

We Believe in the Holy Spirit

By Dr. Dave Neale

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.¹

Who is this Holy Spirit in Whom We Believe?

First let's try to bring some notion of the breadth of the Person of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. The ways in which the Bible speaks of the Spirit are widely varied. The Holy Spirit is a Person, not an it. The Spirit mediates power, anointing (even Jesus), the Spirit is a personal force in the life of the believer (as in Paul), the Spirit is the Paraclete, or Comforter (as in John 14:16-17).² The persona of the Holy Spirit is, as Jesus said, like the wind. Jesus seems to borrow from the widespread meaning of the word *ruach* as a play on words in the Hebrew Bible when he, in response to Nicodemus:

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind [pneuma] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit [pneuma]” (John 3:7-8).³

Holy, *hagios* in Greek and *qodesh* in Hebrew.

Spirit, *pneuma* in Greek and *ruach* in Hebrew.

The two terms taken together only appears twice in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 63:10; Psalm 51:10).

Who Proceeds from the Father and the Son

What you hear in this language is an echo of the dispute with Arius, who you may recall from our message on who Jesus was and is (two weeks ago), did not believe that God could share his essence. So the language was adopted that Jesus is “eternally begotten of the Father... begotten not made, of one being with the Father.” So this is extended here to the Spirit, “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” In other words, an affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

He Has Spoken Through the Prophets

The prophets spoke by the Holy Spirit and were at times animated by the spirit of God to prophecy.⁴ The portrait of the Holy Spirit takes a definite turn in the story of the New Testament. More on that in a moment.

Judaism, but specifically rabbis before Jesus' time, believed that the Spirit of God, synonymous with the “spirit of prophecy” had, decamped after the destruction of the First Temple, leaving Judaism without prophets,⁵ i.e. from Ezra being the last prophet about 500 years before Jesus.⁶

There is a presumption of early Christianity that the time of prophets had ceased in Judaism. In the Joel 2 passage quoted by Peter in his Pentecost sermon, prophecy and the Spirit returns to Judaism:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...⁷

So it is significant that you have Jesus refer to himself as a “prophet” and the idea that he reintroduces the presence of the Spirit in a way not seen in Israel for 500+ years.⁸

The Lord, the Giver of Life

This phrase belongs between the assertion of the resurrection and exaltation, before the Creed turns to the church.⁹

Compare the language of the Apostles' Creed, which simply says "I believe in the Holy Spirit,"¹⁰

There is a mystery here as well. The Spirit is God, dwelling in us.

The Spirit as Giver of life¹¹ is the same as saying God is the Giver of Life. What life? The life of creation? Well, generally, all life is an act of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit at creation.

I think this is a reference to the resurrection of Christ. It follows immediately on the declamation of Christ's resurrection on the third day.

"The Holy Spirit is, from our perspective, the link between the risen Christ and the church, the means by which we experience the power of the resurrected one and are being transformed into his likeness" (LTJ, p. 216).

Spirit mediates the power of the resurrection:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Ro 8:11).

This is just an unbelievable hope!

Our relationship with God through the Spirit is based on our experience of the resurrection. When we gather, we gather in celebration of the resurrection. Always. We are the community of the resurrection, and hence, the community of the Spirit.

No resurrection, no Spirit present in the church. When we say we receive "the gift of eternal life" it means we share in the "God's own life *through* the resurrection" (italics mine).¹²

The Holy Spirit as I/We

This brings us to a shift in meaning as the term Holy Spirit arises in the NT literature.

You find the person of the Holy Spirit mentioned in so many ways that it eludes a simple description. The Holy Spirit is represented as an experience for the individual, the "I" aspect of the Holy Spirit.

- ***"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).***

Let's think about the "We" aspect of the Holy Spirit.

May the God of hope fill you [plural] with all joy and peace in believing, so that you [plural] may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Ro 15:13)

But you [plural] will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you [plural]; and you [plural] will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Here are, in my thinking about this, the true components of creating a place for the Spirit to be active among us:

The exercise of our various gifts. The exercise of the gifts is how God gets out, as we say.

...while God added his testimony [to that of Jesus] by signs and wonders and by various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will (Heb 2:4).¹³

-Worship/Word/Table

-Acts of service to God and the community

These activities become the means, or medium of the presence of the Holy Spirit among us. If you ask me as teaching pastor how we attend to the basic responsibility of the faith community, I'd say it is incumbent upon us to be faithful in our practice of exercising the gifts of the community members for the common good; that we attend to the faithful practice of worship, Word and Table; and that we do acts of service to God and the community.

You can say well, the way we do these things is:

- too emotional/not emotional enough
- too liturgical/not liturgical enough
- too many old songs/too many new songs
- too contemporary/not contemporary enough
- too liberal/too conservative

I don't claim to know how to make the Spirit present. Those who do make me uncomfortable.

But unless the Spirit is present in what we do, however we do it, we are just another club.

So how do we find the balance between all these competing styles of activity? Renewal movements in Christianity have always leaned to an emphasis on the affective experience of the Spirit. Our own Wesleyan theology was a break-away renewal movement from Methodism. And, in true form, it talked about a "second blessing," a sanctification of the Spirit subsequent to initial salvation.

If we want to be a Spirit-filled church, tend to the core of the truth and attend to the means of grace, the exercise of the gifts, worship/word/table, and service to others. And God will come out.

¹ "In the West, a lingering concern for Arianism led to the modification of the declaration [of 381 under the Christian emperor Theodosius I] of the Holy Spirit. The Council of Toledo in 589 added the phrase *filioque* ("and the Son") to the phrase *qui ex patre procedit*, so that it now says that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son."

² See Luke Timothy Johnson's *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* (LTJ), pp. 220ff.

³ This is similar to the play on words from the Valley of the Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37, where a play on words again occurs with *ruach* signifying both breath and spirit.

The presence of God through Spirit appears with some frequency. Most notably at creation in the second verse of the Bible: **...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God [*ruach Elohim*, spirit of God, or wind from God] swept over the face of the waters.**

⁴ The prophets of old fell into a prophetic frenzy by the spirit of God. Saul, 1 Samuel 10:9ff, 19:18-24; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Acts 1:16

⁵ As in the rabbinic source *Tosefta Sota* 13:2ff. See *Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, vol 3, p. 263.

So in Judaism you get this notion that there were

1. The halcyon days of the prophets up until the destruction of the First Temple in about 590 BCE.
2. A “prophetless present,” i.e. a desert of the activity of the Spirit of God⁶; the time in which Jesus’ contemporaries saw themselves, and

⁷ Again *ABD*, as above. See also John 7:39 and Mark 1:8.

⁸ Luke 13:33, 24:19; John 4:19, 44; et al.

⁹ LTJ, p. 216.

¹⁰ “The Holy Spirit was a convenient point of attack for those whose main target was the divinity of the Son [the Arians, whose controversy grew rather than diminished after the Nicene Council in 325 CE, became an even more troublesome problem for East/West church in the later decades of the fourth century]. If the Spirit that worked through the Son is at work in Christians is only a creature and not God, then the Son is not God either” (LTJ, p. 217).

¹¹ Neh 9:6; Job 36:6; Ps 70:20; Ro 4:17

¹² LTJ, p. 224

¹³ Notice Paul: ***Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them.... they are spiritually discerned*** (1 Cor 2:14).