

The Holy Spirit Uses Word and Sacrament to Carry Out His Work

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As many Christian denominations continue to spread, Lutheran Christian doctrine, especially in Malawi, is often attacked by these denominations. The attack our doctrine gets from the Pentecostals says that we Lutherans are not possessed by the Holy Spirit. They say that there is no sign in our members showing that we have the Holy Spirit. They accuse us of not offering enough prayers asking that we be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The topic of our third triennial convention is, "COME, HOLY SPIRIT, GOD AND LORD: THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HIS WORK."

It is a good theme that shows we do honor the Holy Spirit in our Church. We do believe that the Holy Spirit is God. We do ask the Holy Spirit to come to us. This essay shows that the Holy Spirit uses Word and Sacrament to carry out His work.

A. The Holy Spirit uses the Word

The Holy Spirit works through the Word to bring a person to faith. Let us look at the following passages: Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Isaiah 55:11 says, "My word . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire." Romans 1:16 says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." These passage are very familiar to us and are very clear.

Romans 10:17 clearly points out that faith always comes through hearing the message which is the Word. Since the Spirit is the one who creates faith, by saying that the Word creates faith (Romans 10:17), Scripture limits the Spirit's activity to where the Word is preached and heard. Isaiah 55:11 shows that the Word of God is like an agent in bringing God's saving will to the world. Romans 1:16 tells us that the gospel message is the power of God.

Surely the gospel reveals what saves us, namely the righteousness of Christ, as Paul says in Romans 1:17. Another beautiful passage we can cite is 1 Peter 1:23, 25, "For you have been born again not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . And this is the word that we preached to you." Two truths are clear in these passages. First, the Word brings faith to a person. Secondly, where the Word is absent, there can be no conversion to faith. These passages tell us the tool the Spirit uses in conversions and they also limit the Spirit to using the tool.

Most Protestant churches separate the Spirit from the Word in conversion. The Spirit, they say, comes alongside of the Word, uses the Word, helps to explain the Word, and yet is not in and with the Word.

The Word in Scripture is described as doing much the same as the Holy Spirit does. Notice the similarities of operation. As we saw in Romans chapter 10 and other places, the Word is active in conversion. But as we will see, the work of the Word as well as the work of the Spirit, continues in a Christian's life. Christ prays to his Heavenly Father at the Last Supper, "Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth" (John 17:17). Christ prays to his Heavenly Father to make his disciples holy. How will that happen? It will be done through the Word. The Word also has as its central function to witness to the fact that Jesus is Christ, proclaiming him to be the Savior who wants to make all men God's children.

Christ told the Pharisees, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). The Word is active in leading us to understand the difference between sin and righteousness in our lives. The Word goes into our very being, separating truth from error. The writer to the Hebrews says, "The

word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Here we see that the Word is not simply a book of principles and laws to follow, but a living force. The Spirit gives us grace, but notice how the Word of grace, the Word which tells us about God's grace, is the instrument of the Spirit's working that grace in our hearts. Paul tells the Ephesians as he leaves them, "Now I commit you to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Ac 20:32). Listen also to what Paul says to the Thessalonians, "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Th 2:13).

That Word is at work in us. Our Bible might be on the shelf, but the Word we have heard, understand and believe by the Spirit, is now at work in us. Compare also James 1:21, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." John in his first letter writes, "I write to you young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 Jn 2:14). In 2 John 1,2 the apostle writes, "The elder, To the chosen lady and her children whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever." Paul tells Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Ti 3:16,17).

The above passages show how closely bound the Word and the Spirit are. We have seen that the Word converts us, but also the Spirit does the same. We have seen that the Word testifies to our sonship by faith, but the Spirit also does the same. We have heard that the Spirit lives in us, but the Word does the same. The Spirit produces fruit, but the Word does the same by equipping us for every good work. We have seen that the Spirit gives us gifts but it is the Word that spreads those gifts to individuals through hearing the sermon and teaching. These two, even though they are not the same, work the same operation, operations which include every area of the believer's life. Even though it seems that the above passages do not link the Spirit and the Word the connection is there. Christ and the Apostle Paul show the connection. Jesus says, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn 6:63). Paul writes, "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17). It is easy to see the connection of the Word and the Spirit.

Those who claim that the Spirit sometimes comes apart from the Word must consider the following questions. What faith will the Spirit work unless the Word works also? What hope will the Spirit give us unless the basis for hope is spelled out by the Word? What joy will the Spirit give unless the source of joy is given in the Word? What love can the Spirit inspire unless the Word gives us the reasons for that love? What teaching will the Spirit give us unless that teaching is found in the Word? What guidance will the Spirit give us unless the cause of action is directed by the Word? In short, what areas of our Christian lives are dealt with by the Spirit alone and apart from the Word? Are there any areas where the written Word is powerless? 2 Timothy 3:16 again gives us our answer, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." God's Word governs all areas of our lives. I believe that as we understand more and more the nature of God's working in us through his Word, the desire to separate the Spirit and the Word will disappear.

The passages above point to the fact that the Spirit works through the Word, and where the Word is used there the Spirit is working. This should lead us from an inward searching for the Spirit to searching for him in his Word where he speaks to us. Subjectivism disappears and in its place comes a faith built solely on the Word of God.

Yet in using this means of grace, the Word, there is perhaps a tendency to become too stiff in supplying the Bible doctrine to our lives. One of the ways we might misuse this teaching is to

think that only at the exact time when we read the Bible will we be strengthened by the Spirit. Or we may think that only when we are reading the Bible we will be given wisdom or guidance for a particular situation. Certainly God's grace in all its forms comes to us as we study his Word, hear a sermon or meditate on the Word. But think of the passages which describe the Word as living in us, as working in us, as that which "penetrates even to the dividing of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12). This Word along with God's Spirit dwells in us. As we write sermons we lean back in our chairs and a good idea comes into our head which we know will edify our people. Did the Spirit give us that idea? Certainly. Can we say that we did that apart from the Word that lives in us? Not at all.

As we preach, sometimes we get ideas that are not in our manuscript. Provided these are right and sound truths, we attribute them to the Spirit. But should we attribute them to the Spirit as if He were speaking to us without the Word? We cannot say that, since as we have seen, anything that is edifying must have its origin in the Word that is dwelling in us. (Cf. again 2 Ti 3:16) When we are emboldened to witness for Christ, the Spirit is certainly working in us. Here again reasons for being bold are also present, reasons derived from the Word we have heard, reasons centering around those truths about salvation spoken of in the Word.

Another way we could have problems understanding this teaching is by saying that the Spirit always works effectively when God's Word is taught. Luther makes the point that we cannot force God's Spirit to work when we are using his Word. It is important to remember that the Spirit works when and where he pleases. A discussion of this properly belongs to God's hidden will. I think we might keep this in mind, and yet use God's Word as if we were forcing God to work, confident that God's Word will accomplish what he wants it to do.

The doctrine of the Spirit working independently is bound up with synergism and man's claim to have a free will in spiritual matters. Such teachers say that since man's will is free to accept or not to accept Christ, then, it is not important whether the means of grace are present. When grace is not understood properly, man feels that he can approach God, make a step in the right direction and appropriate God's Spirit. He is not so concerned about approaching him through means.

Those who separate the Spirit and the Word are compelled to ask repeatedly, How can I receive the Spirit? If there are not means of grace used, then the appropriation of the Spirit must come in other ways. In all cases these ways turn out to be works. The Pentecostal churches talk much about living the Spirit-filled life. But accomplishing this depends, to their way of thinking, not on the means of grace, but on prayer, confessing sins, obedience to God's command and preparing themselves in various ways to receive the Spirit. The books written and printed on the subject are many. They sound pious and biblical. But these books teach about Christ only in passing as if they are eager to get on to the most important subject, namely, learning how to live a Spirit-filled life. In turning people from the means of grace to works, the writers of these books are cutting their readers off from the very Spirit they wish to find. Paul's words to the Galatians apply here, "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by human efforts?" (Gal 3:2,3). Luther's words also apply here, "Do you not see here the devil, the enemy of God's order? With all his mouthing of words, 'Spirit, Spirit, Spirit,' he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit. They would have you learn how to journey on the clouds and ride on the wind. They do not tell you how or when, whither or what, but you are to experience what they do" (LW, Vol 40, p. 147).

By God's grace many who only know the doctrine of the Spirit's immediate working are kept in faith by the Holy Spirit though the Word they hear. Yet how much peace aren't they robbed of? How much inner searching, doubt and anxiety don't they go through in their lives as Christians? How much anxious preparations do they go through lest they miss the Spirit's guidance when all

the time he is there ready to speak and lead them through his Word? The dangers of separating Spirit and Word are many, but they all lead to work righteousness and trying to find God by our own efforts instead of God finding us through his means of grace.

It is very interesting to see that even when we come to the sacraments, we also see the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

B. The Holy Spirit uses the Sacraments

Let us see the Holy Spirit working through the Sacrament of Baptism. What is Baptism? Let us read Luther's explanation. "Baptism is not simply water, but it is water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word. What is that word and command of God concerning Baptism? Jesus says, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey every thing I have commanded you.'"

Let us think about the earthly element we use in Baptism which is water. But why water? Why did the Lord use such a commonplace substance as water to convey such glorious blessings? We know there are many exotic and mystic liquids, but only water is selected by the Lord. The answer is that God has commanded us to use water. We thank God for making this element which is most available in nearly all places of the world.

God has commanded Baptism, but what benefit does it give? We again read Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism. "What does Baptism give or profit? Baptism works forgiveness of sin, delivers from death and the devil and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. Which are those words and promises of God? Christ our Lord says, Mark 16:16, 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.'" Baptism is a means of justification. The Lutheran Confessions say, "A Sacrament is a ceremony or work in which God presents to us that which the promise annexed to the ceremony offers; as, Baptism is a work, not which we offer to God, but in which God baptizes us, that is, a minister in the place of God; and God here offers and presents the remission of sins, etc., according to the promise, Mark 16:16: Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Apology XXIV, 18).

Jesus' words are clear. To the question: What must I do to be saved? he gives the answer, "Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved." Forgiveness of sins is conferred not only through the Word, but the great benefits of salvation are also conferred through Baptism. Baptism bestows, and the believing baptized person accepts and receives, the great salvation from the Savior.

Blessings such as those just spoken about lead to the question which Luther asks: "How can water do such great things?" Chiefly based on Titus 3:5-8 he says, "It is not water that does such great things but the Word of God which is in and with the water and faith that trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simply the water and no baptism. But with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a regeneration in the Holy Spirit as St. Paul says in Titus 3:5-8, 'According to his mercy he saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.'" Indeed it is the Holy Spirit working through the Word that gives the water such power. It is not the way you do it that gives it power. Rather, it is God, yes, the Holy Spirit, that works through it.

Baptism is a means of grace, and it is good for us to continue remembering the words that Luther used in closing his confession on Baptism in the Large Catechism, "Thus it appears what a great, excellent thing Baptism is, which delivers us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, suppresses and takes away sin, and then daily strengthens the new man; and is and remains ever efficacious until we pass from this estate of misery to eternal glory. For this reason, then let everyone esteem his Baptism as a daily dress in which he is to walk constantly, that he may ever

be found in the faith and its fruits, that he suppress the old man and grows up in the new. For if we would be Christians, we must practice the work whereby we are Christians. But if anyone fall away from it, let him again come into it. For just as Christ, the Mercy Seat, does not recede from us or forbid us to come to him again, even though we sin, so all his treasure and gifts also remain. If, therefore, we have once in Baptism obtained forgiveness of sin, it will remain every day as long as we live, that is, as long as we carry the old man about our neck" (Large Catechism, Of Baptism, 83-86).

Now let us speak about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Hundreds of books have been written by different authors trying to explain the teachings of the Lord's Supper. In striking contrast to the millions of speculative words produced by men concerning this sacrament, the scriptural accounts dealing with the Lord's Supper total only a few hundred words. In our Bible we have four separate but parallel accounts of the institution of this sacrament. They are recorded in Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. The Apostle Paul adds a few inspired words of explanation in the tenth chapter of that same letter to the Corinthians (1 Co 10:16-17,21) These five brief sections constitute the sum total of what the Bible has to say directly concerning the Lord's Supper. There is a strong possibility that the phrase "breaking bread" in Acts 2:46 also refers to the Lord's Supper, but it could refer merely to communal participation in daily household meals. We cannot determine with certainty whether "breaking bread" refers to one or the other or perhaps even both.

All four writers agree on the essential truths concerning the Lord's Supper. The first and most obvious truth is that it was none other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself who instituted his sacrament, as attested to by all four writers. Moreover, all four likewise point out the very special day and the time during that day when it was instituted. Paul reports that it was "the night in which he was betrayed." This agrees fully with the synoptic Gospel accounts, all of which fix the time of institution as the evening on which the Lord ate his final Passover meal with His twelve disciples, at which time he pointed out Judas as his betrayer. The three Gospel writers further describe how Jesus later that same evening led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas carried out his heinous act of betraying his Savior to the powers of darkness and evil.

Another vital point on which these four writers agree is that our Lord employed two ordinary earthly elements, two familiar Jewish table foods. He gave them bread to eat and the cup to drink. We can be certain that the bread was of the unleavened kind since that was the only kind permitted by the Mosaic law for use in a Jewish household during the Passover festival (cf. Exodus 12: 17-20 ; Leviticus 23:6; Numbers 28:17) Although Paul does not describe the contents of the cup, all three Gospel writers identify its contents as the fruit of the vine, which was a common Jewish expression for fermented wine.

Again all four accounts agree that Jesus first spoke a prayer of blessing or thanksgiving over the bread before breaking it into smaller pieces for convenient distribution. Matthew and Mark state that the Lord also spoke the word of prayer over the cup before distributing it to his disciples. Luke and Paul do not directly say that Jesus spoke the words of prayer over the cup, but they definitely infer through the use of the words "In the same way," meaning he did the same thing he did when he gave them the cup as he did when distributing the bread.

When one goes through the passages that talk about Holy Communion, one wonders where we find the Holy Spirit working. Despite the fact that we can find no passage of Scripture which directly links the Holy Spirit to the Lord's Supper, I am sure that no one assembled here today has any doubts whatsoever that God, the Holy Spirit, is indeed very active at every proper celebration of the Holy Supper. How can we be sure? Simply because at the very heart of the Lord's Supper we find none other than the very heart of the gospel: namely, that the holy precious body and blood of Jesus Christ have been "given and shed for the forgiveness of sins." This is purest gospel, and wherever the gospel is proclaimed we have the full assurance of Scripture that there the Holy Spirit is exceedingly active in his salutary work of creating, preserving and strengthening faith in the hearts of penitent sinners. Accordingly, the Christian Church from

earliest times has rightly regarded the Lord's Supper, along with Baptism and the spoken or written gospel, as a blessed means of grace. Through these means of grace God has promised to convey and seal to lost sinners the good news that, as a result of the redemptive work of Christ and God's decree of universal justification, they are the recipients of the undeserved mercy of their loving and gracious God.

Therefore we can conclude by saying that those who refuse to be baptized are rejecting God's means whereby the Holy Spirit does His work. We also say the same words to those who do the same with the Lord's Supper. Rejecting God's means of grace is sinning against the Holy Spirit.

May God preserve this true teaching in our Church.