

Heidelberg Catechism Twentieth Sunday: On God, the Holy Spirit

Andrew Murray

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.*

*Amen*¹

Concerning the Articles of Faith as found in the Apostles' Creed, we were taught that they are divided into three parts: the first about God the Father and our creation; the second about God the Son and our redemption; the third about God the Spirit and our sanctification. It is this third part that we now come to in question 53: "*What do you believe about the Holy Spirit?*" Just as indispensable as the knowledge of God our Creator and Father and Christ our Redeemer and Judge, is the knowledge of the work of the Holy Spirit. Without Him there can be no real knowledge of the Father and the Son. Without knowing Him we do not know how to find and enjoy the love of the Father and the mercy of the Son correctly. Let us approach in faith and with a desire for salvation to hear what we are taught through the Word of God about the blessed work of the Holy Spirit. Notice that the teaching will point out five aspects of the highest value that we will discuss consecutively.²



¹ "The Apostles' Creed", *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta/Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 845.

² Here Murray is following the five biblical reference divisions accorded to the 53rd answer.

53 Q. What do you believe about the Holy Spirit?

A. Firstly that He is, together with the Father and the Son, truly and eternally God.

Secondly, that He is also given to me that I, through true faith in Christ may have part in His kindness, His consolation and eternal presence.³

53 Q. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Spirit"?

A. First, he, as well as the Father and the Son, is eternal God.

Second, he has been given to me personally, so that, by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his blessings, comforts me, and remains with me forever.⁴

I

The Spirit is God

Firstly that He is, together with the Father and the Son, truly and eternally God. This first part of our reply deals with the person of the Holy Spirit. On the eighth Sunday, through the interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, we had the opportunity to discuss this at length. The Spirit is the third of the three persons of the Godhead, as much an independent person as the Father and the Son, and as much a Godly person. This truth is not a doctrine to be accepted and then to be put aside as if it has no specific value for us. No, in what we are now going to consider, it is essential that we will remind ourselves that He, on whom we are so totally dependent for the experience of salvation that Christ has prepared, in fact truly is God, one with the Father and the Son. The Spirit has the Father and the Son in Himself; only to the extent that we get to know and honour Him can He powerfully reveal the Son and the Father in us. The more the believer puts this in the foreground, the stronger shall be his faith to truly expect the full blessing and power the Spirit can bring.

Remember that we have seen previously what power this truth has: the Mediator must be God. My Saviour is God. Similarly, this truth, the Spirit must be God, the Spirit is God, will increasingly reveal to us the joy of salvation and the possibilities of a life of faith. The power that works within us to bring about belief and work, the outpouring and revelation of the love of God in the heart, the real unity with the Lord as members of His body, and so much more finds firm ground in this: the Spirit is God, one with the Father and the Son. As such, He gives the testimony in our hearts that God is our Father because He, as the life of the Father, breathes in us. As such, He makes us partakers of Christ and is the Comforter in the place of Christ. As

³ This is a translation by Gerda van der Merwe of the Afrikaans version of the Catechism as found in Murray.

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such, He abides with us eternally, meaning with a continuing, unintermittent presence every moment of our earthly lives.

Christian, ponder this, immerse yourself in it. Lose yourself in this: the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that is in you, is God! Worship God as the Trinity and thank Him with a joy that has never been known before. The third person, God the Spirit, lives in you.

II

The Spirit was given to me

I believe secondly, that He was also given to me. This is how the true believer expresses his faith. With this he thinks, though not exclusively, of the outpouring of the Spirit from heaven on the day of Pentecost. He was then given to the church to stay with them forever but not in such a way as if all there was of the Spirit in heaven descended onto the earth. No, He is in heaven as well as on earth; He is in Christ the Head and in the congregation, His body, at the same time. And at rebirth every believer receives of the Spirit, as well as from believers around him through the communion of the Word, as from the exalted Lord in heaven. Every believer is not only reborn so that there is in him a new spirit, but he truly receives the Holy Spirit to live in the new spirit.

Let us extend ourselves to understand that the Holy Spirit really lives in us. If He was given to us, can He in any other way be our property than through inhabitation? When we think of the Father, we think of the invisible and concealed God, highly exalted in heaven. When we think of the Son, then we think of God who appeared in the flesh, God in Jesus Christ, lifted up on the cross and exalted on the throne. When we think of the Spirit, we must not think of someone above or outside us. No, when we confess in the Catechism, "*I believe that He is also given to me*", we mean that He moved into my inner being and lives there in order, through His Godly power, to be my life and to do all His work in me. This inhabitation is a Godly mystery but at the same time something of which the Christian can have the glorious certainty and experience.

Many believers fear to express the Spirit because they experience so little, yes sometimes nothing, of the working of it. My brother, when Jesus was on earth, He was truly God on earth, though it often seemed as if He was nobody special because there was no recognized sign of Godly power. If someone did not believe in Him and He could do no powerful deeds, can it be regarded that He was not God?⁵ Only faith recognized Him and could evoke the manifestation of His Power. In the same way, you should not look for the signs and power of the Holy Spirit in you to know that He is in you.

⁵ Matthew 13:58; 17:20.

No, He keeps Himself very concealed in your inner being. The Holy Spirit, who said that He gives Himself to you, wants you to glorify God through faith. He wants you to trust His silent, secret work in you, even when you do not see it. Please accept the word of faith which the Catechism gives you and repeat it often. It will become a blessing to you: *I believe in the Holy Spirit; I believe that He was given to me.*

The effect of such faith will soon become evident. You will begin to understand that inward religion is the main issue in the New Testament: “The kingdom of God is in you” (Luke 17:21). In reading the Bible, in praying, as well as in living and working for God, you will learn not to ask the help of the Holy Spirit as if He should come from above or outside of you, but from inside you, like a tool that the Father gives you more powerfully as you honour the Spirit within you. Fear and consideration will come over you not to hinder Him through human wisdom and power; but you will experience a holy silence of the soul as of one that is under the guidance of a concealed but mightily working Guide. The thought of such heavenly guidance will be difficult to understand at first; but as you hold on to your faith and practise it, your soul will become accustomed to it. And you will understand that the essence of your life should be a daily practice in faith in the Triune God: the Father, from Whom are the Son (in Whom you are) and the Holy Spirit (Who is in you). Believer, here is the blessing of your salvation that you will need today and day after day: the Holy Spirit is in you to work all that your God and Christ promised you. Do not let it discourage you that He works silently and covertly. His work in you will become stronger as you profess it with more conviction: *I believe in the Holy Spirit; I believe that He was given to me.*

III

The Spirit makes me a partaker of Christ

“He was given to me to make me, through faith in Christ, a partaker of His merciful deeds.”⁶

These words wonderfully represent to us the work of the Holy Spirit. Too often the merciful actions of Christ, His righteousness, His guidance and His power are discussed as if they were gifts that could be received apart from Him and without possessing Him. No, just as the disciples had to accept Jesus as their Lord and follow Him as they who belonged to Him before they could enjoy His wonderful teaching and work, so should the believer know that the prosperity and power of his spiritual life will depend on his partaking of Christ. Just as the bride automatically becomes part of the house and abundance of the bridegroom if she possesses him, so must this be first and foremost in the life of faith: to know what it means to possess Christ.

⁶ The 1975 English translation here of the Heidelberg Catechism reads, “by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his *blessings*”.

The specific and unique work of the Holy Spirit is to partake in Christ. He is indeed the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Son. He could not come until Christ was glorified. He first had to undergo the full earthly life of Jesus in the perfecting and sanctification of Christ through suffering. The Spirit had to possess the humanity of Jesus completely so that He, as the totally complete Spirit of Jesus, could bring the same life into being in us as it was in Christ. He was sent from the exalted throne of the Lord so that all the fruit of the work of salvation, as it is acknowledged in heaven, and all the power of the Lord Jesus in His glory could become our inner property. Through a Godly and living communication, He makes us partakers of Christ. Christ becomes our life.

Makes us partakers of Christ and all His merciful deeds. What all His merciful deeds are can only be understood from the point of view of His threefold duty. The more we ponder the work of the Holy Spirit in the Word, the more we see that it is summed up in His suffering or illumination, His sanctification or renewal and His strengthening or making fruitful.

This explains the three offices. Christ is the Prophet; that is, the Word, the Wisdom, the Truth of God. As the Spirit of wisdom and truth in the Word, He makes Christ our Wisdom so that we, through the knowledge of Him, His image and His life, see God's will for us, our calling and our destination.

Christ is Priest. It was through the Spirit that Christ as Priest accomplished His offer. It was as Priest that He poured out the Holy Spirit. It is through the Spirit that the blood of reconciliation, purification and sanctification work continuously and the unification with the Holy Spirit is accomplished.

Christ is King to rule, to use and to strengthen to His service. The Spirit is the power of Christ. He enables believers to accomplish the whole will and work of the Lord, to wrestle and to conquer.

And all this through faith. To make me partake of Christ and all His merciful deeds through true faith. This does not necessarily speak of the beginning of faith at the time of conversion but of the life of faith and the daily joy in Christ and His deeds of mercy unto which the Spirit enables us. It happens through ever increasing and strengthening faith. As much as there is of the Holy Spirit, there is of true faith. If I want to increase in true faith . .

..⁷

⁷ This sentence was not completed in Dr. Murray's manuscript copy which was the text used for the 1945 printed version.

IV

The Spirit comforts me

You know why the church speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in such detail. On the last night, when the Lord gave the promise of the Holy Spirit, He called Him the Comforter. The word thus translated actually means the mediator or advocate (refer to the note in the margin of the state translation, John 14:15) and is, like the last mentioned word in Latin, *advocatus*, one that is called in to assist a person in his lawsuit. It is the same word that is translated for the Lord Jesus as Advocate (1 John 2:1) when the Lord said: “*The Father will send you another Comforter*” (John 14:16), where He meant that He Himself was the first in whose place the Other would come. Here He teaches us of the work of the Comforter or Advocate, the other One. Indeed the entire work of the Holy Spirit would be a completion and appropriation of His work. The work of the Lord Jesus as Advocate in heaven is to represent us with the Father in heaven; the work of the Spirit, *the other Advocate on earth*, is to make the work of Jesus in heaven known to us and in this way be the Representative of Jesus. The second of these, the other Comforter or Advocate, has but one task: what the Advocate does in heaven is revealed and strengthened in a living and powerful reality to the inner man.

Should we understand the word Comforter in the correct, full sense of the word, we would achieve the same result. What was the sorrow for which the Spirit would comfort them? The one great sorrow that filled them was the death of Jesus Christ, the loss of their beloved Lord’s physical presence. But that sorrow would be changed to joy when the Spirit came. And this for the specific reason that the Spirit would reveal the Lord Jesus’ heavenly and spiritual presence to the inner man. Because the Father was in the Son and spoke through Him, Jesus could say: “. . . he that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9 KJV). In the same way, because Christ is in the Spirit, the believer receives with the Spirit the exalted Christ. In this way the Spirit is the Comforter and the Representative of Jesus Christ which makes Him now just as present in reality as when His disciples were on earth. All complaints and sorrow, the missing of the presence of the Lord, all weakness and darkness have one cause: we do not know the power of the Spirit in the fullness of His heavenly position as Comforter, for He can make Jesus just as present now so that there will be no sign of shortage or sorrow. The complete joy that Jesus maintains and distributes as the Comforter in heaven (Hebrews 7:25) is imparted through Him continuously as Advocate to our experience in fullness. Our Comforter is God the Holy Spirit in whom God the Redeemer is personally represented.

V

The Spirit stays with me

To stay with me eternally. These words of the Catechism were taken from the words of Jesus: “*And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter that he may abide with you forever*” (John 14:16). By saying this, the Lord does not want to point our thoughts to what we normally believe – eternity after death. No, He is thinking of Himself and His leaving. His physical presence was always limited to space and time. The disciples could not always have Him with them; now with His death and going to the Father, He would be parted from them. He promises them another Comforter that will stay with them *for all eternity*, unintermittent and continuously. No place or circumstance could be imagined whereby for one moment the presence, comfort and power which makes them part of Christ and His mercy be absent from them. Eternal life that knows no change or end would already be the share of the disciples here on earth.



Pulpit in the Moederkerk, Wellington, South Africa

– JCW photo