

# SHARING THE SPIRIT

By JOHN WRIGHT

**C**HRISTIAN communication is not merely or primarily a matter of passing on information, however important, valuable, spiritual or mysterious this information may be. It is not just sharing with others insights and directives which make their lives meaningful. Much less is it giving them *the* truth which makes them better than others by placing them in the select group of people who have superior knowledge about God, man and the world. Christian communication is radically a sharing of life. It is an overflow of joy in which we seek to give freely what we have freely received: the truth and the reality of God's creative and forgiving love which has been given to us in Christ Jesus. It is not merely information about this love that we communicate, but the very love itself.

Christian communication, thus, builds up a community, an association of persons sharing life together. It should be noted that a community of this sort is not simply a society, that is, a union of persons aimed at obtaining some further goal beyond the very sharing of life together. Thus, persons might form a society to promote a higher quality of municipal transportation or the protection of threatened wild-life. But a community finds the reason of its existence in the very vitality and expansion of life which the persons share together.

The opening lines of the first letter of John provide an illuminating source for this understanding of christian communication. He writes:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 1, 1-3.

Notice the development of this passage. It opens by recounting the tangible, visible communication that God has made in the incarnation of the Word, and announces what he has thereby shared with us, namely, eternal life. Then John proceeds to proclaim to others that which he himself has received; and finally, he indicates the result of this communication, namely, that the person hearing him and accepting this in faith will be incorporated into a community or fellowship, and that this community or fellowship includes the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. The passage ends on a note of joy, the fulfilment of joy that comes from sharing with others the eternal life which God has given to us.

### *Christian experience*

The christian community lives from the ongoing experience of this communication, a sharing of life within itself, from God, and to the world. The christian community is not held together simply by a recitation of formulas, lists of truths in which it believes, matters of information carefully treasured within the group. Nor is the christian community found simply in a structure of authority and obedience where some, vested with power from Christ, are able to tell others what to do and to believe. Nor, finally, is the christian community based just on the performance of certain rites together, ritual observances that mark them off from other men. But beneath all of these externals, manifested in them and strengthened by them, there is a distinctive christian experience, which is the life of the christian community. To confuse this life with the externals which surround and support it, or to subordinate this inner life to those externals, is inevitably to tend towards formalism and the letter which kills and does not give life.

There are no doubt many ways of describing this christian experience which underlies the christian community; but one of the most comprehensive is that which St Paul points to in the Epistle to the Galatians, 'For freedom Christ has set us free'.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the redeeming work of Christ, man finds himself captive to his own weakness, imprisoned by his sinfulness and selfishness, dominated by the pressures and influences of wickedness around him. By the power of Christ he is liberated into love, that is, he is given the freedom to love and to be loved. In the experience of forgiveness and the gift of the holy Spirit, he finds himself joined to a community of men who live with the freedom that God's love confers.

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<sup>2</sup> Gal 5, 1.

*The gift of the Spirit*

It is in this communal experience of freedom that christians are made aware of the presence of the holy Spirit in their midst. St Paul writes, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'.<sup>3</sup> And elsewhere he describes more at length the effect of the presence of the Spirit among us: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'.<sup>4</sup> To the degree that we experience these things, not merely as desirable but as possible through a power that is given to us, we experience the presence of the holy Spirit. As we forsake a reliance upon our own ability and open ourselves to receive what God wishes to communicate to us, we have an awareness of his holy Spirit. St Paul thus sees the source of christian unity in the holy Spirit himself. He writes, 'I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'.<sup>5</sup> By the phrase 'unity of the Spirit' St Paul understands the unity which comes from the Spirit, the unity conferred upon us by the Spirit. The same thought is expressed in the blessing with which he concludes his second Letter to the Corinthians. 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with you all'.<sup>6</sup>

This divine communication which we experience has its deepest source within the trinitarian life of God himself. It begins in that self-communication which establishes God as a community, as Father, Son and holy Spirit sharing together the divine life. This eternal life which Father, Son and holy Spirit have together overflows in the act of creation, the free decision to draw other persons into the trinitarian community, so that they may share with them the life and light and joy which are their everlasting life. When the creative purpose of God was hindered by man's sinfulness, God sent his Son into the world that his purpose might not be blocked, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'.<sup>7</sup> And this divine purpose continues to be actualized in the sending of the holy Spirit by the Father and his risen Son.

It is precisely this gift of the holy Spirit, this communication of

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 3, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Gal 5, 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Eph 4, 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor 13, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 3, 16.

God uniting us to one another, that gives us fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. First of all, the holy Spirit joins us to Christ as members of his body, as living branches of the true vine. Christ our Lord risen from the dead became the vital source of the giving of the holy Spirit to men.<sup>8</sup> In the gospel according to John we read:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'. Now this he said about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.<sup>9</sup>

The risen Lord continually communicates his holy Spirit to those who are willing to receive him in faith. The essential meaning of the day of Pentecost is continually renewed within the Church. The holy Spirit is present always as Christ's ongoing gift to us; and since there is only one holy Spirit, who is one and the same in Christ and in us, this gift joins us ultimately to Christ as the source of that life by which we live and have our unity with one another.

This gift of the holy Spirit joining us to Christ makes us one with him in his sonship, and thus makes us children of the Father. As St Paul writes:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.<sup>10</sup>

Our fellowship is thus with one another in the holy Spirit and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

#### *Mission to communicate*

The communication that makes us the community of the body of Christ is not simply for our own perfection and enjoyment, but lays upon us a mission of communication to the world. We are asked to share what we have received. This is the profound and central

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Jn 7, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Rom 8, 14-17.

meaning of christian communication. It is a prolongation and created implementation of divine communication and self-giving. This indicates how misguided would be the effort to seek perfection in isolation, simply for oneself, in a supposed union with God cut off from all contact and concern for others. The divine activity of giving and communicating never ceases to promote the growth of community. To attempt to receive the gift of God's grace without seeking to share it generously and unselfishly is like a heart trying to live and beat only for itself and not for the rest of the body as well. Christians, then, to the degree that they are faithful to the call they have received and accept gratefully the gift which God makes to them, become a living and life-giving centre for the freedom of the world.

*Light, forgiveness, strength*

When we consider more particularly some aspects of the communication that christians are directed to make to the world, it becomes still clearer how we are continuing a divine action of communication. Christ came 'to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death'.<sup>11</sup> He is himself the light of the world.<sup>12</sup> Still, he gives this same title to his disciples: 'You are the light of the world';<sup>13</sup> and Paul calls the philippians, 'children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world'.<sup>14</sup> The light to see is the first of all the gifts which God gives to us; and the refusal to accept the light makes all further divine communication impossible. Thus, the first obligation of christians to communicate to the world concerns the light of their own lives, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven'.<sup>15</sup> Light, if it is just received and not acted upon, can be mere information; but when the light is welcomed and loved and rejoiced in, it becomes the source of all future development. 'For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true'.<sup>16</sup>

Light, however, besides being a guide, can also make clear our own sinfulness and deformity; and hence, besides light, God sends us, through Christ, forgiveness. He comes to save us from our sins; and the mission which the risen Lord gave to his disciples on easter sunday was also this same mission of forgiveness.

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent

<sup>11</sup> Lk 1, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Phil 2, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Jn 8, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mt 5, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Mt 5, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Eph 5, 9.

me, even so I send you'. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'.<sup>17</sup>

And St Paul directs the colossians to show to others the forgiveness they have received: 'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive'.<sup>18</sup> And our Lord made clear that the indispensable condition for our receiving forgiveness from God is our willingness to extend forgiveness to others. 'For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses'.<sup>19</sup> The divine presence in Christ was for St Paul above all a presence of forgiveness and reconciliation, and he sees this same activity continued in his ministry in the Church: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God'.<sup>20</sup>

Forgiveness and reconciliation do not automatically remove all that is hurtful and painful from our lives. Christians, therefore, both look to God to receive comfort and strength from him, and turn to the world to share with others the comfort they have received. 'The God of all comfort . . . comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God'.<sup>21</sup> This comfort does not mean the elimination of all suffering from life, but rather the ability and the strength to endure, a strength that comes both from the power of God at work within us and from the support of our brethren. 'May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light'.<sup>22</sup> And the mission to strengthen was part of the special trust that Jesus gave Peter the night before he died. 'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Jn 20, 21-23.

<sup>18</sup> Col 3, 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Mt 6, 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Cor 5, 19-20.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Cor 1, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Col 1, 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Lk 22, 32.

*The community of eternal life*

Light, forgiveness and strength are all aspects of eternal life which comes to us through faith, our acceptance of God's gift to us. For this reason, the whole of christian communication can be summed up in the commission to spread to men that faith which brings eternal life. John writes in the epilogue of his gospel, 'These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in his name',<sup>24</sup> St Paul sees in the lives of christians a kind of fragrance, or aroma, which brings life to those who are willing to receive it:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.<sup>25</sup>

As the holy Spirit truly dwells within us, and becomes the source and inspiration of what we do and think and hope and desire, and as this finds expression in our lives, we become a source for the giving of life, a means whereby God transmits his holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of others. The renunciation of all selfishness, which is the openness to which we are called, is both an openness to receive from God and a willingness to share with others all that he communicates to us.

The final effect of all christian communication is to join us to one another, to Christ and to the Father in the community of eternal life. Jesus saw this kind of oneness as an effect of the proclamation of the gospel. In his prayer at the Last Supper he said:

'I do not pray for these only (the apostles), but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved me.'<sup>26</sup>

This is the community which the creative love of God sought to establish from the beginning. It is the unity of the holy Spirit which

<sup>24</sup> Jn 20, 31.

<sup>25</sup> 2 Cor 2, 14-15.

<sup>26</sup> Jn 17, 20-23.

comes from the out-pouring of the risen Lord. It is the fellowship of the saints begun here upon earth and continued in the everlasting joy of heaven.

### *God is Love*

The biblical teaching on christian communication is probably best summed up in a passage of matchless beauty in John's first letter.<sup>27</sup> In these fifteen verses, the christian revelation of God as Father is brought to luminous expression, and the command is laid upon each of us as his children to share what we have received. This is expressed as the central element of our existence. St John here twice announces, 'God is love'.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, he underlines the unselfish sharing which God has shown in sending his Son into the world as a source of life and forgiveness for us, even though we had not loved him but needed his forgiveness for our sins against him. The conclusion which John draws from God's great love for us is that we should love one another. The movement of love, which began in the heart of God and has reached us, must not be allowed to stop with us, but must pass on and reach the whole world. 'If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us'.<sup>29</sup> This unselfish love, this willingness to share what we have received, is a divine activity, a participation in the activity of God who dwells in us. It is loving which makes us like God in the world and so casts from our hearts all fear of judgment to come. 'In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear'.<sup>30</sup> It is in love that we share the light and forgiveness and comfort and strength and life and union which we have received from God. We can receive these, indeed, only as we are willing to share them with others. The attitude which God actually and effectively has toward us is the attitude that we are willing to assume toward others: forgiveness, kindness, patience, or their opposite.

### *Concrete applications*

Concretely, we must strive first of all to realize this ideal of christian communication at the level of the local church: in the parishes, religious houses, and families that make it up. All the persons involved in these institutions, the bishop, priests, sisters, brothers, and

<sup>27</sup> 1 Jn 4, 17-21.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Jn 4, 8.16.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Jn 4, 12.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Jn 4, 17-18.

laity, should strive to be servants of one another in all their dealings.<sup>31</sup> In our daily contacts we should show the forgiveness, understanding, esteem and kindness that will make us like the early Church of Jerusalem, where 'the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul'.<sup>32</sup> This primitive christian community even tried to share all material possessions together; for many reasons this did not work, but it points to the attitude of generous sharing that we must have. St Paul wrote to the church at Rome: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited'.<sup>33</sup> As far as it is given to us by God's grace, we must love one another as Christ has loved us. It means being willing to give our time, energy, talents and resources for the benefit of others rather than for our own self-interest. The great paradox of the christian life, repeated six times in the gospels in slightly different ways, asserts, 'Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it'.<sup>34</sup> We lose our lives not so much by dying as by living for others.

The health and vitality of the universal Church depends directly upon the life of the individual local churches. There does not exist some separated world-wide catholic Church in addition to the communion of all local churches with one another and with the See of Peter. The unity of love, faith, obedience and worship, which is God's gift to his whole Church, must first be gratefully received at the local level. Christian communication throughout the world is rooted in the day-to-day immediate relationship of christians with one another. This, in fact, is so true that it defines the essential norm of christian ethics or morality: whatever truly builds up the community is good; whatever hinders or destroys it is evil. 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, *and any other commandment*, are summed up in this sentence, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law'.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the Church's mission to the world, the communication of the grace of divine sonship to all men, depends profoundly upon the vital unity of all who sincerely acknowledge Jesus as Lord. It is the

<sup>31</sup> Cf Lk 22, 24-27; Phil 2, 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 4, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Rom 12, 15-16.

<sup>34</sup> Mk 8, 35; cf Mt 10, 39; 16, 25; Lk 9, 24; 17, 33; Jn 12, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Rom 13, 8-9.

healthy body alone that grows. So long as we who claim that our first loyalty and obedience is to Christ do not manifest in our lives the unity and peace and love of the gospel we proclaim, our influence upon other men can be only slight. The world will not become christian so long as christians are divided by unwillingness to communicate among themselves; but the world cannot fail to become christian when the visible community of all christians attests unmistakably the power and presence of the risen Lord among us.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cf Jn 13, 35; 17, 20-21.