



The Holy Spirit and Creation

...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

(GENESIS 1:2)

Every year on the day of Pentecost we remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and speak about his work of sanctification and renewal. This is good and necessary. We must be careful, however, not to restrict our focus to the inward work of the Spirit in our hearts. There are those who say that we must become spiritual people, who live as sojourners on this earth, and look only for the new heaven and the new earth. The created earth is of little meaning, except maybe as a collector lane for the elect.

This line of thinking contains important truths. The Bible indeed warns us against world-conformity. We are called to live as aliens and exiles (cf. 1 Pet 2:11) and to look for an enduring city (Heb 13:14). Although in the world, we not part of it. Rather than setting our mind on earthly things our attention is to be directed to the glory that is to come. Our citizenship is in heaven, from where we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3:20).

All this does not mean, however, that we are to ignore the world or deny the gifts that God gave us in creation. The Bible makes clear that God himself cares for the world he made. It also tells us that the Spirit guides us in the use of created things. Sin does not lie in things but lives in persons. The Lord Jesus warned the Pharisees to use proper discretion: "...out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Mat 15:19).

Creation, then, is the work of God, and we may not take a negative attitude toward it. For it, too, is the domain of the Holy Spirit. Creation is the

domain of the Holy Spirit himself. It always has been his realm and will continue to be so. The Holy Spirit does not manifest himself first at Pentecost, or at the end of time, in the latter days. He reveals himself already at the beginning of time, precisely in connection with the creation of this world, where he works and we may live.

To begin our study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, we will take a close look at the very first passage in Scripture where the Spirit is mentioned. We read in Genesis 1:2 that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” In what follows we will note that his glory is revealed already in the divine work of creation; that this work is deeply pastoral and that it is also powerful and promising, setting the tone for all the work that the Spirit will do in the development and history of this world.

In the beginning: the Holy Trinity

In the first verses of the Bible we meet God, Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” From this passage we draw some important conclusions. God, who lives from eternity to eternity, is the supreme, intelligent Being who has called all things into existence. The Bible does not explain God’s existence, but simply states that he lives and acts, revealing himself first of all in his work of creation.

Later (in John 1) we learn that everything was created through the Word who is the only-begotten Son of God. The expression, “God said”, which later in Genesis 1:26 is shown to be a plural (“Let us...”) may be understood as the Father creating through the Son.² God the Father and God the Son were both actively involved in the mighty work of creation.

In Genesis 1, we read about the Spirit of God being present as well. One might say, then, that in the first two verses of Scripture we already have

² Article 8 of *The Belgic Confession* speaks of the Son being the Word, the wisdom and the image of the Father, the Word capitalized. The expression “God said” may be taken then to refer to the creating through the Word, the Logos. H. Bavinck writes, “Even though creation is a work of the whole Trinity, it can not be denied that in the Bible it has a special relation with the Son....” “The Old Testament says in many places that God created all things through the word. Word and wisdom are presented personally as counselor and master of creation.” Therefore we read in the New Testament “not only that God has created all things through the Son, but Christ is also called the first-born of all creation, the beginning (source) of the creation of God...” (Colossians 1: 15-17). See H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* 2, Kok, Kampen, 1967, page 386 ff.)

the contours of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit, cooperating in the same work, the work of creation.

The question is: what exactly was the Spirit doing at this point? It appears that the earth, though created, was still “formless and empty” (Gen 1:2). It was a great, undefined mass of water, which did not sustain any life. It was cloaked in darkness that lay as a thick blanket over the waters of the deep.

Storm or Spirit?

What is the Spirit doing with these dark, inhospitable, even fearsome waters of the measureless depth? There are explainers who suggest that no reference is made here to the Holy Spirit. They translate the words, “the Spirit of God” differently. The word for Spirit is the same word as that used for breath or wind. Remember how the Lord Jesus uses a play on words in his conversation with Nicodemus about the Holy Spirit, recorded in John 3:8: the wind blows where it wills... so also with the Holy Spirit you cannot tell where he comes from or where he is going.

What about the additional words “of God”? These explainers suggest that the word God was in ancient times added to something when it was very great and powerful, almost divine. Then it would read as follows: a god-like wind, that is, a mighty storm was (not hovering but) beating upon (or against) the waters. The passage then does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but to a great force being exerted on the waters to bring them under control. As supporting evidence, pagan myths about the origin of this world which speak about a wild chaos, are quoted. There was a heavy battle of God against nature, according to these legends, a battle in which God ultimately prevailed. The so-called Gnostics in the early Christian church still spoke in these terms.

But all this is nonsense. When elsewhere in the Bible the same expression, Spirit of God, is used, and it always denotes the Holy Spirit. Why should it have a different sense in this passage? The context neither requires it nor allows it.

Hovering?

We must also seek to ascertain what it means that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The word suggests the hovering of a bird, as it floats in the sky on the currents of air, turning gracefully, going up and down over the same spot. The idea is that the Spirit of God in his hovering

keeps a watchful eye on the surging waters. The Spirit is watching intensely over the creation of God.

The same verb is used in Deuteronomy 32:11, "...like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads his wings to catch them, and carries them on his pinions." We find these words in Hymn 8 (*Book of Praise*), *Lo, as an eagle, hov'ring o'er its young....* This hovering of the Holy Spirit over the waters means that the Holy Spirit is not just governing creation, but also caring for it with tender love.

Pastoral work

For that reason I wrote that the work of the Holy Spirit is *pastoral*. He cares about this world, about all who live in it, and he has done so from the very moment it came into being. The word hovering indicates a constant influencing, searching, and correcting of any situation, wherever this might be needed.

Was this work of the Holy Spirit necessary? Was there any remote possibility that the waters would go beyond their boundaries and break free? I do not believe this to be the case. This is not a passage about the waters, it is a statement about the Spirit. It tells us something very important about the person and the work of the Holy Spirit, something that became abundantly clear later on Pentecost, but that finds its root in the personality of the Holy Spirit. He is deeply involved in this creation because it is God's world, and he exercises over it his pastoral care, in order that all things go as they should, that everything will function properly, and that nothing is left to itself. All creation is under the power of God through the Holy Spirit.

Through the Spirit, God manifests his pastoral care over the world that he has created and is still shaping and forming according to his pleasure and plan. Why through the Spirit? The Father and the Son also show this care. But the Spirit is the One who searches and examines all things, and leads them where God wants them to be. All the world is from the beginning the domain of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and the covenant of love

We know from Scripture that God entered into a special relationship with Adam and Eve, a covenant of love,³ and that the entire creation benefited from this love. With this knowledge, we can the more easily understand

³ See my publication, *The Covenant of Love*, Premier Publishing, Winnipeg 1999.

Psalm 104:30, where we read how the LORD by the Spirit creates and renews the face of the earth. This, too, is pastoral care from above. We understand what it means in Psalm 139 that David asks God to search him, to know his heart and thoughts. This is a psalm that sings of the pastoral care of God by the Holy Spirit: (verse 7) “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” If this care is true for God’s creation, how much more will it be true for God’s children. We are assured as Christians about spiritual, pastoral care from above, wherever we go. In subsequent sections we will pay more attention to these important passages.

There are, as we have always recognized, various dispensations in the covenant (see chapter XV in this book). The Bible makes clear that as time progresses, God gives or dispenses his grace in different, that is, in more beautiful and richer ways. But the Holy Spirit was always present and active in caring for God’s creation. At this point, nothing yet exists, except the heavens above and the waters below, shrouded in darkness. But the Spirit is hovering, moving, watching, and caring. This is his character. In this way he leads all things to God.

When it then comes to the new covenant, to the time when God will dwell in Jesus Christ with his people, and when the Gospel will go out into the world, the Holy Spirit is the One who is poured out over the disciples, over the church. To whom better to entrust this mighty pastoral work among the nations, calling God’s children, watching over them, and leading them home to the Father’s house, like an eagle hovering o’er its young, than to the Holy Spirit? Who shall be sent for the great re-creation, the making of a new humanity, other than the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son?

It is true that the event at Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is new, for the Holy Spirit has not lived in this way in the church before. But the fact that the Holy Spirit is poured out, made abundantly available, and presents himself for the work of recreation should not surprise us. For the world that God made was never without the Holy Spirit, and he worked in it from the first day, governing, shaping, guiding, and leading. When man fell into sin the Holy Spirit intensified his efforts so that the Son of man would be revealed, the King of glory!

A perfect pastor

The Holy Spirit is a true and perfect pastor. That is why he is called by the Lord Jesus our Counselor or Comforter (cf. John 14:24; 15:26; 16:7; see also chapter VII of this book). The Holy Spirit does not receive from Christ

a new name or task, for he always was a counselor and comforter to God's people. This pastoral work may intensify, but it is not a new characteristic or strange dimension. The eternal Spirit has always done the pastoral work required among and in the people of God.

The word pastoral is very important here. We speak of the love of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus. But there is also the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. What is more pastoral than fellowship? He is always beside you, all around you, even within you, and has laid his hand upon you. He has observed you from your conception on. David expresses in Psalm 139 in moving words what this fellowship means.

In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 20, we may therefore profess this wonderful work as follows: [the Holy Spirit] "is also given me to make me by true faith share in Christ and all his benefits, to comfort me, and remain with me forever." The fellowship never ends. The bond has now become through Christ's sacrifice even closer: he dwells *in us* making us partakers of what we have in Christ.

Powerful

This same passage in Genesis 1 reveals that the work of the Holy Spirit is powerful. This hovering of the Holy Spirit is not some detached floating over the waters. It means exercising powerful control. We might say that these waters would have been under God's control, even if the Spirit had not hovered over them. That may be true, but it is irrelevant. We are to know that the Spirit of God did hover over the face of the deep, as he will later watch over the face of all the earth. We learn that the Holy Spirit is exercising the power of the God over all of creation from its earliest beginnings to its very end. He is mentioned in the first verses of the Bible as well as in the last (Genesis 1:2; Revelation 22:17).

The Old Testament also teaches that the Holy Spirit is powerful and sovereign over all flesh, over the entire world. Moses and Aaron call upon God as the "God of the spirits of all mankind" (Numbers 16:22). No spirit stands above God's Spirit. His dominion was never restricted to Israel, even if he for a time limited his saving work to Israel. There was always with the Holy Spirit an open eye to the whole world, and God's house would be called a house of prayer for *all* nations! Who could ever bring this about except the Spirit of God? As Nehemiah confesses, the Spirit of the LORD was given especially to Israel to instruct them (9:20), but that same Spirit controlled world powers, moved kings and princes to act favorably towards God's people (cf. Daniel 2:36-45).

This Spirit was powerfully involved in creation. Consider Isaiah 40:12ff., "...who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens..." God took all the waters of the great deep, and put them in the hollow of his hand, casting them up (sky) and down (seas). What a powerful work. Imagine all the water of the sea in your palm. Then we find in verse 13: "...who has understood the Spirit of the LORD or instructed him as his counselor?" The NIV translates with the "mind" of the LORD, but the original has here indeed the *Spirit* of the LORD.

Did anyone tell God what to do? Did anyone give advice at creation to the Holy Spirit as he hovered over the waters? Consider his powerful work. Isaiah 40:15: "...surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket." See also the verses 21 and 22, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" (Genesis 1) "Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in." As great as creation, so powerful and more is the Spirit of God. It is important to note that Isaiah speaks in the same breath about God and the Holy Spirit.

In Isaiah 40 the work of creation is mentioned. The context of all this in Isaiah is to show forth the certainty of God's great work of redemption and renewal. Let no one doubt it. For the Spirit of God is all-powerful. That Spirit is upon the Son, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me," the Lord Jesus said in Nazareth, quoting from Isaiah 61:1, and he added, "Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Promising

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to complete his work of the ages, to put that work into its final phase, and to have the Gospel of Christ – once revealed in Paradise – preached in its full riches now to all nations. Therefore we may see this hovering of the Spirit over the waters as being promising indeed. Why would the Spirit hover and why would he linger, if all that water was of no consequence? But as he hovers over it and looks into it, does the Spirit, who from eternity knows the mind of God, not see the great promise that lies in it, which God has attached to it?

God's world will come out of this water. In this world God's children will be placed. Out of this world God's people will be gathered. And the Holy Spirit from the very beginning takes an integral part in all this, as do the Father and the Son. Even when there is the fall into sin, the Spirit will

not leave the earth. He will work through the generations to bring forth the seed of the promise, the great Savior, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

There will be some dangerous times. When you read about the Spirit here hovering over the waters, you think of the great waters of the *flood*. The waters came back, up from below and down from above. But as the ark rode the crest of the soaring waves, the Holy Spirit watched carefully over those eight people, for to them God had given the promise of his covenant. That's why we can sing from Hymn 36:3, "Praise the Spirit who will never/ leave the church by blood once bought. Would he not securely keep/ those whom Christ bought as his sheep?" (*Book of Praise*).

The presence of the Holy Spirit is promising. As he then hovered over the waters, so he now regards the sea of nations. We never need to doubt whether he will bring the work of God to completion. He did this at creation. He did this in the conception and birth of Christ. He will do it in the gathering of the holy, catholic, church. He will do it in our lives. The Holy Spirit will impart unfailingly to believers and their seed whatever promises the Father has given in Christ to them. He will watch until the great day dawns and the Morning Star rises. He makes us faithful, for *the Spirit* and the bride say: come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:17). We could never say this on our own, but through the Spirit we learn to long for the coming of the Son and the dwelling with the Father.

Why do we not make this the basis of our lives? He searched the waters of the deep. Now he seeks the earth's remotest end. He also wants to search your heart, and lead you in the way everlasting. Open your life and heart to him. The Spirit's vision is far and wide, but also near and deep. He brings from the Father and through the Son immense comfort in all the trials and pains of life. He watches over God's work of creation, redemption, and perfection so that the great day may come when God is everything to everyone.