of the hidden wisdom, "the deep things of God" {1 Cor 2:10b KJV}, which are so necessary, but which eye has not seen nor ear heard, and which God has prepared for those who love him (see 1 Cor 2:9). These are made known to us, he says, by the Spirit.

The third characteristic, Jesus says, is that the world cannot receive him. The "world" means all those who are what we would call secularists or humanists, those who try to look at life without making any provision for God or for God's operation; who think of life as consisting merely of what can be observed and learned and acted on; and who think they don't really need God in order to live. Our world is being rapidly secularized. Education is losing its Christian perspective and is taking on a wholly secular point of view. Those who hold that viewpoint, Jesus says, cannot know the deep wisdom of God, cannot find the secrets of life. That is why, if we are restricted to following completely secular philosophies, we will repeat the same mistakes over and over again, generation after generation.

It is by the revelation of the truth as it is in Jesus, disseminated through the church, that the world is given light in the midst of its darkness. And if the church is not preaching the truth which is in the Scriptures, but, rather, is ignoring it, then the world is in unrelieved darkness and has no way out. That is why life gets worse and worse throughout the generations; why secular ideas and philosophies govern but cannot solve our problems. The world cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it does not believe him, Jesus says. It doesn't see him or know him. It doesn't believe that a spiritual kingdom exists, and thus cannot know the great secrets of life.

The fourth characteristic, Jesus says, is that the Spirit would operate from within the believer: "You know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." The primary reference here undoubtedly is to his disciples. Jesus could never say that of us, nor of anyone after the Day of Pentecost. We don't have to go through a process in which the Spirit first is with us and then is in us. But these men did. At this point in their experience Jesus had been with them, and thus the Spirit of God was with them, because Jesus was filled with the Spirit. Everything he did was by means of the Holy Spirit who was in him, but with them. But now Jesus is going away, and when he goes he will send the Spirit. And the Spirit will come to be in them. Everything they do, then, they can do by the power of the Spirit living in them.

All this is introduced to us by a very startling statement with which our Lord caught the attention of the disciples, Verse 12:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." {John 14:12-14 RSV}

That is one of the most startling promises in the Scriptures, and many have puzzled over it. There are three things we need to notice in this passage:

The first is the reason he gives for these greater works. It is because I go to the Father. What does he mean? Well, when he goes to the Father, he will send the Spirit. He says later: "if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you" (John 16:7b {RSV}). He is referring again here to the coming of the Spirit. As the Spirit of God comes into human hearts and dwells in them, these things will happen -- by means of the Spirit. The Spirit, of course, is releasing to us the life of Jesus, so that it is still Jesus who is doing these things.

We need to understand that. Some people read this passage and think that we ordinary human mortals, living here in the 20th century, are somehow going to be so capable, so well developed, so intellectually astute, that we can actually do greater things than the Son of God himself did when he was here in the flesh. That isn't what he says. He is telling us that he will do greater things through us, as the risen Lord, dwelling in us by means of the Spirit, than he did when he was here in the days of his flesh. And, in either case, it is he who is

doing it.

Some time ago I attended a public breakfast meeting designed to emphasize the spiritual values of life. It was one of those times when God seemed to come down and meet each one of us. Even though there were hundreds of non-Christians present, there was still a deep sense of God's presence. At the close of the meeting, I heard two men discussing it on their way out. One said, "Well, God must have been very pleased with this meeting." The other said, "Yes, he probably was -- he did it!" That captures exactly what Jesus means here. He is going to do it because he goes to the Father and by that means sends the Spirit.

The result will be that he who believes in me will also do the works that I do. Unquestionably this refers to the miracles that he performed. But what does this mean? Can Christians do miracles like Jesus did -- raise the dead, heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, still the storm, multiply the loaves and fishes -- all these great signs? The answer is, "Yes." If you read the record of church history you learn that there have been occasional manifestations of miracles of this nature. These are well documented and cannot be denied. And this same kind of power, by God's hand, is still at work among us from time to time.

But the focus of this passage is not on these physical miracles. Jesus drives on immediately to say: And greater works than these will you do. Now, what are they? Obviously they can't be greater miracles, because there are no miracles greater than his. Can you think of anything greater than opening the eyes of those born blind, or speaking a word and enabling a lame man to walk, or delivering the oppressed, or raising the dead? Can there be any greater miracles than those? Of course not. Then what are these greater works? The only answer that makes any sense at all is that they are greater in their significance and importance. In other words, they are spiritual accomplishments, rather than physical. Anything done to the spirit of man is far more significant than something done to the body. That is what Jesus is speaking of.

As you read the account of his ministry, notice that although the crowds followed him when he did those amazing wonders, and entire cities would turn out to hear his message, yet when you come to the end of his life -- when he is facing the cross -- where are all the crowds who heard him? Where are the hundreds whom he must have healed? They are gone. Only a handful are found at the foot of the cross. By every human reckoning the ministry of Jesus was a total failure. His miracles did not change people; they merely touched the surface of their lives.

But later on in this account Jesus says to his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide [your fruit will remain]" (John 15:16a {RSV}). Isn't it interesting that the ones whom Jesus healed would not stand with him through the test of the cross, but that when these disciples went out and preached in the power of the Spirit they won converts by the thousands, all across the length and breadth of the Roman Empire. And when the testing came, these men and women -- won by the preaching of these disciples -- were willing to face lions, to endure torture, to be pulled apart on the rack, to be bound up in skin bags and thrown into the sea, to be burned as living torches, to be mangled and mashed and twisted and torn apart, rather than to deny Jesus? "Your fruit will remain."

Those are greater miracles, aren't they? Anything done to the spirit of man is permanent; that which is done to the flesh is merely temporary. All those whom Jesus healed or raised from the dead died again; there is no record of it, but Lazarus must have died again, even though Jesus raised him from the dead. They all died. So, what is done to the spirit of man is far greater, and this is what Jesus means by "greater works."

Finally, we come to his method, which is that of prayer. How will these things happen? He adds immediately:

"Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." (John 14:13-14 {RSV})

That is an amazing promise! We often read that without careful thought of the context, and we are seized by the tremendous possibilities of that word anything. And shallow, superficial Christians, their passions aroused, leap up, and say, "Oh boy! What a promise! I can have that new Cadillac I've always wanted." But James reminds us: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions," (Jas 4:3 {RSV}).

No, that isn't what it means. You see, there is a limitation to this promise and a very important one. It is obvious that it couldn't be taken in an unlimited sense, because it would be contradictory. What if somebody prays for rain because his crops need it, and somebody else prays for sunshine so that he can put a new roof on his house -- whose prayer is answered? I remember hearing my dear friend, Dr. Howard Hendricks, tell of the time when he was a young man, before he was married. He was aware that certain mothers had set their caps for him on behalf of their daughters. One mother even said to him one day, "Howard, I just want you to know that I'm praying that you'll be my son-in-law." Dr. Hendricks always stops at that point in the story, and says very solemnly, "Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?"

What does it mean, then? Surely the words of Jesus are not without meaning. What is the limitation here? If you examine it you find only one, "Ask anything whatsoever in my name and it shall be done." What does that mean, "in my name"? Somehow again, in a superficial approach to these ideas of Scripture, some think they have fulfilled this when they tack on at the end of a prayer, "This we ask in Jesus' name" -- as a kind of magic formula, like rubbing Aladdin's lamp so that the "genie" of God will suddenly appear and do all that we ask!

Now, I have no objection to people adding those words. I do it myself. But there are many prayers with those words tacked onto the end which are not prayed in Jesus' name at all. To add those words does not make it a prayer in Jesus' name. God is not impressed with this kind of trivia. I think of our Lord's teaching about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, "Don't pray like the hypocrites do, thinking that you impress God with your endless repetition," (see Matt 6:5-7). Prayer is not magic.

What, then, does "in Jesus' name" mean? I've been given some difficult and painful lessons on what this means! I think God teaches us through our experiences, as we go on through life, to give us deeper and deeper insight into what these phrases mean. I had thought that praying in Jesus' name meant praying for the things he wants accomplished, the ends he wishes to achieve, the desires which he says are his will. And it does mean that; that is not wrong. But I thought you could pray to prevent certain things, and to attain others, and that we had an ability somehow to control the process by which these things come to pass. I have learned that this is not the case. I prayed for weeks, with all my heart, that something wouldn't happen, but one day it did happen, in spite of my prayer.

So what do you do with your prayer in a case like that? And what do you do with the promise? I learned that "in Jesus' name" means to pray in his place. That is the way we use the phrase, isn't it? If someone acts in the name of the president, it is as though he is standing in the president's place. If you give someone the power to act in your name, for that purpose it is as though you yourself were acting. When you sign your name on a check, that check is acting on your behalf, as though it were you. To pray in Jesus' name means to stand in Jesus' place. And where was Jesus standing when he said these words? Facing the cross. Facing the collapse of all the hope that his kingdom had raised in the hearts of his disciples. Facing the end, the apparent collapse and failure of all of his work and all of his program.

But he knew that beyond the cross lay the resurrection, and that there could never be that new beginning if there were not first an end of all which the others saw and hoped for. I think that if these disciples were praying for anything, and I'm sure they were, they were praying that somehow he would be spared, that somehow he would not have to go to the cross. They were praying to prevent it. But Jesus knew that it had to be. And to pray in Jesus' name means that you accept the process of God, the process by which he brings matters, often, to utter collapse, so that the very thing you don't want to ever happen, happens. But that is not the end of the story! Beyond it is a resurrection. Beyond it is a new beginning, a beginning of such different quality that the mind moves into an ecstasy of joy in contemplating it. That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name.

That is why, when we pray, it often seems as though God waits until the very last moment to answer our prayer. That is why he doesn't stop the process long before the heartache and pain comes, but allows it to go on into death -- and out of the death comes resurrection. And to pray in Jesus' name means that you consent to that process, and that you are aware that prayer is not merely a shield, a guard, to prevent things from happening. Sometimes it is, but not always. Prayer is also a commitment to undergo the end and the collapse and the failure. But that is never the end of the story. It is by this means that the greater works shall be

accomplished. It is only out of death that life comes.

This is what God teaches us through the Scriptures. This is why one day he had to say to Abraham, "Take your son Isaac, your only son, your beloved son, and offer him up as a sacrifice." And Abraham had to go through with it. It was only as the knife was poised in his hand, ready to plunge into the breast of his son, that God stopped him, (see Gen 22:1-12). The book of Hebrews says that Abraham received his son back as though it were a resurrection -- out of death comes life (cf, Heb 11:19). That is what it means to pray in Jesus' name. It may mean, therefore, the collapse of all that you hoped for. But out of that collapse, out of the tears, out of the heartbreak, God will bring new life.

Prayer

Our Father, we take some of these things of yours so shallowly, at times. We pray so glibly, and without understanding. But we thank you that you teach us, Lord, again and again through life, that you are never going to deviate from your process. As Jesus taught us, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." May we gladly consent to that process, Lord, in order that we may see the greater works which the world has not seen before -- "greater works than these" -- because, Lord Jesus, you have gone to the Father. We thank you in your name. Amen.

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