

# *The Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church . . .*

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

March 21, 2010

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## "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, . . ."

*Isaiah 63:9-14 (TNIV, NRSV)*

- <sup>9</sup>It was no messenger or angel,  
But his [God's] presence that saved them.  
In his love and mercy he redeemed them;  
he lifted them up and carried them  
all the days of old.
- <sup>10</sup>Yet they rebelled  
and grieved his Holy Spirit.  
So he turned and became their enemy  
and he himself fought against them.
- <sup>11</sup>Then his people recalled the days of old,  
the days of Moses and his people—  
where is he who brought them through the sea,  
with the shepherd of his flock?  
Where is he who set  
his Holy Spirit among them,
- <sup>12</sup>who sent his glorious arm of power  
to be at Moses' right hand,  
who divided the waters before them,  
to gain for himself everlasting renown,
- <sup>13</sup>who led them through the depths?  
Like a horse in open country,  
they did not stumble;
- <sup>14</sup>like cattle that go down to the plain,  
they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord.  
This is how you guided your people  
to make for yourself a glorious name.

*John 16:7-14 (NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup>Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup> And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup> about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup> about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

<sup>12</sup> "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

*Today, we come to the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, and certainly the least understood. Yet, it is the Spirit who is God-Present with us every day and it is the Spirit who has formed us into this holy and universal fellowship of believers.*

The Apostles' Creed is about as simple and straightforward a statement of essential Christian beliefs as there is. Nonetheless, there are many Christians who don't really understand all of what they are affirming, why they are doing so, and what difference it makes. When we come to the Holy Spirit, there is a lot of misunderstanding and confusion that needs to be swept away. So here's a few Holy Spirit FAQ'S:



The Dove

One of the symbols in St. Andrew's Rose Window is that of a dove. All four Gospel writers tell us that at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, God's Spirit descended like a dove upon him. Luke put it this way, ". . . and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22).

Though doves appear in the Old Testament, never before in Jewish traditions had a dove been used to represent God's Spirit. The descent of God's Holy Spirit upon Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, marks out Jesus as God's "beloved Son" and prepares us for the uniqueness of Jesus and his mission. Later, returning to his hometown, Jesus would rise in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me."

## The Holy Spirit: Just the FAQ's

### Exactly what is the Holy Spirit?

Yikes! First, the Holy Spirit is not a “what,” but a “who.” You too are not a “what” but a “who,” a person. The Holy Spirit is a person. Look, for example, at the above passage from John 16. I’ve underlined all the personal pronouns that refer to the Holy Spirit, aka the Advocate.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit is no less a person than you and I are persons.

In the Bible, the Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens*, and is *lied to*. These are not verbs we apply to chairs or to electricity. The Holy Spirit is not akin to the Force of Star Wars; the Spirit is a person, a Holy Who! Don’t be misled by the fact that the Bible uses images like doves, wind, or fire in reference to the Spirit. Such images illustrate something about the Spirit to us, but that is all. After all, Scripture refers to God as a “rock” and Jesus as a “door.”

### But is the Spirit more like an angel or more like God?

The Holy Spirit is not an angel. Angels are created beings that are neither human nor divine. In Scripture, God uses angels as his messengers. Like you and me, angels are persons, though not divine.

And the Spirit is not merely “like God,” the Holy Spirit *is* God, fully and completely, though not all of God. The Spirit is God in exactly the same manner as Jesus is God and the Father is God. These persons, the three “who’s” of the Trinity, comprise the one God, who is not divisible, for God is one.<sup>2</sup>

### Does the Holy Spirit have a name?

The name most commonly used by the New Testament writers is “the Holy Spirit.” However, the Holy Spirit is also called “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of the Lord,” “the Spirit of Christ,” “the *Paraclete*,” “the Spirit of Jesus,” and “the Spirit of his Son.”<sup>3</sup>

I suppose it would be easier to think of the Spirit as a person if the Spirit were named Tom or Sally. But those are names given by humans to other humans. The Spirit is a person, but not a human person. Don’t let the seemingly impersonal nature of the word “spirit” mislead you. The Holy Spirit of God is very personal indeed.

### What does the Spirit do?

Gordon Fee, the most prominent Pentecostal NT scholar, came up with just the right phrase to describe the Spirit’s work. The Spirit is the “empowering presence of God.” For example, look at the above passage from Isaiah. I’ve underlined a few key phrases that directly relate the presence of God to the Spirit of God.

Jesus does the same thing. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples that he was leaving, but it was ok and even better, because God would send his Holy Spirit to be with them. God would still be with them, but it would be his Spirit, not Jesus. Jesus would still be with them, but it would be his Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Don’t get too caught up in the fact that these are all masculine pronouns. In English, we only have “he” and “she” to choose from when it comes to singular personal pronouns. Using “it” is a far worse choice, for though it avoids the gender issues, it relegates the Spirit to being an impersonal thing.

<sup>2</sup>If you think you’ve figured out how three can be one, without sacrificing something of their diversity or something of their unity, I can assure you that you are wrong – at least it is still a mystery of God after these past 2,000 years.

<sup>3</sup>This Greek word is variously translated as Comforter, Advocate, Helper, and Counselor. It is a name used often by Jesus in his last talk with his disciples. Jesus was leaving but God was sending another to be with them – the Spirit, aka the Paraclete.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, it takes a somewhat expansive and flexible to accommodate all things Trinitarian! My advice is to pay careful attention to the words of Scripture and let them guide you.

The Spirit is God with us every day. It is the Spirit who empowers and strengthens us. It is the Spirit who comforts us. It is the Spirit who lifts up to the Father the prayers that we can't even articulate ourselves. If you believe that God is helping you through a crisis, it is the Spirit who is the helper. It is the Spirit who opens people's hearts so they can hear the Good News. It is the Spirit who is God-doing with us and for us every day.

It is the Holy Spirit who gathers us together for worship. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who has formed us into the fellowship that we call the Church,<sup>5</sup> the holy catholic church. And it is the Spirit who sustains us in this community of believers.

#### *The holy, catholic church*

Ok . . . are we affirming somehow that we are covert Roman Catholics? No. The word "catholic" simply means "universal." Thus, for example, the NT letters that aren't directed to any person or church in particular are sometimes referred to as the "catholic epistles" or "universal letters."

In this three word phrase, we are affirming that there is a Church, a universal community of believers, and that it is set apart for God, i.e., "holy." Though none of these affirmations are very controversial, it is worth exploring each of them.

#### The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
the third day he rose from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth at the right hand of God  
the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge  
the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

#### *The universal<sup>6</sup> Church*

Simply put, the Church, aka the Body of Christ, is the worldwide community of believers, encompassing not only the living, but the believers who have died. We gather in churches to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given us by Christ. But the Church is not the buildings, it is the people. The Church includes believers of all the various denominations, large and small, including: United Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Lutheran, the Church of Christ, and so on.

There are many images of "the Church" in the Bible. It is we who are God's sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his

hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts it, a "chosen race, a holy nation . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

#### *A holy Church*

To say that God is "holy" is to say that God is, well, God. It is God who is inherently holy in himself; all other holiness is derived from God. Holiness is not an attribute of God. As Aulen put it, "holiness is the foundation on which the whole conception of God rests."

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<sup>5</sup>Writers often capitalize "Church" to help the reader differentiate between the universal body of Christ and the local churches, such as St. Andrew.

<sup>6</sup>In the UMC hymnal, the word "universal" is rightly footnoted as an acceptable substitute for "catholic."

Because God is just and good and righteous, because God is love, there is an ethical and moral dimension to holiness.

Just as we are called to be holy<sup>7</sup> individuals, encompassing purity, social justice, and morality, we, as the community of believers, are called to be holy. As the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* puts it:

It is also possible for communities to be holy. Thus Israel is called to be a holy people (Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:2), meaning on the one hand that they are to be different and distinct from other peoples on the basis of their relationship with Yahweh. But there is an added ethical dimension here: there is to be a moral difference in Israel. As a holy people, Israel is to reflect the moral holiness of Yahweh its God. Similarly, members of Paul's churches are called "the saints." They are to be holy in character, and their behavior is to reflect their inspiration by the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

*Why go to church?*

In closing, I want to address a question that is posed to me too often. It usually goes something like this: "I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can't I love Jesus just as well in my living room?" I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society.

But there is a reason that Bishop N. T. Wright writes, "it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself," for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God's creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." To put it another way, we can't expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover all that God hopes for us and provides to us. It is in the midst of other believers, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

## **Encounter**

Wednesday evenings at 6:45 In Wesley Hall

***The Cosmic, Crucified Christ: a study in Colossians***

**March 24: A Hunger for Holiness**

We toss the word "holy" around a lot. But what does a "holy life" look like? How could we possibly hope to live in such a way that anyone would call us holy?

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***Heresy: Why it Matters What Christians Believe***

**This week, Mar 21, in Scott's 11:00 class: *The Protestant Gnostics?***

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### **What's Coming in April?**

The 9:30 Teaching Service: *Resurrection Road*

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class: *A Case for the Crusades?*

Encounter (Wed evening): *The Story of the Exodus*

**Beginning Tues., April 4: A new weekly lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 12:00 – 1:30, Room 127**

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<sup>7</sup>Obviously, this is a holiness derived from God. Such holiness doesn't make us divine, but it does speak to making the image of God in us all shine as brilliantly as possible.

<sup>8</sup> Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed.) (390). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.