

XVI *Sealed with the Holy Spirit*

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

(EPHESIANS 1:13, 14)

In this section we focus on an important passage in Ephesians 1 that speaks about the Holy Spirit. It says there in verse 13: you were marked in him [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not simply give a seal, but he is himself the seal of Christ.

There are those who have seen this “sealing” with the Spirit as one of the steps or demands in the process of becoming a truly committed Christian. The sealing is then understood as the ultimate and undisputable proof that one is really a child of God. Unfortunately not every Christian has this experience or reaches this height of grace. Those “sealed” are truly Christians par excellence, and they also are the most effective witnesses of Christ.

Some follow a specific order here. There is, first, the need for conviction of sin. Second, there must be repentance. This is followed by regeneration. Fourth, faith is received. Then we are justified (Step 5), and, sixth, adoption as God's children follows. In this scheme of things, the seventh and final step and the crowning touch is the sealing with the Holy Spirit, sometimes seen also as the baptism with the Spirit. When one is thus sealed, the possibility exists that one can perform miracles and wonders. We are here right in the very heart of Pentecostalism.

Sealing not for everyone?

In this line of thinking, apparently not everyone receives this sealing. Some would have us believe that you can be a Christian without it, but not as effective a Christian as you could be or even should be. While not essential to salvation, this sealing is seen as being the indisputable proof of salvation. Some defend the position that this sealing is something which happens after conversion and that we therefore can be a Christian without it. It's better to have it, but we don't really need the sealing to be saved.

Someone may ask whether all the above is important or whether it is just another useless theological debate. I think it is important. If God gives to all believers this sealing with the Holy Spirit, we should know about it. We must understand exactly what it is and how we are to use it.

I am convinced that this "sealing" is indeed something which *all* believers receive. It is not a bonus for some, but a blessing for all.

In Ephesians 1:3 Paul praises God who has blessed us with *every spiritual blessing in Christ*. God gives different gifts to different people, but we all have the same blessings in Christ. Every spiritual blessing in Christ is ours. It would follow that this also includes the sealing with the Holy Spirit. Besides, when Paul mentions this "sealing" he continues in the plural, addressing all the believers, and he makes no distinctions. The miracle is really that not only Jews are being saved but that also Gentiles are "included in Christ" when they hear the Gospel and believe it.

Therefore we consider what this sealing with the Holy Spirit is. All believers are marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. We will see when this sealing takes place, what this sealing implies, and why this sealing is needed.

When sealed?

When does this sealing with the Spirit take place? In verse 13 Paul writes: and you also (the Ephesian believers, of which the majority were from the Gentiles) were included in Christ, *when you heard the word of truth*, the gospel of your salvation. In this letter Paul more than once refers to the great mystery or miracle that the heathen are no longer excluded from the *covenants* of promise (2:12), but have been brought near in Christ. The word "covenants" here refers to the covenant made of old with its various dispensations.¹⁶

¹⁶ See my publication *The Covenant of Love*, Premier Publishing, Winnipeg, p 35 ff, "How Many Covenants Are There?"

When the Ephesians heard the gospel, they were called to faith. They responded positively to the gospel, for we read, “Having *believed*, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” Note the expression: having believed. Some translate: *after* having believed, you were marked in him... This is the rendering of the RSV and the KJV. Then it is easy to conclude that the sealing took place *after* the Ephesian Christians came to faith, even as a separate matter. The order would be: they came to faith (regeneration must play a role here somehow) and after that in due course this was confirmed or augmented by the *sealing* with the Spirit.

The element of time here is rather important for it casts a certain light on this “sealing.” Is it something the believers receive at the moment they come to faith or is it something that stands completely loose from faith as a totally different experience? Can we be believers, and not yet be sealed with the Spirit? Is this some kind of added blessing or higher level than other Christians receive? You will understand that Pentecostal evangelicals tend to go in this direction.

Simultaneous

The expression “having believed,” as rendered by the NIV, is here indeed the proper translation. The NIV does not see this sealing as taking place at a later time, but in accordance with the original language understands the coming to faith and being marked with a seal as events that take place simultaneously. When we believe, we are immediately marked with a seal, namely, the Holy Spirit. This marking with a seal, then, pertains to *all* believers and not just to some in the church.

I hope that you appreciate the importance of this. Otherwise we get different classes of believers in the church. Some are merely believers, while others have above and beyond faith also been marked with a special seal, namely the Holy Spirit. The Spirit then functions more in the lives of some believers than in that of others. But Paul does not write in this way. All believers upon coming to faith are also marked with a seal, the Holy Spirit. This mark sets them apart from this world and gives them a lawful place among God’s people.

It would be wrong, therefore, to ask a believer if he has also been sealed with the mark, the promised Spirit, because that mark *is given with faith*, comes along with faith, and even authenticates this faith. The fact that a mark or seal is given when we come to faith lies fully in the line of biblical thinking. When do we receive a mark or seal? This happens always when we become part of something or when we join a certain fellowship. The mark

or seal then confirms that we are indeed truly members with all the rights and all the obligations of membership.

Apply this to the church of Christ: when do we become members? This occurs when we come to faith. At that very same time also we receive the mark or seal of that membership, which is the Holy Spirit.

Full access in Christ

This begs another question. Was the Holy Spirit not active in us before we came to faith? He certainly was at work, for how could we come to faith without the Holy Spirit? But when we believe, we receive *full access* with all the saints to the presence and blessing of the Holy Spirit as he is poured out over the church. As we join the church of Christ, we are set apart from the world, and the distinguishing mark or seal is the Holy Spirit himself. He has put his claim on us and set his mark upon us. He now dwells in us and makes us more and more into living members of Christ.

What the Bible tells us here is that you cannot be a true Christian and not have the Holy Spirit. When you truly believe in Christ, you are marked with a seal, namely the Holy Spirit. This does not come later or earlier. It comes with faith. It is given the moment we become by faith members of the holy catholic church.

When we come to faith in Christ our Savior, and, as Paul writes, are included in him, we receive all this with Christ. It says even: you were marked *in him* with a seal. We did not merit this seal. We cannot earn this seal of approval by climbing higher and closer to God. When we are included in Christ by faith we are marked *in him* with a seal. The seal does not come by itself or separate from Christ, but the seal comes with Christ, and we receive the Spirit only in Jesus Christ. When it comes to the sealing with the Spirit, we must be very humble.

The promised Holy Spirit

Paul also writes here of the *promised* Holy Spirit. This is covenantal language. We did not earn this Spirit, just as we did not merit salvation in Christ, but the Spirit has been *promised* to all believers. And when God deals with believers, he also deals in these believers with their children, their generations. For that is the structure and the way of his covenant. We received the Spirit because the promise of God is that the Spirit is given to all who believe in Christ. God keeps his promises.

We must keep together what God has put together. We may never see the Holy Spirit as a kind of addendum, a bonus given only to certain believers who are worthy of this, but the Spirit is given to all, and works in and through all who truly believe. The first question is not: how do I know for sure that I have received the Holy Spirit but the question is: do I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? For if I believe in him, I have received also in him the seal of God, which is the Holy Spirit.

A mark of authentication

This becomes even more important when we consider what this being marked with a seal implies. I wrote earlier that a seal is a mark of authentication. It means that something is the real thing. It means also that something is legitimate, true, and not a false imitation. This seal gives us an *identity*.

This may not be as evident to us today as it was in the days of the apostle Paul. When one sent a letter in those days, the envelope or scroll was sealed with wax, and on this wax a signet ring was pressed to leave behind a clear and visible mark. The one who received the letter could know from the unbroken seal that the letter was authentic. No one had tampered with it and no one had changed the contents. The sealed letter is perfectly valid and carries the authority of the one who sent it. It bears a mark of authenticity.

The seal and baptism

The question is now how we are to envision this marking with a seal. It has to be an internal thing which we do not as such see from the outside. Still, I think that we must lay a close connection between the seal of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the water of *baptism*. If there is any event which symbolizes the receiving of the Spirit, it is holy baptism, and if there is any substance which speaks of cleansing and renewal, it is the water of baptism.

When people came to faith and were admitted as members of the church, they were baptized. Holy Baptism is the sign and seal of admission to the church. This baptism is a “sign” that we from now on belong to Christ and his people, and it also functions as a “seal” that we are truly in every way a child of God in Jesus Christ. The seal of which Paul writes here is then shown and presented in the water of baptism. We also note how baptism speaks to us of our inheritance (see the next verse). The *Form for Baptism*

says that we are heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant (*Book of Praise*, page 585).

Other passages about sealing

Also elsewhere the New Testament speaks of this matter of sealing. I'll mention only a few passages. It is remarkable that *circumcision* is called in Romans 4 a sign and a *seal* of the righteousness of faith. Like baptism circumcision marked one's admission to the people of God. We read in Ephesians 4:30, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." All believers are sealed, the Holy Spirit dwells in them, and therefore they must watch not to grieve this Spirit.

Perhaps the most significant use of the word seal is found in Revelation 7. In this chapter we first read about four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent great damage from being done on the earth. Apparently the day of final judgment and total destruction has not yet come at this point. Why not? Verse 2: I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He calls out with a loud voice: do not harm the earth, *until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God*. I have italicized the key words. And then John *hears* the number of the sealed, 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

The seal is the mark of the living God. It shows that we belong to him. Notice that this seal is placed on the *forehead* so that it is immediately visible. You look at a person and immediately see this seal,. So you know right away that he belongs to the living God.

What is this seal mentioned in Revelation 7? Is it the same as in Ephesians 1 and 4? It cannot be much different.

The seal in Revelation 7 has a three-fold purpose. It protects against tampering. Those sealed cannot be destroyed. Second, it indicates ownership. It points to a relationship of love as we find in the Song of Songs (8:6): set me as a seal upon your heart. Those who are sealed belong to the one whose seal they bear. Third, a seal certifies a genuine character: it is true and irrevocable.

We see this three-fold sense also in baptism. The Father assures that he will take care of us, and protect us. The Son assures us that he has bought us with his own blood, and we belong to him. Finally, the Holy Spirit assures us that he will work in us so that we persevere in the Lord's service.

Outright reference to baptism?

I do not say that this sealing in Revelation 7 is an outright reference to baptism. But we cannot escape some sense of a connection here. The sealing is most likely symbolic, just as baptism is symbolic. The message is that the final judgment will not come until all God's children have been called and sealed. Then the end is here.

In the final period of history, holy baptism functions as a clear sign and seal, as we read in Matthew 28. So baptism is called in the *Belgic Confession* a “mark and emblem of Christ” (Article 34). Lord's Day 27 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (about baptism) does refer us to Revelation 7, especially to the fact that this multitude of the sealed “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb.” The sealing in Revelation 7 is therefore not to be seen loose from the sealing mentioned in Ephesians 1 and 4.

I want to mention yet that in Ezekiel 9 we also read about a “seal” or distinguishing mark. There a man with a “writing kit is supposed to go through Jerusalem and make a mark on the foreheads of all “who grieve and lament over the detestable things that are done in [Jerusalem].” We may also think of the blood that was placed on the doorframes of the homes of the Israelites when the angel of death went through all of Egypt (Ex 12:7). The people of God are distinguished from those of this world by a mark that God sees and knows, so that they may escape the great judgment. They bear the seal of Christ, and the seal they bear is ultimately the Spirit of Christ himself. The seal has wondrous implications of redemption, renewal, and certainty.

Eschatological thrust

We truly need this seal, because the days are evil, as Paul writes in Ephesians 5. There is for Christians always the danger that they do not persevere, fall away, and maybe even come to deny the Lord Jesus. Will we make it across the finish line? Will we be able to run the race, to complete the course, and to receive the crown of glory? (2 Tim 4:7).

It is remarkable when we read of this sealing with the Spirit that there is always an eschatological thrust, which means, the Spirit is always focused on our perseverance and we look towards the *future*. Notice how in verse 14 the Holy Spirit is called a *deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*. I touched already on the word inheritance, being heirs of God's kingdom and covenant. The Spirit is called a “deposit” of this inheritance.

It may seem a bit strange at first that the Holy Spirit is called a deposit. A deposit is only a dead substance, while the Spirit is a living and active Person. How are we to understand this word deposit?

In Lord's Day 18 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* (about the ascension of Christ) we can read that the Spirit is sent as a "counter-pledge" by whose power we seek the things that are above. The word *counter-pledge* comes from the rendition of the RSV. The original word is the word deposit and the reference is to 2 Corinthians 1:22, where we read something similar as in the present text: God (Christ) set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. We have assurance in heaven. Christ's flesh in heaven is a pledge that we will also go there. And then the Spirit is called a counter-pledge, a deposit, and our assurance on earth. He directs us heaven-ward to the great inheritance that we have in Christ. A deposit is an installment which guarantees that the rest will come also, maybe later, but it will come.

The Spirit reassures us

We all know what a deposit is. Sometimes when we purchase something, we do not pay the full price until it is delivered. But we do give a "deposit," let's say 10% of the price. This deposit has a two-fold purpose: it assures the seller that the remainder will be paid upon delivery, and it gives the buyer a firm right to the matter purchased. Both the seller and the buyer are assured that the transaction will be completed in time. It's like both having a guarantee.

The Holy Spirit was poured out over the church and dwells in the church precisely for this reason to assure us all that we will receive the inheritance that Christ has earned for us and has promised us. The Holy Spirit keeps our faith and hope alive. He directs us forward so that we do not doubt the inheritance itself and persevere in the hope that we will receive it.

The Spirit has come, and he stays. But one day Jesus Christ will return and he will put an end to all sin and death. He will bring full redemption. That is the focus of the passage: until the redemption of those who are God's possession. The Spirit stays with us and is our seal until the whole work of redemption is completed and Christ has come again. The Spirit reassures us until Jesus Christ has come back.

God's possession

Notice that this passage speaks about the redemption of those who are God's *possession*. Those who believe and who already now have the sealing with the Holy Spirit belong to God as his possession and shall always belong to him. Whoever is sealed with the Spirit, will receive the inheritance of Christ.

We need to have this assurance in our lives, as church and as individuals. There are so many things that can bother us and even hinder our assurance. Am I really God's child? Will I persevere to the end? Can I handle my responsibilities as a Christian? Will I receive the inheritance? We are so weak that we cannot stand for a moment, and our arch-enemies do not cease to attack us. But we are marked with a seal. The devil knows that we are God's possession. He cannot decisively influence our lives, for the Spirit of God keeps us. The seal indicates that we are private property. The sign says: out of bounds, no trespassing. The Spirit assures us that the inheritance in Christ cannot be taken away or lost. We may believe that even in our darkest hour God will finish what he started (Psalm 138).

The mark of the beast

Those who belong to Satan, to the beast, also have a "mark" (Revelation 13) either on their right hand or forehead. There is no in-between phase or state. You either bear the mark of the beast or the mark of Christ. You either face glory with Christ or desolation with the devil.

May it be so then that the Holy Spirit always directs us forward to the day of Christ when we may receive in full the inheritance that is assured. And all this is not because we are worthy of it. The text ends with these words: to the praise of [God's] glory! God is to be praised and will be praised for this wonderful work of redemption. He receives from all believers the glory and the honor, now and forever.

We are saved by the Son. We are sealed by the Spirit. We are heirs of the kingdom and the covenant. Let us live then to the glory of the Father. So the triune God is praised by us all.