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The Spirit and the Lord Jesus

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said: This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.”

(MATTHEW 3:16, 17)

There is an important question which inevitably comes up when looking at the passage of Scripture which tells us about the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. I do not mean the question which John the Baptist himself asked Jesus. He said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Mat 3:14) It was difficult for John to accept that the Lord Jesus, who is without sin, needed to be baptized, that is, to be cleansed of sin. How can one be cleansed of what one does not have?

Our Lord’s answer is simple and straightforward, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Mat 3:15). Though Christ is without sin, and does not require the ceremony of baptism for himself, yet as our Mediator, he was “made...to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21). He was sent with a mission, for “the LORD has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.” (Is 53:6). For this reason, he had to be baptized.

The question that concerns us now is why the Lord Jesus, who is God of God, needs to receive the Holy Spirit, descending and lighting on him. Was the Lord Jesus not “conceived by the Holy Spirit” (cf. Mat 1:20). Did he not already before the occasion of his baptism have the Holy Spirit? Is this having of the Spirit not also a consequence of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? Was the Son ever without the Holy Spirit?

Is the Lord Jesus divine?

This passage appears to give ammunition to those who like to shoot holes in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Some say that Jesus is not divine, for he needs the special help of the Holy Spirit descending upon him, as happened later at Pentecost with the disciples (Acts 2). Without the support of the Spirit, Jesus is merely human, just as we are.

Why did our Lord, who is true God, require the Holy Spirit to descend upon him and empower him to fulfill his task? Could he not do his messianic work on his own steam? Or is the descending of the Spirit, as described here, to be regarded as a symbolic gesture, like the voice of the Father expressing love for his Son? In that case, this passage would tell us no more than that the Father, Son, and Spirit are on-line with one another, fully cooperating in the venture of our salvation. It is no wonder that this passage has become a classic proof-text for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

In dealing with this important matter, we learn to understand better the relation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This understanding, in turn, may help us better to see the relation between the Holy Spirit and *us* through our Lord Jesus Christ. We see here how the Holy Spirit visibly descends upon our Lord Jesus Christ to anoint him for the work of his public ministry. It is important to consider the moment of this anointing and the manner of this anointing.

Heaven opened

The exact moment of the descending of the Holy Spirit on our Lord is emphasized in this passage. In verse 16 we read, “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.” We might even translate: when Jesus was baptized, he *immediately* went up out of the water. Some explainers connect the word “immediately” with the next passage: immediately at that moment, heaven was opened. Whatever the exact translation may be, the idea is that Christ right after his baptism went out of the water and that right away, immediately, at that moment, heaven was opened.

The two events, the baptism and the opening of heaven, with all that follows, are therefore inseparably connected. The Lord God has waited for this precise moment to reveal the anointing of Christ with the Holy Spirit. Also, we understand, just as the baptism with water was a one-time event, so also the visible descending of the Spirit on Christ did not occur again.

I mention this because we do read in other places that the voice of the Father was heard again. When the Lord Jesus was on the mount of transfig-

uration, a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased. Listen to him!” (Mat 17:5). However, only Peter, James, and John were present to hear this voice.

Later, after Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when he is troubled and prays, “Father, glorify your name,” there is again a voice from heaven, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.” (John 12:28). Those who are standing around knew that something special had occurred, but they could not understand what was said. They thought it was either thunder or the voice of an angel.

A visible descending?

In both these instances the understanding of what the voice says, is limited. The text here in Matthew 3 does not tell us how many people were present at the baptism of Jesus. So we are not sure whether, besides John the Baptist any, few, or many saw that “heaven was opened.” We also do not know how many people actually saw the appearing of a figure as a dove over Jesus, and heard a voice from heaven.

We know from verse 5 that people out of the whole region flocked to John the Baptist at the river Jordan. John also had a number of disciples who were involved in his work. They were with John constantly and possibly assisted him in baptizing the multitudes who came. It stands to reason, then, that some of these people saw and heard what John did see and hear: heaven opened, a dove descending, and a voice speaking.

Matthew twice even uses a word that has for some unclear reason been left out in the NIV translation, even without footnotes. It is the word “see” or “behold.” The RSV properly has, “And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and *behold*, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him; and *lo*, a voice came from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” This implies clearly that there is something to be seen and heard. There was a visible manifestation and an audible declaration.

Official presentation

Now basically it is not of decisive importance for the truth of what is recorded whether only John the Baptist (and Jesus) or also others saw and heard these things. John the Baptist later testifies about what he *himself* clearly saw and heard, and does not mention others (John 1:32-34). But it

is important for us to note that what was seen and heard functioned as a visible and audible *sign from above* that Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Christ of God, a sign that was clearly observed by John the Baptist, the one, trustworthy witness who really counts. It was a sign from above precisely at that specific moment.

For the baptism of our Lord Jesus is his official and legitimate presentation to Israel as the Messiah of God. Coming forward to be baptized is a public act of commitment to God to place himself under the law of righteousness. Jesus will be “cleansed” and set aside for service to the very same kingdom which he embodies and secures. The great King comes as a humble servant to be baptized. But his identification and authentication are not made lesser by it: *immediately* thereafter heaven is opened, a dove descends, and a voice is heard from above, and Matthew presents this clearly as a divine token, a very important sign, and undisputable proof: behold, look!

When the Lord Jesus comes out of the water and proceeds to the shore, it says, heaven was *opened*. The verb is a very intensive verb, and some translate: heaven was rent asunder or torn open, not for a long vision, but for a brief interlude. When the great Son of God thus presents himself for his public ministry on earth, heaven cannot remain uninvolved and aloof. When the Son comes to his point of appearing to Israel, the Father and the Spirit cannot remain hidden, for they, too, are fully *involved* in the one work of salvation. It is the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by which we are saved.

We may speak (e.g. in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 8) about God the Son and our *redemption*, and he is indeed our one Redeemer, but his work is not loose from the love of Father and without the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Heaven, as it were, breaks open, and the glory of the Triune God is manifest, Father, Son, and Spirit.

We should not here isolate the Spirit from the Father, but see the application of the Spirit as connected to the proclamation of the Father and the dedication of the Son. The descending of the Spirit upon Jesus at this precise moment means that he who was ordained by the Father to be our only Savior, now is anointed by the Holy Spirit to function fully as our perfect Savior. Ordination – official appointment – and anointing – or complete equipping – always go together, for God equips whomever he appoints. This is how it has always been, and so it is especially now.

Did the Lord need this sign?

Did Jesus, then, *need* to be equipped? Did he miss something before this anointing? Was he unsure of himself? This cannot be the case. There was nothing lacking that needed to be given. There were no uncertainties that needed to be taken away. Such conclusions are offensive to God. But do remember that the Lord came into the weakness of human flesh, in the form of a servant, one who came to humble and even empty himself. This public presentation means: in Jesus the Triune God officially manifests himself for our salvation. The sign of this is baptism. Baptism points to the anointing with the Spirit. For in this work, the Lord indeed will be guided by the Spirit of God, just as he will be surrounded by the love of the Father, so that *we* may surely know that our entire salvation rests in him alone.

We must clearly understand that it was not first for Christ's sake that these things happened. That's often the direction explainers take. The Lord's humanity is stressed. At this point, they say, Jesus needs reassurance and he also gets it in these signs. Indeed, he will have been greatly encouraged by them. As our Mediator, come into the flesh, he will require encouragement and support from above. He knew this himself, for he relentlessly searched out the Father in prayer. But the dove and the voice, the signs, are first meant for John the Baptist, for *us*, for the holy, Catholic Church, so that we may all know how Jesus was called, ordained and anointed to perform his task as the great Shepherd and Lord of the flock.

The point is not whether Jesus ever doubted himself, for he knew exactly who he was and what he had to do; the point is that we will never doubt him or disbelieve what he did and still does for us. At the very moment he presented himself to enter into his public ministry, these signs happened to confirm that he is indeed the Anointed One, and may we then doubt him, now that he has been glorified and is seated at the Father's right hand?

Fatherly Pride

The Father only spoke, but this was a wonderful and emphatic endorsement of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It is the official presentation of Jesus as the Son of God. It is as if the pride of Fatherhood shines through: this is my Son! About the Son, then, two things are said. The first is, "whom I love." It is no light matter for the Father to give his only-begotten Son into the flesh of man, so that in the flesh sin might be judged. The love between Father and Son is an eternal, always proceeding, and perfect love.

The Father also says: with him I am well pleased. It can happen that a father has reasons to be displeased with his children, with his son. Sometimes a father can be deeply disappointed with the views and actions of his son. In how many parental hearts is there not a constant, nagging pain over the disobedience of a son or daughter? Sometimes the situation is so extreme that a father needs to disown his son to preserve his own name and sanity. You wonder how we ever come that far sometimes in our families. But it happens: this is my son, with whom I am deeply displeased.

It could even be that some of the people who later see Jesus in his misery on the cross think: surely this man is accursed by God. How can God ever be well pleased in such a man who hangs naked on the cross as a criminal? What great crime did this son commit that he is thus left to die by his own Father? Some say mockingly: he trusted in God, let us see if God will save him (cf. Luke 23:35).

But there is no reason whatsoever for the Father in heaven ever to be displeased with this Son. That needs to be said at his baptism. I find no wrong in him. I am pleased with him. This Son has always done exactly what the Father has required, not out of mere duty, but in true love. Who would not deeply love such a Son?

Many explainers see this verse not so much as a personal endorsement of Jesus as the beloved Son, but as a fulfillment of Psalm 2: he said to me, you are my Son, today I have become your Father! The Son is then the One who shall in the Father's Name destroy all the enemies of the kingdom of heaven. Through this Son the glory of God will forever be established. In Psalm 2 the Son is presented almost in militant terms: kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you are destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. This element of Psalm 2 is certainly present, but it really comes to the fore later. I think of Acts 4, where the congregation at Jerusalem appeals to Psalm 2 when persecution begins against the church of the risen and ascended Christ.

In the form of a dove

What we focus on now is that John saw the Holy Spirit “descending like a dove upon and lighting on him.” Descending *like* a dove indicates that there was not really a dove, but only the form or shape of a dove. The verb lighting simply means that this form came down over the Lord and disappeared into him, or was taken up by him. I’ll come back to that in a moment.

It is clear from the text that this form of a dove is, in truth, as John sees and Matthew writes, the Spirit of God. The question is: why does the Spirit of God manifest himself in this form? When the Holy Spirit was first mentioned in Genesis 1, it was said: the Spirit of God was “hovering” over the waters. This manner of speaking reminds us of a bird, but why, then, a dove? Are not other birds (e.g. eagles) more impressive or suitable?

The dove functions as a symbol of hope and peace. This becomes clear, for example, when Noah lets out a dove from the ark to determine how far the waters of the flood have receded (Gen 8:8). The dove is also a bird that comes “home” again. It may fly out far and wide, but always returns from where it came. Yet a dove is a very fragile bird; in various places in Scripture we read how a dove moans and mourns.

Here the element of peace is also important. Jesus later said: be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Mat 10:16). Innocence is meant here as being without any guile or deceit. So a dove also still today is a fragile but enduring symbol of hope, life, freedom, innocence, and of peace.

Why does the Holy Spirit use this form to light upon the Lord? This has something to do with the different characters of Christ’s and John’s ministry. Remember that John was the Elijah, who came to announce *judgment*. John proclaimed that the axe was already at the root of the tree (Mat 3:10). John functions more as a hawk, not a dove. John spoke about the winnowing fork and the threshing floor, where the wheat is gathered into the barn, but the chaff is burned with unquenchable fire (Mat 3:12). And that is an element which we will also see on the great day of judgment. John’s words will never go away, but will all be fulfilled. In the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, however, there is emphasis on peace, life, hope, and grace.

Ministry of love

The manner of this anointing by the Spirit, “in the form of a dove,” tells us that the ministry of our Lord will be one of great love that seeks peace. In this way the Spirit will guide him, and he will fulfill the prophets: the people living in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus will say, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, now is the time of “the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:19; cf. Is 42).

Therefore we may say that the manner of Christ’s anointing also indicates the style of his earthly ministry. He came to show forth God’s love, to make peace by the shedding of his blood, and to grant us hope for the future. The Lord Jesus went about preaching the love of God for sinners, healing the

sick, and driving out demons. It was in sharp contrast with what John actually expected from him, and it is not without reason that John later, when he is in prison, asks Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mat 11:2, 3) Then John has to learn not to be offended at Christ, for the Lord works according to the Scriptures. John the Baptist has to go back to the Bible.

The form of a dove qualifies what kind of a ministry Christ will publicly serve in the midst of Israel. He still does so today: showing forth God's love and working love for God, calling us to peace and hope in him, and bringing us to new life that reflects peace and hope also for our neighbor.

We sometimes speak about doves and hawks as peacemakers and warriors. The warrior image is very strong in our society. The peacemaker image has been much distorted. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called "sons of God" (Mat 5:9).

The measure of Christ's anointing

We noted earlier that this form of a dove comes down and then *lights* on Jesus. How are we to understand this? Lighting upon someone means gently setting down on him. The Holy Spirit did not come with a loud crash or a heavy thud. There was no sound as of a rushing wind, and no tongues of fire were seen, as later at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2). There was just a form as of a dove descending and lighting upon him, gently, carefully.

This lighting means that the Holy Spirit did not actually land on Jesus' head, or hover above his head, but came over him. The figure of the dove comes over Jesus and completely disappears into him, and that means then that the Spirit fills him fully from top to bottom. Therefore we may speak here about the *measure* of this anointing.

It is a full measure. In this connection we may look at an intriguing passage in John 3:34, where specifically John the Baptist, testifying about Jesus, makes an important point about the relation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, "For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit *without limit*." I emphasize here the words *without limit*.

The Spirit came over Christ in a full and complete measure, so that Christ was filled with the Holy Spirit. For the great work of redemption, Christ needed and received as our Savior and Mediator the full measure of the Spirit.

Once Elisha asked from Elijah a *double portion* of Elijah's Spirit. Elijah answered: this is difficult thing, I cannot guarantee it (2 Kgs 2:9, 10). But here Jesus Christ receives the full measure of the Spirit, without limit so that he might also in every way be our complete Redeemer.

When the Spirit comes upon our Lord Jesus Christ after his baptism, it is then without limit so that Christ may draw up out of the Holy Spirit whatever is needed for the great work of redemption. Ever wonder how he could do what he did? Why demons shuddered before him? Because he received the anointing that was without limit to do all that was required for our salvation.

Utterly forsaken

God always gives in full measure. The opposite is that when God withdraws his Spirit, he does so also completely: my God, my God, why have you *forsaken* me? (Mat 27:46) Here lies the heart of Christ's redemptive work. He did it all by the power and will of the Spirit. But when the Spirit departed from him, he stood firm because of his perfect love and divine nature.

It is then no wonder that the risen Lord Jesus Christ can say: I will *send* the Spirit (John 15:26). I will give you the anointing with the Holy Spirit. He who has the fullness of the Spirit, can also fill us with his Spirit and does fill us with the rich blessing of his Spirit. He comes, like the wind blows, in sovereign power and pleasure. He anoints one and all with holy fire. It has been Pentecost. What the Father gives to Christ, Christ now gives to us. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace, and the Holy Spirit in great measure (cf. John 1:16).

What a strong bond exists between the Father and the Son. What a deep and intense relationship exists between Jesus and the Spirit. All this is now applied to us by the Gospel, and to this we must respond. We may by faith and through prayer in Christ tap into this great love and this rich fellowship every day again.

Here I am

This passage about Christ's anointing with the Spirit, by which he commences his public ministry, leads us today to understand our calling as children of God in a wicked world. Can the Father say of us: behold, my children, in whom I am well-pleased? Would God have any reason to be displeased with us? Do we pray to God for his grace and Spirit every day that we might make progress in the battle against sin?

Christ stepped forward, and said: here I am, let us begin. Now God asks us: where are you? If we are in Christ, we, too, will step forward and say: here I am, to do your will, O God, living from your grace, and walking by your Spirit in accordance with your word.

Here I am.