

Is the Holy Spirit a stranger to you?

An article about what Presbyterians - and many other Bible believing Christians - believe about the Holy Spirit!

- To be able to believe in God and what he reveals about himself in the Bible, it is of great importance to know what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit.
- To be able to love Jesus and serve him passionately, it is vital to understand what the Bible teaches about the Spirit of Christ.
- To be enabled members of the Body of Christ, our place of Christian growth and service, it is imperative that we understand the teachings of the Bible about the Spirit of God!

As Presbyterians - also called Reformed Christians - following in the footsteps of powerful and passionate servants of Christ such as John Calvin, John Knox and many others, we should go to great lengths to make sure that we understand what God reveals about the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

There are five main, prominent truths about the Holy Spirit in the Presbyterian tradition. It is found in the Bible and taught by our church founders and the Confessions of our Faith, such as amongst others the Westminster Confession. These documents, central to our teaching ministry, make publicly known what we as Presbyterians hear when God speaks to us through the Bible about the Holy Spirit. Many important theologians, such as Karl Barth, and others, also helped to communicate our ancient belief to peoples of a new generation facing new challenges.

(You will find some of these Confessions of Faith on our website, www.cpk.co.za, under **Presby Confessions**.)

The five main truths taught by the Bible, are that:

- The Holy Spirit is first and foremost - God.
- The Holy Spirit is God's intimate presence with and in us.
- We experience the presence of the Spirit in our lives, through faith.
- The concrete shape of the coming of God as Holy Spirit into our lives is the experience of forgiveness and the gradual infiltration of our entire life and being by the Spirit of Christ.
- The coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives is both an individual and corporate experience of Christ's people.

1. First and foremost, we believe that the Holy Spirit is God.

That is to say, the Holy Spirit is understood in terms of the Holy Trinity. The Trinity is a way of referring to the three ways God has of being God. (We refer to the three Persons of God). All three Persons simultaneously are the one and only true God. Each Person of the one, true God is always active in relation with the other two. This means that our experience of God as Holy Spirit always involves also our relationship to God as Creator and Sustainer (Father) and to God as Mediator, Saviour and Son (Jesus).

We finally and decisively encounter the Holy Spirit by that Word who became one of us, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the Son of God.

2. The Holy Spirit is God's most intimate, powerful and mysterious presence with and in us.

God as Creator gives us our very existence and life and sets the context in and course on which we are to live our life. But this working of God is hidden, at a level not open to our natural, human way of discovery, awareness or scrutiny.

God as Word speaks to us through the wonders of nature and the discoveries of science, through the proclamations of prophets and apostles and the great events of history as told in the Holy Scriptures and ultimately reveals the very being of God and God's will for our lives *through Jesus the Christ*.

But all this may remain somehow external, outside of us. We may know the way we should go, but lack the will to follow it. We need deeper, inward assistance. So the God who created us and who, when we lost our way, took the step to come after us in Jesus Christ in order to open the way to eternal life, now takes a further step. *He comes into our inmost central being by the power of his love, enabling us to see that all that he has done and is doing in Christ, is for us - for me - out of love and compassion for us - for me.*

One of the most prominent theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth, said, "The being and activity of Jesus Christ has essentially and necessarily the form ... in which he turns precisely to the single human being - to you and to me. He works with a particular one person, precisely in his or her loneliness, in which his Holy Spirit speaks just to that one person's spirit." And *only by the power of this divine love*, are we enabled to respond freely in love, to accept the fact that we are accepted as one of God's people and as a child of God.

3. We experience the presence of the Spirit in our lives, through faith.

How does a personal experience of the work of the Spirit come to each of us? In a blinding, overwhelming, mystical, overpowering sense of being caught up into oneness with God? *No, God's love does not eliminate our own free struggle.* God honours too much "the dignity, truth and authenticity which belong to the individual Christian person" (Barth).

Every major expression of Scripture, and therefore of our Presbyterian teachings, agrees that the shape or form that this experience of God as Holy Spirit takes, *is faith*, - a relationship in which God takes the initiative to make it possible and the individual accepts and responds with the heart.

It is faith that saves us, not because of any response that we can boast about or that could lead to spiritual pride - *but because it unites us with Jesus Christ, from whom new life flows into us.*

As Calvin says, Christ remains an object of "cold speculation ... at a great distance from us, **unless and until we are united with him.** And it is only in the Holy Spirit that he unites himself with us. Only through faith does he lead us into the light of the gospel."

4. The concrete shape of the coming of God as Holy Spirit into our lives is the experience of forgiveness and the gradual infiltration of our entire life and being by the Spirit of Christ.

The Presbyterian tradition clearly asserts that this event of faith is a profoundly mysterious, even mystical one. But it also affirms that it cannot be known directly and consciously with our natural human senses.

It happens, but it is invisible and indescribable.

The truth of this event therefore comes to us in its effects on our relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

The concrete shape of our faith-union with Christ, of the coming of God as Holy Spirit into our lives, is twofold:

(1) It is the experience of forgiveness

(2) and the gradual infiltration of our entire life and being by the Spirit of Christ, in order to become more and more holy, which means setting apart more and more of ourselves and our lives to the rule of Jesus, through the work of the Spirit in us.

5. The coming of God as Holy Spirit into our lives is always and simultaneously both individual and corporate, as the Body of Christ's people.

There is no such thing as a lone Christian, living in our own relationship with God in blissful isolation!

The Holy Spirit always comes to us and works within us, through and with the Scriptures, Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the communal worship and work of the Christian church. Individual Christians find the fulfilment of faith *as it carries them beyond the church to all areas of their lives*, in order to share the love of God with everyone who may be lost and lonely, hungry and oppressed, naked and in prison (Matt. 25).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (the historic document that explains what Presbyterians believe) is detailed and specific about the Holy Spirit.

First of all, it tells us what the Spirit deserves and expects from believers and secondly that in the central matter of salvation, nothing happens without the direct participation of the Holy Spirit.

It tells us what the Spirit deserves and expects from believers:

The Spirit is "to be believed in, loved, obeyed and worshiped, throughout all ages." This means that the Spirit is on the same level of dignity, majesty and glory as the Father and the Son.

In the central matter of salvation, nothing happens without the direct participation of God's Spirit. The Spirit is "the *only efficient agent* in the application of redemption", the Confession teaches.

His actions are very well explained:

- The Spirit renews men and women by his grace,
- convicts them of sin,
- moves them to repentance,
- persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith,
- unites believers with one another,
- dwells in them
- and makes them thirsty for God's Word and for prayer, praise, worship and fellowship.

The Church itself, therefore, is the outcome of the work of the Spirit, who calls God's children to the priesthood (servanthood) of all believers - and anoints them for this service.

As Presbyterians we ultimately want to learn from the Holy Scriptures about the work of the Holy Spirit.

According to the Biblical narrative, there were three moments in which the Spirit was given to the church community - and we learn a lot from these, about how he still wants to influence and lead the people of God today.

The first took place in Jerusalem in the days of Pentecost (Acts 2). This experience enabled and empowered the apostles to present the gospel to the wide community of Hebrews, scattered all over the known world of the day. It brought about unity in diversity and a sense of community among those who followed Jesus. At Pentecost, many languages were spoken, but there was clear communication and union among believers, as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The second incident, described in Acts 10, is also most revealing. We read that "while Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." The believers from the traditional, orthodox Jewish background were "amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles".

Here we have the crossing of frontiers, the widening of horizons, in terms of the Christian mission. Baptism becomes the privilege also of those who are "Gentiles". The universality of the gospel is dramatised. The "Second Israel" is according to God's grace, not according to genes, history, culture, language or tradition. Again the Spirit unites those God intends to bring together. It is a breaking down of classes, cultural/ethnic groupings and genders within the Christian family.

The third character part of the Spirit was revealed in the corrupt, heathen city of Ephesus, where Paul explained the difference between the baptism of John, by water, and the baptism of Jesus, by the Spirit (Acts 19): "On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them."

In this incident, the Holy Spirit is also given to evangelise another family of Gentiles, the Greeks. The entire city of Ephesus is impacted by the proclamation of the gospel. Its economic, religious, cultural and emotional life is touched in a dramatic way. There is turmoil, riot and revolution. And there is the destruction of some old myths and beliefs - and the acceptance of a new way of life - "the Way" of the Lord.

In each instance, the Spirit is given for the fulfilment of a missionary task - to preach to the Jews, to the Romans and to the Greeks.

The giving of the Spirit is positive and he is personal. But his work is social, too. The Spirit unites the Christian family and then sends its members out to proclaim and share the gospel, the good things that God has done in them, for them and with them, in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Whenever any faith community grasps this perception of the Holy Spirit and this experience of his transforming and sending power, the Spirit turns our church life around for the greater glory of God and every day the Lord adds to the church those who are being saved.

Most Biblical images explaining the person and work of the Holy Spirit are images of life. The Spirit is both life-giver and life-nurturer. The word *Paraclete*, the Greek name by which Jesus introduced the Holy Spirit to us, is translated to express warm, growth-enhancing qualities: Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate, Helper, and Partner.

The Spirit first comes into our lives to show us that we were created in the image of God; we were chosen before the foundation of the world to "be holy and blameless before him"

(Ephesians 1:4). The Spirit then helps us understand that our self-dissatisfaction comes from our awareness that we fall short of the glory God designed us. ***The Spirit leads us to believe in Jesus Christ to be the Healer of our brokenness. Being made one with Christ, through being filled with the Spirit, we are being taken into the presence of our Father, as true and comforted children of God.***

The Holy Spirit is the life of Christ in us. We are transformed by the Spirit's life filling us. Some of us blossom overnight, while others grow slowly. We each grow according to the God-seed planted in us and our faithful response to the Spirit's nurturance.

A most profound instruction of the Bible about the Holy Spirit is that we must be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Slow growers may experience "being filled with the Spirit" as a process; they may give to God level after level of themselves, being filled always with increasing joy and power to serve.

Others may experience a sudden rush of growth, a sense of God coming into their lives in such a dramatic way, that they need to find a special word for this event. Whatever the name we give to this transforming power, whatever the description of the process, we know that somehow we have been enabled to put ourselves out of the way so that the Spirit is free to urge us to receive our full potential in Jesus Christ.

The evidence that we have been "filled with the Spirit" is, as Paul makes it clear in among others I Corinthians 13, that the Spirit expresses life in us, by fruit rather than by gifts.

Love, joy, peace and courtesy ripen in those who yield themselves to the inflowing life of God through the Spirit. By this fruit the indwelling Spirit is made known to us and makes us glad and full of enthusiastic zeal for God.

But it remains Biblical teaching that the Spirit gives gifts to every believer:

the love to reach out to others,
helpful hands of service,
communication with power,
healing and miraculous interventions in lives
and many others.

The purpose of the gifts, however, is not so much to enhance the growing individual, but to be the life of God in the whole body of God's people. It is given for the common good. Just as the Spirit brings to full personhood each one who receives the life of God, so the Spirit brings us into oneness with each other in Jesus Christ. He floods every facet of our lives to also fulfil God's dreams for us as the Body of Christ.

The Bible is clear that the greatest fruit of the Spirit, love, is also the greatest gift.. Since God is love, all the gifts we have, are offered to the Body of Christ in the context of love and of gladness when there is healthy growth in the Church.

The Creator Spirit provides a miracle equal to the creation of the universe - or more! Somehow that same Spirit fills thousands, yes millions of other equally troubled folk than I and he makes us to be one living, fruitful, giving Body: **the Church of the Living God!**

*What greater and more profound joy could there be, when we all who belong to God,
move in harmony,
responsive to the Life of the Spirit that makes us one in Jesus Christ, our Saviour
and Redeemer
and as such, one within the family of God's children.*

***May we never forget to love, praise and serve the Holy Spirit,
who gave us a personal relationship with God,***

*in our unity with Jesus our Saviour and Friend,
and in our service to God in His church.*

Be passionate about the power of Christ, that you may demonstrate this power of the living Christ in God's work, through His Spirit who dwells in you - and fills you each day, anew!

For your feedback, please write to Andries Combrink, Minister of Centurion West Presby Church at: info@cpk.co.za