

John 14:15-21,25-27

May 7, 2023

Ephesians 5:15-21

This We Believe – Part III

I believe in the Holy Spirit

Of His own teaching Jesus said: *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand, Matt. 7:24-29.*

Friends, we are living in those times now ... the rain and the wind of post-modern storms are slashing at the house of the Lord ... His church. Each one of us, and all of us together, must stand on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, lest we be swept away by the flood of false teachings that assail us from every direction. We must know what it means to be a Christian, holding steadfastly to the truth that God has revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Apostles Creed, that enduring statement of faith, has summarized the beliefs of Christians for nearly two thousand years, across all cultural and language boundaries. When people ask you (or us) what it is you believe as a Christian, you can confidently say what Christians around the globe have said for two millennia.

Two weeks ago, I began this series of messages by considering what we mean when we repeat the first lines of the Creed: *I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.* Then last week we reviewed what we mean when we say: *And in Jesus Christ, His only son...*

Today let's consider what it is we mean when we say, *I believe in the Holy Spirit...* God the Father: we know about Him. God the Son: We know Him even better. But the Holy Spirit? He's God as we hardly know Him.

Acts 19 records the story of Paul's first visit to Ephesus where he met some disciples of John the Baptist. When Paul asked if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they replied with total honesty, *No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit, Acts 19:2.* Many contemporary Christians could say virtually the same thing.

"Is the Holy Spirit a ghost?" a child once asked the pastor. "Absolutely not!" replied the pastor, "The Holy Spirit is God!" "But what's the difference?" continued the child.

"Well," pondered the pastor, "God's Spirit is holy – you know – special. It's not a ghost like in the cartoons!"

"Well," responded the child, "how come you sometimes call the Holy Spirit the Holy Ghost?"

“Look, when you get older, I will explain it to you,” replied the frustrated pastor. Yet, too often when the child gets older, there’s still no explanation forthcoming. But that shouldn’t be the case, especially for Methodists. Look at the symbol of our church: a cross and a flame. You all know the cross represents Jesus’ atoning death that paid the price of our sins. The flame? That’s a symbol of the Holy Spirit who gives life to the church – once a much more powerful force in Methodism than it seems today.

Early Church

In the first centuries of Christianity, the Holy Spirit was given very little attention in official writings – probably because He was just experienced and not debated by early believers. When the Council of Nicea met in A. D. 325 they wrote a Creed (Nicene), but it had only one sentence about the Holy Spirit “And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit” – just like in the Apostles Creed. The creed has many sentences about Jesus because that was important to define. Eventually, though, more questions about the Holy Spirit arose. Later, A.D. 381, 150 church leaders from around the world met in Constantinople and added the following to the Nicene Creed: *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshiped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets.*

Later, the Western church added, “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” All of which is to say Christians recognized the Holy Spirit is a manifestation of God and fully God and one with the Father and the Son. Hence the third person of the Holy Trinity.

Misunderstandings of the Holy Spirit

Why this need to define the Holy Spirit in the creeds? There came a time when misunderstandings and misuse arose. Some claimed the Holy Spirit was really the human spirit. Others said the Holy Spirit was less than God. Some early believers only emphasized the Spirit, and ignored the Father and the Son, like Simon the magician – Acts 8:9-24. This misinterpretation of the Christian faith led to some wild movements. In the latter half of the second century, a priest of an emotional pagan religion converted to Christianity – Montanus. Accounts indicate that he taught a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit and that he was the Holy Spirit’s prophet. His followers regarded themselves as the real “Spirit-filled” church. Sound familiar? (Some church leaders, back then, stated that one sign of a false prophet was that he/she spoke in states of ecstasy.)

The history of the Church shows that from time to time there have been perversions of understanding the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The perversion always has to do with using the Spirit for one’s own gain – like Simon the magician (Acts 8). The Holy Spirit is not simply for us. The Holy Spirit is from God so that we can be for God. The Spirit’s work and purpose is the fulfillment of God’s will and not ours, bringing in God’s kingdom not ours, making

God's name holy and not ours. The Church has always understood that the Spirit of God, like the Son of God, is equal with God the Father. All three in fellowship together make up the total action of God toward humanity.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible shows that the Spirit was active at the beginning – Genesis 1:2, in Creation – and will be at the end – Rev. 22:17, in a New Creation. Now, John's Gospel states that *... the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified*, John 7:39. But earlier it said that John the Baptist *... saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him*, John 1:32. What's going on? Wasn't God's Spirit active in the Old Testament? Was Pentecost necessary? How is the Spirit related to Christ?

God's will for all people is revealed in Jesus. God's will for all people is made real through the work of the Holy Spirit. That's why the Gospel shows the Holy Spirit first coming on Jesus in order to then come to all believers.

The Holy Spirit is an inspiration in the Old Testament. The Spirit is the power, love, and grace by which God acts. [This is evident in the creation (Gen. 1:2), in maintaining life (Job 33:4; Isaiah 42:5), in leadership (Gen. 41:38; Judges 3:10), in giving knowledge (Prov. 1:23; Isaiah 11:2), and in prophetic activity (Isaiah 61:1; Micah 3:8). The Spirit maintains God's plan for Israel (Isaiah 11:10; Rom. 15:12)] yet the plan has been fulfilled in Jesus.]

The Holy Spirit is for all believers in the New Testament. God's promise that, at the dawn of the new age, the Spirit will be given to all people - *And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions*, Joel 2:28 - has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is the dawn of the new age. The plan of salvation is complete.

The Importance of the Holy Spirit Today

1. Our Link to Christ

Most people think of the Spirit as kind of like gas filling up a tank. But that's not a good image. Think about a tree and its leaves. The leaves grow out of the tree and need the constant nourishment that comes to them through the trunk and branches. That's just the way Jesus illustrated it: *I am the vine; you are the branches*, John 15:5. A branch cut off from the vine cannot live, let alone bear fruit.

The Holy Spirit is our direct link to the living Christ. He's the continuing presence of Jesus and the truth of God. *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth*, John 16:13. The Holy Spirit guides the church into the truth known in Jesus, recorded in Scripture. *...the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*, John 14:26. The Holy Spirit guards

us against false teaching. In a troubled world the Spirit unites us with Christ and is our source of power and courage to live or die for the truth of God.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God, Romans 8:26-27.

Today more than ever, we need to implore the Holy Spirit to intercede for Christians. In numerous countries, Christians face persecution, even death. Right here in the U.S. Christians face an onslaught of non-Christian worldviews and false-teaching within churches.

2. Our Assurance from God

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed." He wrote in his journal "and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Though a believer in his mind, Wesley had long struggled to find some assurance of what he thought was true. Suddenly, on that evening at a Bible study, he discovered that it is not based on emotions – "I feel God" - but upon God Himself. Too often Methodists have focused on that phrase "I felt my heart strangely warmed" and think it's about emotions and it makes us look inward, to ourselves. But if we base our assurance in our feelings, we will never be the church of Christ proclaiming the gospel. Assurance of God's forgiveness is not in you or me, but in God's action in Christ. Assurance is not supposed to make us feel good, but to give us confidence. The Holy Spirit is our witness. Christ is the objective truth of God; the Spirit is the subjective truth of God.

Like Paul on the road to Damascus, Wesley's experience was God centered and not human centered. That's what gave Wesley the power, courage, and energy to tell everyone who would listen that God has already forgiven your sins.

3. Our Openness to God

The work of the Holy Spirit really begins with your salvation. Our state of sinfulness is so deep, that without the help of the Holy Spirit we cannot find the motivation to even turn to God. We're like the man who wanted his son healed and said to Jesus *If you can do anything... 'If you can?'*" said Jesus. *'Everything is possible for him who believes'* Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, *'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'* Mark 9:23-24. The Spirit opens us to God.

The fact that we believe, is the work of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3) and that's why we pray for nonbelievers to come to faith in Christ. The central issue is our cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit doesn't mean I have more of the Spirit, it means the Spirit has more of me.

It doesn't happen all at once, but as you continually choose to live under His influence.

Example: *Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, Ephesians 5:18.* It's about influence or control and the behavior that results. A person under the influence of wine may say or do things he would not ordinarily do. Emotions may be out of control. Mental processes will be affected and decision-making ability can be radically altered—almost always with a negative result.

The filling of the Holy Spirit produces a very different behavior. In Ephesians 5:15-21 Paul mentions a number of practical things related to the filling of the Spirit, such as: wisdom for living in this evil age (vv. 15-16); understanding of God's will (v. 17); a joyful heart filled with singing to the Lord (v. 19); a heart filled with thanksgiving (v. 20); an attitude of mutual submission (v. 21). Think of the fruit of the Spirit stated in Gal. 5:22.¹ Only a heart touched by the Holy Spirit can live like Christ and maintain such an attitude toward God and others in His family.

And another thing: God's Spirit is what transforms the church from a social club or a religious gathering into a living body of Christ. We need the filling of the Spirit for the reformation and revival of local churches everywhere. Which brings us to ...

4. The Holy Spirit is the power of God in the church

Just as He had promised (John 14-16), after His resurrection Christ released the power of the Holy Spirit to raise the church, the body of Christ. According to the Bible it occurs like this: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...* Acts 2:1-21. Peter said to people, *'Repent and be baptized ... And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'* Acts 2:38.

The Spirit gives gifts for building up the church. *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, 1 Pet. 4:10 (1 Cor. 12:4-7).*

Our Greatest Need

The great 19th century preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, said, "The grand thing the church wants in this time is God's Holy Spirit." The filling of the Spirit is not primarily an emotional experience, and it's certainly not reserved for a few super-Christians. It's nothing more than the normal Christian life when the Holy Spirit is in control.

God is ready, willing and able to fill you right now. He's more willing to fill you than you are to be filled. We do not have to beg God to do what He has already promised to do. Rather, He is begging us to make the way clear so He can do what He promised to do! You must be connected to be filled.

Imagine trying to fill up a jar that is already full of something else. You can't fill what is already full. Or imagine an empty jar with the lid screwed on tight. You can't fill that jar either. Some Christians are so full of themselves, or the cares of the world, they have no room for the Holy Spirit. Some Christians have simply closed their heart to the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Spirit who leads believers to salvation, who equips believers to serve the church, who communicates assurance to all Christ's followers, and who continually regenerates the church. Most importantly of all, the Spirit links us to the living and ascended Christ. *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth, John 16:13*

We believe in the Holy Spirit

Source: Norman P. Madsen, *This We Believe, The Articles Of Religion And The Confession Of Faith Of The United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: Graded Press, 1987) 33-39.

Ted. A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999.

J.N.D. Kelly *Early Christian Doctrines (revised edition)*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1978.

¹ Further examples from Ephesians 5:18 - It is in the present tense meaning continual action. We could legitimately translate this verse: *Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit*. It's not a one-time event. We need to be filled again and again and that's the normal way of life for the Christian.

It is in the passive voice. Commands can be either active or passive. We're used to active commands: "Fill that hole with dirt." But Ephesians 5:18 is a passive command. He doesn't say, "Fill yourself with the Spirit" but rather "Be filled with the Spirit." To "be filled" means that the filling of the Spirit is a work of God, not us. The Holy Spirit is ready and willing to fill us at any moment, but we must make ourselves available to him. When your need to be filled with the Spirit becomes your great desire, you will be filled, over and over again. Every time.

It is a plural command. God intends—and desires—that all His children be filled with the Holy Spirit. It's quite personal, but not strictly individual. The church as a church is to be filled also. Two "one another" verses immediately follow: *Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual song, (v. 19). Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, (v. 21)].*