

VIII

The Holy Spirit given as the other Counselor

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.”

(JOHN 14:16, 17A)

*“What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?
First, he is together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.*

Second, he is also given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all his benefits, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever”.

(HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, LORD’S DAY 20, BOOK OF PRAISE)

When we speak about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit we can do so in a very theoretical manner by merely expounding the doctrine. This approach, however, will not really help or satisfy. The danger is that we run the risk of knowing a lot about the Holy Spirit, but not knowing him ourselves.

How can we be sure that we really have the Holy Spirit? There is in our time again a renewed emphasis on “experiential” faith, and thus also on experiential preaching.

What is meant here by the word experiential?⁶ It means that we have to experience somehow that we are truly children of God. It must be an experience to be a Christian. Faith is a life-changing power, and herein especially we may see the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Reformed churches have always stressed this aspect of faith. In the *Heidelberg Catechism* there is a section on God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification (Lord's Day 20). Sanctification means that our life is being made holy and is renewed. When we speak about the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that the Spirit brings about change or new life. This change is something that we must and do experience. Can you change without knowing it?

The promises of God

A new life is something that we may joyfully experience for it is one of the great promises given to us already at our baptism: the Holy Spirit promises that he will dwell in us, imparting to us what we have in Christ (Form for the Baptism of Infants, *Book of Praise*, page 584 ff.). This promise is real, and we may build on it, work with it, and plead on it. In that sense we should speak about the Holy Spirit in a very child-like and confident manner, as the Heidelberg Catechism also does.

For the tone of the catechism is very striking. It asks: what do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit? The intent is not to discover what we believe on the basis of our experiences, for human experience is sometimes untrustworthy, but on the basis of God's Word, his given promises.

What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit? The answer is very straightforward: He is true God; He is also given me, to comfort me, and to remain with me forever. I just picked out some elements of the answer which show us the calm confidence of faith.

Yet it may be asked whether this manner of speaking about the Holy Spirit is not presumptive. May I simply say that he is also given me? Is he not given only to true believers? How can I be sure that I am among these true believers?

Notice that the catechism also mentions the element of faith: to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits. But first comes the

⁶The word "experiential" is a poor translation of the Dutch word "bevindelijk." Actually the word experiential does not really function in Anglo-Saxon/American theology. It denotes a conscious undergoing of some concrete and strong, spiritual experience which authenticates a person as a true believer.

Spirit, and then comes faith. The Holy Spirit is given to make us by faith share in Christ. Otherwise we never would become believers. The very existence of faith is already evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit of Christ there would be no church, no faith, no sanctification, and no spiritual life.

Three are One

The catechism, therefore, teaches us to rejoice in the presence of God the Holy Spirit. In the presence of the Holy Spirit we also receive the Father and the Son. Note how the catechism stresses that the Holy Spirit is together with the Father and the Son true and eternal God. This means that we cannot have the One without the others. The Three are one. The work of the Holy Spirit may therefore never be made loose from the work of the Father and the Son.

This may seem pretty straightforward, but it is very important. In John 14:16 the Lord Jesus speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit. We find there these words, “And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever...” This text lies at the bottom of Lord’s Day 20: the Spirit is given, and he stays forever. It is almost as if this text is quoted literally in the catechism.

Jesus says: I (the Son) will pray the Father, and he will send the Spirit. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are together. They belong together, come together, and work together, as we saw also when discussing the baptism of Jesus. In that sense there is no separate experiencing of the Holy Spirit: you receive either the full blessing of the Triune God or you receive nothing. The Spirit may be distinguished from the Father and the Son, but not separated. I mention this again to show the Biblical foundation and importance of the first sentence of this answer: [the Spirit] is together with the Father and the Son true and eternal God. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is crucial for our understanding of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Pending Departure

When the Lord Jesus said, “I will pray the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever,” he was talking about his pending departure, his ascension. He would die, be raised from the dead, and then go to the Father. That is the context in John 14 which must be appreciated.

Christ spoke about these monumental events in such a simple and open way. He said: I am going to the Father’s house, and I am going to pre-

pare a place for you there. When that is done, I will come and take you so that we may be always together.

He concluded simply (verses 3 and 4): so you know where I am and how to get there. But Thomas said to him: but, Lord, we don't know where you are going, let alone how to get there ourselves. Then follow Jesus' well-known words: you do know; I am the way, and the truth, and the life. You can go to the Father by me.

The Lord then speaks about the work that the disciples must do in the meantime and how they must live through prayer. In the interim it is our calling to pray and to work. But Christ adds: I will not leave you on your own, by yourselves, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever." The disciples will not be left alone, for another Counselor, the Holy Spirit, will come and he will stay forever.

Pentecost: the Spirit given

We know that this promise of Christ was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Then the Spirit came to stay in the church. It is in this light that we understand what the Heidelberg Catechism means, when it says: he is also given to me. The Spirit is *given*. No one can claim the Spirit. No one can take the Spirit. No one controls the Spirit. No one deserves the Spirit. He is simply given by the Father and through the Son. We do not climb up to the Spirit, but he comes down to us.

It says in the catechism: he is given *also* to me. There is a sense of awe and amazement in that little word *also*, for we do not receive the Holy Spirit on our own or just by ourselves. We receive the Spirit together with others. The expression, also to me, means that others, too, have been given the Spirit.

Who are these others? It can be no otherwise than that these others are the fellow members of the church of Christ. For the Spirit is not poured out over single individuals – that's not the essence of Pentecost – but over all the believers gathered that day. The whole body shares in the anointing of its Head, Jesus Christ. It says in Acts 2:7: they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was poured out over the church of Christ. In that sense, since I belong to the church, he is given also to me. That is what the catechism means. This is our joy: together we may share in the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Given to the church of Christ

Now we have to keep this simple. Someone might ask: does this mean that every single member of the church has the Holy Spirit simply because he is a member? What about unbelievers in the church? Are there not hypocrites in the church? It is dangerous to say that everyone in the church has the Spirit. It is also rather presumptuous, for only true believers have the Spirit of God. So I should say: *if* you are a true believer, then you have the Spirit, and otherwise you do not have the Spirit. And you'd better start doing something about it.

That's not how the Bible speaks. What we read in Scripture is this: the Holy Spirit is given to the church of Christ. This is a tremendous and joyful reality. As members of the church we may and we must stand and grow in that reality. We should not doubt this reality and spurn this grace. We must be careful that we do not grieve or quench this Spirit, for, indeed, unbelievers and hypocrites will not last in the realm of the Holy Spirit.

That's also the sense of Paul's statements about the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:9, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature, but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you." Paul does not make this controlling indwelling of the Spirit questionable, but he appeals to the Roman believers' own experience: if the Spirit of God lives in you. Is it not so that he does? Is that not a fact, a joyous reality?

He is also given to me. Now, of course, the calling that comes with this promise is that I then place myself where the Spirit works, namely in the church of Christ. I will go to church, hear the Word, believe the Word, and strive to live the Word. I will be found in the fellowship of the saints. Psalm 16: I love thy saints, with them I am united, and in their midst my soul will be delighted (*Book of Praise*). The Spirit dwells and works in the midst of the saints.

If you want to receive something, you have to go where it is given. It is true that the wind blows where it wills, and the Spirit of God is almighty and sovereign, but we have to go where the Spirit has been poured out, where the Word of life is proclaimed, and there we must begin to set ourselves under the power of the Holy Spirit. In the fellowship of the saints we find also the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When we seek the Spirit in faith and in truth where he can be found, he will be found. He will find us. That is the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Corporate or Personal?

Someone might ask if it is not dangerous to speak of the Holy Spirit in a corporate sense that he is given to the church, for is it not the work of the Spirit to dwell in persons and in person's hearts, and not, as such, in a larger, perhaps undefined, body? Should we not speak about the Spirit in a personal sense, as the catechism also does, given to me, rather than in a corporate sense, given to the church?

We should not make any false dilemma's here, as if everything can be pressed into a certain scheme. The church is not an undefined body, but a visible gathering of saints. When we seek the Holy Spirit, where he is given in the fellowship of the saints, it becomes very personal.

The Holy Spirit is very active, and indeed he works in our hearts. Our Lord said it this way in John 14:17: for he lives with you and will be in you. The Lord Jesus here uses the word you in the plural (meaning all the disciples) Therefore we can speak of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the church. In this way he dwells within us, in our hearts. This indwelling makes the work of the Spirit for everyone a very personal matter. Emphasis on the corporate aspect of the Spirit's work does not deny his work in persons. United to Christ, we are also united with his body (cf. I Cor 12:12-27, "... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it...") These things belong together.

The Spirit makes us share in Christ

The catechism shows us something of this when it says about the work of the Holy Spirit that he is given me "to make me by a true faith share in Christ and all His benefits." The Holy Spirit makes us share in Christ. That is here the central element. The Holy Spirit binds us to Christ and through Christ to the Father.

The Holy Spirit does not tell us how great and good we are, but he leads us to Christ. In John 16:14 we find this stated very strongly, "He (the Spirit) will bring glory to me (Christ), by taking from what is mine and making it known to you." Notice the next verse 15, "All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." So the Holy Spirit takes from Christ, who has received from the Father, and he then gives to us. See again the unity in the Trinity.

We must realize that the great work of the Holy Spirit is to make us share in Christ and all his benefits. The Spirit is Christ-directed and so ori-

ented to the Father also. What the Holy Spirit does, is take us and lead us to the Lord Jesus, and says: receive all the blessings of your Savior.

The Holy Spirit is then the living Person who unites us with the Son and through the Son with the Father. How does he do this? It says: we share in Christ by true faith. Faith is the only possible linkage. The Holy Spirit brings about this immense miracle that he works faith in us, and by that faith we start to reach out to Christ and receive him and all his benefits. The Spirit took my hand and put my hand in the hand of the man from Galilee, as the song goes. The Spirit has one message: look away from yourself; look only to Jesus.

Faith is the Connection

Faith is the connection. The catechism reminds us that this must be true faith. That is not meant to make us doubt the quality of our faith, but to remind us of the genuine character of faith. For what is true faith? That is explained in Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism. True faith is unconditional acceptance of all that is promised in the Gospel and (at the same time) a complete trust that these promises are true for me. True faith is simply that I know deep within my heart that the Gospel is true for me. Jesus loves me, this I know, because the Bible tells me so.

And so the work of the Holy Spirit goes deep into the heart. He works in us faith, and feeds and nurtures that faith. To this end he is constantly with us and in us. He lives in us, and we have become temples of that Spirit. He makes alive what is dead, restores what is lost, and strengthens what is weak. We confess joyfully that the Spirit never ceases in this work. If he did, we'd be lost. We build on him alone. We accept the promise of his permanent indwelling. And then it truly becomes a wonderful experience.

The other Counselor

For this work of the Holy Spirit is known and experienced by us. How could this great miracle of faith be happening in our lives, and we do not know of it? The catechism speaks of this when it says that the Holy Spirit is given to *comfort* me and to remain with me forever.

The Spirit is given to comfort me. The Lord Jesus called him *the Counselor*. Actually it says in John 14:16: another Counselor. So we already had one, namely, Jesus himself. But since the Lord Jesus is going to the Father, he will give us another Counselor who will never depart from us. That again is the context. Jesus is saying: I have to leave you (ascension) but the Holy

Spirit will come (Pentecost) and he will always stay with the church, with you.

This does not mean that Jesus is not with us anymore. We also believe that with respect to his divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit, Christ is never absent from us (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 18, Matthew 28:19). It means that Christ is with us in the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit never leaves. After his outpouring, he stays. Pentecost can never be reversed.

The name Counselor

The name *Counselor* is beautiful. Sometimes it is rendered as in the original, which has the word *Paraclete*. Literally it means: someone who is called in to give help in an official capacity. Christ has the right to ask the Father to send the Spirit; he has earned that privilege on the cross. So the Spirit comes officially to stay. He does not do free-lance work, but is commissioned to stay forever with God's people.

He has come to help and to comfort us. The word comfort basically means: to give strength. We certainly do need help and strength, for our faith is weak and the enemy is strong. There are so many adverse conditions that might lead us to doubt and draw us away from Christ and from the church. Satan likes to take us by the hand and lead us down a path of desperation and doom.

How is the Spirit then known? He will not permit Satan to succeed. He hangs on to us. As much as we may feel the magnetic pull of this world, the call of the Gospel is stronger. As often as we feel the world trying to swallow us, the embrace of Christ is more powerful. Whenever we wonder if we will persevere, we are reminded of the fact that the Spirit will stay with us forever.

Jesus said: I go to the Father, and I will come back to get you. In the meantime I will ask the Father to send you another Counselor, a real helper, and he will stay with you always. I know that you need this Counselor. This Counselor will connect you to me and to the Father, and you will be fine.

Let us look now at John 14:17. Jesus speaks there about the Spirit of truth, and says, "The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

There are immense ramifications here. You know him. The world does not see or know him. That's why they cannot receive him. The world wants nothing to do with the Son, Jesus Christ. The church, not the world, is the object of the Spirit's attention. The world cannot recognize the Holy Spirit. They do not understand whom or what Christians are talking about.

You know him

But, says the Lord, you know him. Why do we know him? We know him because he is living in us. How could we have this Spirit and not know it? How could we have this Spirit and not show it? How could all the gifts of Christ flow to us through the Spirit and not become evident in our lives?

You know him. It means to have intimate knowledge of and personal fellowship with the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit comes to you, said the Lord, you'll know him. Is this because you are so good or because you have better eyes than the world? Is it because you are smarter? We don't read that anywhere in Scripture. We know him because the Spirit of God is given to the church of Christ, and as living members of this church, we experience the comfort and strength of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can be known and is known in the Christian life. His presence is a great comfort. This does not mean that our relationship with the Spirit is always so good. We often give the Spirit – to use a blunt expression – a very rough time. The Bible warns us for that. We are warned not to grieve or quench the Spirit. We should not make things difficult for the Holy Spirit within us. We will only increase our own pain and sorrow. We will look at these passages more closely later.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is also shown in the Christian life in works of faith, in a service of love, in humility, and in hope. But all these works are only the fruits of faith and fruit of the Spirit. They are simply evidence of a living faith.

We can not climb over the wall of the sheepfold through our faith and its works. There is only one way into the sheepfold. Jesus said: I am the door (John 10:7). The Spirit leads us to and through this door.

The presence of the Spirit is known. You know him, Jesus said. The power of the Spirit is shown. You crucify the flesh with its demands, said Paul (Galatians 5:24). Paul actually states that those who belong to Christ *have* crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. We have this reality only in Christ. This is not yet perfect in us. But it has begun. One day the Spirit's work in this respect will be finished. Then Christ will present us to the Father as a Bride without spot or blemish.