

The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Faith

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1. The Holy Spirit in our time

Sometimes there is the complaint that the Holy Spirit receives too little attention in theology and sermons of Christian churches. In a way that may be correct for former times (even though not in the way it is often said). But in our day we usually do not have to fear this anymore. There has probably never been a time before in which more was discussed in the churches about the Holy Spirit and his work than today.

For about 100 years the new enthusiastic movements have received much attention. In the beginning of the 20th century the Pentecostal churches came into existence. They demanded a baptism of the Spirit that should have a greater importance than the baptism by water. That "baptism of the Spirit", they said, should be shown in extraordinary works of the Spirit. Speaking in tongues and other ecstatic appearances were claimed to accompany such a baptism.

In the more recent past the charismatic movement attracted attention in a similar way. The charismatics believe that the Holy Spirit should be shown in visible and perceptible works of power. The so-called "Toronto Blessing" can apply as the most popular example, where people are reported to be thrown on the ground, tossing and turning and screaming through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Through services of praise or adoration the charismatics try to put people into a trance and believe that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. We know from the Bible that the Holy Spirit can bring out such effects (cf. 1 Sa 10:10f). But the question is: Is it possible to have an extraordinary appearance and automatically be able to see the Holy Spirit as the originator of it. Such a conclusion is not possible because Satan also can use those signs (cf. Ex. 7:11f). If we want to be sure that we are dealing with the Holy Spirit, we have to stick to those ways that he stuck to himself. He wants to work through God's word and the sacraments. There we should look for him. (The next essay will deal with it in detail.)

Here we wish to ask what the reason is as to why the extraordinary works of the Holy Spirit attract so much interest today. It probably is because the center of theology was moved during the time of Pietism. Influenced by the increasing individualism of modern times, the concentration of theological thinking moved toward the subjective feelings and experiences, and away from objective facts of salvation. Not the content of faith (the so-called *fides quae creditur*) but the act of faith (*fides qua creditur*) became of chief importance to many people. Not what I believe was interesting but how I believe and in which way this faith influences my life.

When the topic is "Salvation," so often the full work of the Holy Spirit is not meant anymore, but only salvation in a generalized way: Christian living as based on the faith. This emphasis leads to the situation where the true and most important work of the Holy Spirit almost completely shifts into the background. It appears there is a much greater interest in the psychological considerations about faith.

2. The work of the Holy Spirit

We have a proverb in Germany: "They have the name according to their deeds." That means: Some people's names are Miller and they actually work in a windmill. Others' names are Little and they actually are little in size. Other people are called Schuetze and they actually are good marksmen. It is the same with the Holy Spirit. He has his name in his work. Martin Luther writes in his Large Catechism:

This article (as I have said) I cannot relate better than to Sanctification, that through the same the Holy Ghost, with His office, is declared and depicted, namely, that He makes holy. Therefore we must take our stand upon the word Holy Ghost, because it is so precise and

comprehensive that we cannot find another. For there are, besides, many kinds of spirits mentioned in the Holy Scripture, as the spirit of man, heavenly spirits, and evil spirits. But the Spirit of God alone is called Holy Ghost, that is, He who has sanctified and still sanctifies us. For as the Father is called Creator, the Son Redeemer, so the Holy Ghost, from His work, must be called Sanctifier, or One that makes holy" (Large Cat. II, 36f; Triglotta 687; BSLK 687f).

Following that, Luther also explains what is meant by "Sanctifier." Through his suffering, dying and resurrection our Lord Jesus did everything that is needed for the eternal salvation of all people. But that would be of no use to us if we knew nothing about it. We would live and die without having heard anything about this wonderful gift. It is exactly at this point where the work of the Holy Spirit starts. He takes the part of making us appreciate what Jesus has achieved for us. Luther writes:

"For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on Him, and obtain Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the Gospel. The work is done and accomplished; for Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection, etc. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew of it, then it would be in vain and lost. That this treasure, therefore, might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and appropriate it to us. Therefore sanctifying is nothing else than bringing us to Christ to receive this good, to which we could not attain of ourselves" (Large Cat. II, 38f; Trigl. 689; BSLK 654).

The Holy Spirit brings us to Christ. He leads us to faith in the Savior. The faith he gives us is the hand whereby we take hold of Christ. Through faith we get a share in what Jesus achieved for us. He has us bring forth "fruits"—fruits produced by the faith that the Holy Spirit works in us.

3. No faith—without the Holy Spirit

The first and most important work of the Holy Spirit is that he leads us to faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). That means: No person can recognize Jesus Christ as the Savior and accept him as such. The Holy Spirit brings us to such recognition. The Holy Scripture describes this process with several pictorial terms. Connected with this it talks about enlightenment, conversion and rebirth: "Who (God) has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Ti 1:9). Or, again: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 2:9).

In the picture of rebirth it is the work of the Holy Spirit which is expressed most significantly: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:4-6). The Lord Christ himself says to Nicodemus: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (Jn 3:5).

Since the Fall every human is born as a sinner. All of us suffer from the inherited taint of not being able to live without sin. Sin is resistance against God. We do not live our lives as we should. We do not live in fellowship and harmony with our creator and Lord but as his enemies. The Bible calls this "sinful mind" or "spiritual death": "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Ro 8:7). "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph 2:1).

Only through a totally new beginning can we be rescued from this hopeless situation. This new start happens through rebirth. The Holy Spirit brings it about that we are born again—this time as spiritual, God-pleasing humans. He shows us God's will which is expressed in the Ten

Commandments. Through the word of the Law he lets us realize how lost we are as sinners and how much we need a Savior. Through the word of the Gospel he awakens the confidence in us so that we confide in this Savior. He causes us to trust in this Savior only and to depend for salvation entirely on what he has achieved for us. The Bible calls this faith. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon describes this process in the following words:

“Christ in the last chapter of Luke (24:47) commands that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name. For the Gospel convicts all men that they are under sin, that they all are subject to eternal wrath and death, and offers, for Christ’s sake, remission of sin and justification, which is received by faith. The preaching of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with true and grave terrors. In these, hearts ought again to receive consolation. This happens if they believe the promise of Christ, that for His sake we have remission of sins. This faith, encouraging and consoling in these fears, receives remission of sins, justifies and quickens. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life” (Apol. IV,62; Trigl. 139; BSLK 172f).

The Holy Spirit gives us faith through pure grace. And he does that not just in any way but through means. The word of the Gospel and holy baptism are his “vehicles” through which he comes to us and works in us. (The next essay will deal with this more precisely.)

It is surely no coincidence that the Holy Scripture compares our coming to faith to a second birth. For this comparison shows that the rebirth is not a human work. Birth means: Something happens with me. I am passive, not active. In rebirth the Holy Spirit does the same thing with me. He gives me new life, the spiritual life that extends past the death of my flesh. He does this through pure grace. There is nothing I could contribute. Everything is done by God: Through his word he sends his Spirit to me (compare Formula of Concord, Epit. II, 18; Trigl. 791; BSLK 781).

Here man’s reason raises its objections. Is not man degraded to a machine if he acts only passively during the rebirth? Does that not lead to the conversion being an irresistible compulsion (as Calvin claims)? It remains a secret how the Spirit of God works on our hearts in every detail. We only know his means (word and sacraments) and the result. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

It is misleading to speculate about the role of man’s will in conversion (as Melanchthon did in his later editions of his Loci). Such speculations end very soon in Pelagianism and the related error that man could work at least the beginning of his conversion by himself. The Formula of Concord says correctly:

“For when the Holy Ghost has wrought and accomplished this, and man’s will has been changed and renewed by His divine power and working alone, then the new will of man is an instrument and organ of God the Holy Ghost, so that he not only accepts grace, but also cooperates with the Holy Ghost in the works which follow” (Epit. II, 18; Trigl. 791; BSLK 780f).

However, it is certain that we can resist the work of the Holy Spirit. God does not force any human to embrace his happiness. He does not—as the old church fathers said—pull us to himself by the hair but with the heart.¹ Don’t we unfortunately experience too often that people prevent the Word of God from coming to them at all or that they stubbornly ignore his voice? They are lost through their own fault.

4. Faith—as work?

Our old Adam does not hate anything more than receiving a gift. Even on those occasions where we regularly give presents—Christmas, for example—the subject of “gifts” becomes in reality a mutual exchange of presents. But the Holy Scripture is extremely clear: Only through grace because of Christ are we saved, not because of our works. If just a little bit of works gets

involved, then grace is not grace anymore. This is a valid point also in regards to conversion or rebirth.

But even where “by grace alone” (*sola gratia*) and “for the sake of Christ alone” (*solus Christus*) is taken seriously, danger lies in wait. Often “by faith alone” (*sola fide*) is misunderstood as if the faith is a human work. In this case they say: Of course we are saved through God’s grace for the sake of Jesus. God did the decisive thing for us. But now he expects that man does his work, too. Man has to agree to accept this offer. He has to give his “Yes” to this offer. God knocks on the door but man has to open it himself. Billy Graham describes it:

“The biblical conversion includes three steps—two of them are active, one is passive: repentance means to turn away from the former life. Faith means the conscious turn to God. Rebirth is the resulting gift of the new life from God.”²

That means: First the human has to take two steps in the direction of God, then God takes one step towards the human. In this case, faith is declared as a work man has to do before God is gracious to him.

But the question is: What does faith have to do with conscious recognition at all? Sure, there is no doubt that the recognition is a part of faith along with the trust and the confidence. Does not the Lord Jesus say: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3)? And the Apostle Peter writes: “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Pe 1:3).

However, when the Holy Scripture describes faith—among other things—as recognition, it does not mean the purely intellectual understanding of godly truth. Here is why: “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” (Isa 40:13; Ro 11:34; 1 Co 2:16). And the Apostle Paul says correctly: “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe . . . But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Co 1:21-27).

When the Scripture calls faith a recognition, then this recognition does not only apply to reason but includes the whole human being. A strong sharing or fellowship growing out of deep love (like the Hebrew verb “*yadah*” = recognize). The Hebrew even describes the sexual connection of husband and wife with the same word. Such a recognition of God has nothing to do with purely intellectual works/words. In fact, the opposite is true, especially in the case of the baptized mentally ill and children where this faithful recognition of our Savior and trust in him may well be much more pronounced than in the case of a normal adult. Since reason is more often an obstacle to faith in the case of a normal adult, the Lord Jesus reminds us: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3).

Therefore it is foolish and unbiblical when the Baptists deny the capacity of faith for little children and for that reason refuse to baptize them. This wrong and unbiblical understanding of faith unfortunately can be found almost in the whole evangelical-pietistic spectrum of “decision theology.” People are encouraged to decide for Jesus or to “give their lives to the Lord” to be saved eternally. They ask for human work. And they even refer to biblical statements. Doesn’t the Bible, they contend, very often ask for conversion or faith in the imperative form? Doesn’t the Lord Christ say to his disciples: “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)? And the Apostle Paul encourages the prison warden in Philippi: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

But here one sees that in such requests faith is only described as the way in which salvation comes to us. If faith were a condition that had to be fulfilled by man, then this definition of faith would stand in direct contradiction to the clear witnesses of the Scripture. The Lord Jesus points out: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Or, the

prophet Jeremiah confesses: “Restore me, and I will return, because you are the Lord my God” (Jer. 31:18).³

Therefore, any human activity in conversion is out of the question from the start. If somebody follows the voice of God, then this is not an independent step towards God, but a sign that the Holy Spirit already has worked. And where the first spark of faith is lit, there the conversion has already happened.⁴

After the Fall no human is able to do anything good concerning God anymore. He faces his creator not neutrally anymore but as his enemy. He is not able anymore to turn to God himself. The Apostle Paul says: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ro 3:10-12). And to the Corinthians he writes: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he can not understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Co 2:14). The Formula of Concord summarizes:

Namely, that the spiritual and divine things the intellect, heart, and will of the unregenerate man are utterly unable, by their own natural powers, to understand, believe, accept, think, will, begin, effect, do, work, or concur in working anything, but they are entirely dead to what is good, and corrupt, so that in man’s nature since the Fall, before regeneration, there is not the least spark of spiritual power remaining, nor present, by which, of himself, he can prepare himself for God’s grace, or accept the offered grace, nor be capable of it for and of himself, or apply or accommodate himself thereto, or by his own powers be able of himself, as of himself, to aid, do, work, or concur in working anything towards his conversion, either wholly, or half, or in any, even the least or most inconsiderable part . . .” (SD II, 7; Trigl. 883; BSLK 873f).

When our Lutheran Confessions rule out any human cooperation concerning conversion (and we certainly agree with that!), this does not mean that human feelings are unaffected. It does mean, however, that also such feeling in the converted is a work of the Holy Spirit. The Formula of Concord remarks:

“So also when Luther says that with respect to his conversion man is pure passive (purely passive), that is, does nothing whatever towards it, but only suffers what God works in him, his meaning is not that conversion takes place without the preaching and hearing of God’s Word; nor is this his meaning, that in conversion no new emotion whatever is awakened in us by the Holy Ghost and no spiritual operation begun; but he means that man of himself, or from his natural powers, cannot do anything or help towards his conversion, and that conversion is not only in part, but altogether an operation, gift, and present, and work of the Holy Ghost alone, who accomplishes and effects it by His power and might, through the Word, in the intellect, will, and heart of man . . .” (SD II, 89; Trigl. 915; BSLK 909f).

5. Remain in faith until the end

In the explanation of the teaching of rebirth and conversion as Scripture says it, it is not about theological sophistry. When there is no clarity about what happens in rebirth, then our whole Christian life is in danger. If the rebirth—even just a tiny little bit—consists of human work, then our faith relies on the shaky foundation of our feelings. Then, in afflictions, the question will always arise: Did we turn close enough to God, or did we believe strongly enough? Only when we accept the clear witness of the Scripture (although our old Adam does not like it), and when we let the rebirth be completely the work of the Holy Spirit, can we find the confidence of our salvation.

Our Lutheran Confessions precisely point out this comforting aspect over and over again. For example, we read:

“And, in a word, it remains eternally true what the Son of God says (John 15:5): Without Me ye can do nothing. And Paul (Phil 2:13): It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do

of His good pleasure. To all godly Christians who feel and experience in their hearts a small spark or longing for divine grace and eternal salvation this precious passage is very comforting; for they know that God has kindled in their hearts this beginning of true godliness, and that He will further strengthen and help them in their great weakness to persevere in true faith unto the end" (SD II, 14; Trigl. 885; BSLK 876f).

The Holy Spirit brings us to faith. He works a rebirth in us. But with this his work is not finished. He also takes care of us so that we stay in faith. As to this remaining in the faith, it is important that we not doubt the work of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Christ says: "But he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13).

Many Christians are concerned about staying in faith until the end of their lives. Such doubts are understandable. Who knows what life will bring? Who can be sure that he is not going to stagger? If we look to ourselves we can never find this confidence. But it is not necessary to look to ourselves, for it is not our efforts which keep us in the faith. The Holy Spirit works faith in us and he is the one who wants to keep it there as well. He has promised that to us. The Apostle Paul writes about that topic: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Php 1:6). And in 1 Corinthians we read: "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Co 1:7,8).

Whoever considers faith and rebirth as man's work will soon lose faith again. There are many examples of this in church history. Satan puts his full effort into bringing souls already won for Jesus back into his kingdom. We can resist his attacks only when we are trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit for the preservation of our faith.

How does this happen? The Holy Spirit preserves our faith by working in us through his means of grace. He leads us to the fellowship of the believers who gather around word and sacraments. Here we receive fresh food for our faith and here we are strengthened in the fellowship of brothers and sisters. In this way he works in us and takes care that we persevere until the end. For that he deserves our daily praise and thanks!

6. Conclusion

Finally, there is especially one misunderstanding to avoid. We heard how important it is that any human cooperation concerning conversion and rebirth is out of the question. There is no cooperation. The conversion is no "joint venture" (this is a new "German" expression) where God and man work hand in hand. This applies to rebirth, the coming to faith (*conversio prima*). And besides this, it is valid for the daily conversion also (*conversio continua*).

Concerning this, Luther says in his Small Catechism:

" . . . that the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Small Cat. IV, 12; Trigl. 551; BSLK 516).

And in the first thesis of 1517 Luther says:

"Because our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says: Repent, etc., he wants the whole life of his believers on earth to be a constant never-ending repentance."

This daily turning back is necessary for a believer, too. Yes, it even has faith as a requirement. Through this the believer becomes able and willing through the Holy Spirit to cooperate in this work that pleases God.⁵ Any passivity would be wrong. (But a later essay will deal with this topic).

Let us encourage each other over and over again and pray to God:

Oh, enter, Lord, thy temple,

Be my spirit's Guest,
Who gavest me, the earthborn,
A second birth more blest!
Thou in the Godhead, Lord,
Tho' here to dwell Thou deignest,
For ever equal reignest,
Art equally adored. Amen.

(The Lutheran Hymnal 228:1)

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