

XI *The Spirit Resisted*

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: you always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not prosecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – you now have received the law that was put into effect through angels, but have not obeyed it.

(ACTS 7:51-53)

There are in our time, also in Reformed churches, many questions concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Some members desire to know more about the mysterious yet wonderful work of the Holy Spirit. Younger people, who grow up in a more open and expressive society, desire to have better insight into the work of the Spirit. This desire is good.

On the one hand, the Bible speaks in very encouraging and certain terms about the Spirit in our lives. We have seen that he is called our Comforter or Counselor, who always abides with us and fills us with the riches that Christ has earned for us. This must always be emphasized. The Holy Spirit came to stay. Yet on the other hand, we are warned not to grieve the Spirit or even quench the Spirit, and there is the implication that he may withdraw from us. Do we receive here *conflicting* messages?

A reference could be made to Acts 7:51, where Stephen accuses the Sanhedrin of *resisting* the Holy Spirit: you always resist the Holy Spirit. In explaining this text, this line of thinking is often followed: the Spirit has to reveal man's misery and create the desire for salvation. He also needs to convince people that God's Word is true and reliable. This work [of the Holy Spirit] however, is not a guarantee to salvation – apparently it is *resistible* grace.

Some think that especially in the early stage of the Spirit's work, man can resist the Holy Spirit. I am not sure what is meant by an early stage as compared to any later stage in which (I assume) the Spirit is not so easily resisted, but notice how the resisting of the *Spirit* is in one sentence equated with the resisting of God's *grace*. It is not irresistible grace, as we thought and taught, for Stephen infers that the Spirit can be resisted.⁸ This is a flawed manner of thinking.

Invincible grace

I mention as a side-note that I do not anymore speak of irresistible grace, and therefore also not about resistible grace. This dogmatical terminology is insufficient to describe what is meant. We have learned to speak of *invincible* grace. Just as the Holy Spirit is almighty God, so the grace of God is invincible. God's sovereign grace is by nature resisted by everyone, and even true believers can sometimes lose the sense of God's grace because of their sins, but God's grace, as the Spirit himself, is invincible. To say it differently, when the Holy Spirit sets out to save us, we can resist but cannot overpower the Spirit, for he overpowers us. God remains stronger than man.

Which brings us back to this passage, then, and to the question: what is meant by this *resisting the Holy Spirit*? It is something that indeed demands our attention, for it would not be good if it was rightly said of us that like the Jews in the apostolic time we today resist the Holy Spirit.

Remember the context

Actually this is the only passage in Scripture where the term "resisting the Spirit" is used, and that should make us careful not to draw quick conclusions. It also should alert us to the fact that we are to understand the expression here very specifically in its *context*, for that is the first rule of proper exegesis or explanation of Scripture.

In the context of Acts 7 this resisting is not at all something which takes place during an early stage of our regeneration or sanctification. On the contrary, it is something that Israel has been doing for a long time, throughout the ages. Stephen says: you *always* resisted the Holy Spirit. He implies that the Jews still do so. Precisely stated, we do not stand here at the beginning of a process of regeneration, but at the end of a long history of hardening in sin.

⁸See e.g. Isaac Smit, *Praying For Rain*, Mt. Hope, 1998, p. 42.

This chapter in Acts gives us the account of a great *turning-point* in the history of Israel and the church of Christ. Until now there have been certain prohibitions to the Christian church and some brief imprisonments. The apostles were slapped on the wrists and told to stop preaching the name of Jesus (see Acts 4). But now it becomes very serious. Stephen is the first martyr and here the ways of Judaism and Christendom truly part.

Massive persecution

We must have a keen eye for these circumstances; otherwise we completely misunderstand the passage and text. The resisting of the Holy Spirit, which was evident through the ages in Israel's history, found its strongest expression in the rejection and crucifixion of Christ. Now it breaks loose against the church of the new covenant, and this will lead to great consequences.

As Stephen dies, massive persecution begins and the church at Jerusalem is scattered far and wide. Israel's resistance against the Holy Spirit comes to an unprecedented height. We must understand that through Stephen's testimony the Lord makes a final appeal to the Jewish Sanhedrin regarding Israel's sin of resisting the Holy Spirit. This passage speaks to us about the key element in this sin, the final evidence of this sin, and the only deliverance from this sin.

Vehemence and sharpness

This passage is remarkable for its sudden vehemence and sharpness. Stephen was going along at a leisurely pace, being nice to everyone, simply recounting the main moments of Israel's history, when suddenly there is this outburst: you stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! One is almost taken aback by the sharp tone and strong language. We understand that the first hearers could hardly be pleased.

Please note two things. First, Stephen is addressing the Sanhedrin, the official Jewish court, on the charge of *blasphemy*. He is being accused of a terrible crime. Stephen knows, as do all others, that if found guilty, he will receive the death penalty, as did Christ Jesus. So he's not telling a fairy tale which might well begin with the words "once upon a time" but he is recounting a specific history.

Second, he does this from a certain perspective. What comes out time and again in his defense is that Israel has a history of *rejecting* faithful prophets. Joseph was sold as a slave to Egypt by his own brothers. Moses

was betrayed by the very same people he was trying to help. Moses spoke about the coming of a great prophet, but they laughed at Moses. Later God gave them the Promised Land, and a place to worship him, but they did not appreciate it.

The defense of Stephen is precisely that Israel has throughout its entire history been a stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts. History is not neutral. It could be that the hearers were slowly catching on to this theme, and were starting to get angry. Sensing their rising displeasure, Stephen makes it very plain: you are a stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears. Imagine, the man accused of blasphemy is now accusing his judges of resisting the Spirit.

Stiff-necked

Being stiff-necked is the sin of *human pride*. It is a refusal to bow before the Lord and his Word. The people of Israel never learned to depend on the Lord alone and to entrust themselves fully to his care, but they went their own ways and sought their own security. They fell into deep apostasy time and again, serving dead idols instead of the living God.

Stiff-necked also means that they would not bend under God's discipline. Instead of bowing before him and his servants, they became even more defiant. And this is because they have "uncircumcised hearts and ears." Circumcision was a sign of *renewal of life*. Sin had to be cut out. But for the Jews it became an outward ritual with no real spiritual meaning. They took pride in the *sign* of the covenant, but did not honor the *essence* of the covenant. This is a very serious matter, which must meet with God's wrath.

You would expect that the Jews in Stephen's time had learned their lesson. They had the Scriptures. They knew how God had punished his people in the past. Had not the prophets already warned them for uncircumcised hearts and ears? They would not fall into the same pitfalls as their fathers. They honored the very memory of the prophets killed by their fathers. They built impressive tombs and erected fancy memorials for the prophets of old (Mat 23:29, 30). They thought they were different and better than their poor, misguided, unrepentant, unspiritual fathers. They knew better...

Like your fathers...

But Stephen tells them unequivocally: you are just like your fathers. You come from them, think like them, act like them, and refuse to listen. You *always* resist the Holy Spirit. Times change and generations come and go,

but the sin of resisting the Holy Spirit is always the same. It is constantly present like an ugly birthmark. This sin stands out: you always resist the Holy Spirit.

It is remarkable that this is not said in general terms about the Gentiles, but about God's covenant people. Resisting the Holy Spirit is something of which especially covenant people have to be aware. The Holy Spirit may be resisted everywhere, but only among God's people can it be known *whom* they are resisting. I would say: it's not a sin found in the *world*, that does not know God, but in the *church*, where God has made himself known.

Can the Spirit be resisted?

What is this resisting of the Holy Spirit? Can the Spirit really be resisted? Indeed, he can be resisted. Resistance means that you do not want to give in or give up. There is no surrender or compliance. You go your own way, doggedly and stubbornly. We continue to resist, and if God does not powerfully break down that resistance, it will *kill* us.

Stephen does not say that there is any weakness with the Spirit, or any inability to break down human resistance, for the Holy Spirit is omnipotent and invincible God. The point is rather that we are so terribly stubborn and unyielding. Were it not for God's covenant of love and his enduring faithfulness, there would be no covenant people left. We are so incredibly stubborn and stiff-necked that God would not put up with us.

Stephen makes it clear that God wants to break through that stubbornness. God did not say: okay, have it your way, do what you want, I don't care. On the contrary, the LORD sent prophet after prophet. He came to his people with his holy Word. Through those prophets and in that Word, he proclaimed the promise of the great Messiah, who would save his people from their sins.

Rejection of the prophetic word

Stephen asks: was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? It is a rhetorical question of sorts, because the inference is that all the prophets were persecuted, and many even killed. When God in his love sent prophets who spoke of the great Deliverer, the son of David, they would not listen to them either, but killed them as well. And finally in the greatest manifestation of their sin, they killed even the Messiah himself. Stephen says: now you have betrayed and murdered him. Not just killed, but murdered. Murdered, for he was innocent of all that was brought in against him. They

wrongly accused Jesus also of blasphemy, and knowingly condemned an innocent man.

The resisting of the Holy Spirit is not some initial reluctance to be saved, let's say a natural hesitation on our part, so that God often waits to see what choice we will make, perhaps even nudging us along a bit in the right direction. It is something far more serious; it is the rejection of the prophetic Word of God which leads ultimately to the denial and rejection of Jesus Christ.

Stephen stands here before the Sanhedrin with his own life on the line, and he dares to say: you have always resisted the Holy Spirit. How? They have done so by rejecting the prophetic Word by which the Spirit came to them time and again, by rejecting even those prophets who spoke about the coming of the Messiah, and then finally, despite all his signs and his obviously authoritative and clear teaching, by murdering the Messiah himself, our chief prophet and teacher.

The resisting of the Holy Spirit is a denial or twisting of God's Word which leads to the rejection of Christ as the only and complete Savior. This is the inclination of all people, whether they are Jew or Gentile, as Paul writes to Romans, and it is most serious among those to whom the Holy Spirit has revealed and proclaimed the counsel of God concerning redemption.

The breaking point

Stephen makes clear that the breaking point has been reached. This is not open for discussion. There is a breaking-point with all who promote false teaching. You cannot negotiate on this point. The Sanhedrin must now recognize its sin and confess that sin, or the moment has come that the apostles and other members of the church go to the Gentiles.

Constant resisting of the Spirit ultimately means that God gives you over to your own devices. In this sense, there is hardly a way back. One explainer suggests that it comes very close to the sin against the Holy Spirit, consciously and willfully rejecting the clear testimony of the Word of God concerning the redemption in Christ.

Resisting the Spirit is not an initial human reaction which leads God to wait and see and to give you the benefit of the doubt, but resisting the Spirit is saying, after all the evidence is in and the Word has clearly sounded, that there is a better way to be saved. Rejecting the way in Christ, we determine a way of our own.

Some people think that there is no breaking point with God and that people can go on resisting the Spirit indefinitely. But there is a breaking point. Stephen warns the Sanhedrin that this moment has now arrived. The Jews have doggedly charted out their own course and they are sticking to it.

Christ or the law

Stephen makes this quite clear as well. Just before they mob him and drag him out of the building, he says (verse 53), "...you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but not obeyed it."

The Sanhedrin followed a way of salvation secured by doing and obeying the law. If you reject Christ, as the one who fulfilled the law in your place, the only way of deliverance is then that you yourself fulfill the law by obeying it. If Christ does not save you fully and perfectly, then you are left to yourself. How far will that get you?

Reject Christ as perfect Savior, and you will have to deliver yourself. It's the only way left over. Now Stephen does not deny that the law is important. He does not deny that the law should be obeyed. On the contrary, it is very important that there are good works as fruits of faith. The law is good and spiritual, as Paul would later write (Rom 7:13-20).

Stephen speaks highly of the law as having been put into effect *by angels*. This may seem like a cryptic reference, which is not supported by Old Testament evidence, but Stephen only speaks here of angels to show that the law came from God and by God's own messengers. It is not strange to think that when God descended on Mount Sinai, also many *angels* accompanied him and that these angels played a role in communicating with Moses. But that's not the point here.

It is clear that Stephen does not want to deny the importance of the law. The law is so important that if you do not keep it, it condemns you. Those who seek their salvation by the works of the law will be judged by the law. In rejecting Christ and resisting the Spirit, the Jews have made a clear choice for a man-centered and works-oriented salvation, stressing what we have to do in order to be saved. God will therefore judge them on this basis. Let it be clear then that they will not be saved in this way, for they have not obeyed the law. The only way of deliverance is by faith in Jesus Christ, and that means also by not resisting the Holy Spirit, but yielding to him and accepting the full testimony of the Word of God regarding his sovereign grace in Christ.

The only way: accept the Gospel

We should not resist the Holy Spirit. This means that we should fully and completely accept the Gospel which we have received, and so become wise unto salvation. Then we discover what the love of God in Christ truly means, how his grace is wondrously imparted to us, and that all our boasting is in the Lord alone.

Want to resist someone? The Bible tells us that we should resist the *devil*, and he will flee from us.⁹ We can now by the power of the Spirit resist sin. The more our lives are governed by Christ's Spirit and Word, the less control Satan and sin have over our life. Then we start to obey God's commandments again. We try to keep his law, not for merit, but out of gratitude for the salvation received. Then we go the only way of deliverance that is truly open to mankind: the way of faith in Christ Jesus.

Just before he died, Stephen said it plainly: there is only one way of deliverance and that way is by faith in Jesus Christ. If you reject that, you are riding on your own merits right into hell, because you have not kept the law.

There is one way of deliverance. This is the way of the Gospel that was proclaimed and is being proclaimed all over the world. After Stephen's death a great persecution arose and the disciples were scattered all over, but the true Gospel had been maintained again before the Jewish Sanhedrin. It was God's last appeal to them in their official capacity as Jewish rulers.

Later Paul would appear before the Jewish leaders, the very same man who agreed with Stephen's execution at this point, but then it was before the Roman governors Felix and Festus. The members of the Sanhedrin were only false accusers and angry spectators. God did not again deal directly with them. There surely is a breaking point.

Through Stephen's testimony God still appeals to his people to be faithful, to stay on the one way of salvation of faith in Christ. It is the only way.

Do not resist the Holy Spirit, but yield to him. Let the Spirit direct the bride to Christ.

⁹James 4: 7; I Peter 5:9. . See also Paul's instruction about the full armor of faith required for this resisting, Ephesians 6: 10-20.