

‘We believe in the Holy Spirit’ Sunday 5 November 2023

Bible reading: John 14:15-27

Introduction

‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’ was the simple confession made by spiritually young disciples of Jesus in the second or third century AD. It was something undisputed in the wider community because the big debates in the first three hundred years of the history of the Christian Church centred on the most appropriate form of words to describe the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not simply a form of wording in one language, but how to explain this essential truth in the different languages used by the growing number of people groups that had groups of Christians living worshipping and witnessing within their communities in the Middle East, North Africa, in parts of Asia and increasingly across Europe. In the fourth century AD, after the public recognition of Christianity and the end of systematic state persecution of individual Christians for their faith in the Roman Empire, Christian leaders convened for Councils to spend significant amounts of time together working through their understanding of key doctrines. In 381 at the First Council of Constantinople, the published statement of faith called: ‘The Nicene Creed’ lengthened the article on the Holy Spirit to state the following declaration of belief: ‘We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.’

1. Our understanding of the Holy Spirit

In both Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*) the same word is used to cover the English words ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’. It is important to understand this point when we come to passages like John 3, where Jesus speaks about the work of the Holy Spirit with Nicodemus, the prominent Jewish theologian. ⁵*Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.’* ⁶*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.* ⁷*You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.”* ⁸*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’* (John 3:5-8) A Christian may sense that the Holy Spirit is at work in another person’s life, but we cannot see the Spirit at work, just as we can see the effects of the wind in nature, but cannot see the wind directly.

(a)**The life-giving Spirit** (Genesis 2:7) The creation of the first human being, Adam came about when God breathed into him the *breath of life*. This resulted in Adam becoming a *living being*. Genesis 2:7 states: *Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* We use this terminology to speak of people today. ‘X has ‘drawn his last breath’ means that they have died. More encouragingly, ‘X is still breathing’, i.e. this person is in better health than we might have expected! In the first instance, God gave life to Adam and Eve by breathing that life into them by His Spirit in a physical sense. The work of the Spirit in the Church age is to ‘breathe new spiritual life’ into a person when they come to faith in Christ. A new Christian is aware that in the past they were insensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in their lives. But something changed and they have become spiritually alive. In fact the Bible draws the most vivid of contrasts to explain how we come alive spiritually when we put our faith and trust in Jesus. In Ephesians 2:1-2,4-5: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and*

sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient... But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ **made us alive** with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions... We cannot give life to a dead person physically, nor can we give life to someone spiritually. It is only the Holy Spirit who can work in someone opening their minds and heart to see their need of Jesus and give them the desire to commit their lives to following Jesus. When Christians make the mistake of thinking that they can ‘convert’ someone by winning a verbal argument about the faith, for example, it will not go well. We have to pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in someone’s life so that when we share with them about the Lord that there is a receptivity and understanding of what we are saying. It is an incredibly thrilling time to see God’s transforming grace bringing a woman or man to put their trust in Jesus as their own Lord and Saviour. It is the life-giving Spirit who accomplishes this work. Our duty and calling is to pray for other people and to share our faith with them where this is appropriate and allow God the Holy Spirit to do His work of changing people from the inside out that results in a personal conversion to following Jesus. The God on whom we are totally dependent for physical life is equally the source of spiritual life and vitality through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

(b)**The powerful Spirit** Writing the first part of this message, a couple of weeks ago as the storm raged across the east coast of Scotland, the mighty wind was in evidence through my study window. Thankfully, it was less powerful than the bad storm of a couple of years earlier that damaged so many properties, especially blowing down fences and numerous trees. As Christians it is not what I do for God, but what He does through me, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. What is needed in the church of God in our land is not just godly zeal to share the good news of the gospel and to serve in a wide range of ministries in the church and wider community, but Holy Spirit empowered men and women who are walking by faith in the places God has put them day by day as His witnesses. We can easily burn out if we think that just doing more and taking longer with tasks is the answer. Yes there are times when hard work is required and dedication in His service is called for, but it will only be effective over the longer term if our service is carried out through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. This is why we must be a praying people individually and collectively. There are no short cuts to spiritual blessings from the Lord. Zechariah 4:6 reminds us: *So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty.* God has not changed over the centuries and His ways of working through His people have not changed. The application of His Word in each cultural context will vary as we seek to be salt and light in a challenging world, but the underlying principles are unchanged.

One of the most remarkable pictures of the work of the Spirit in the Bible comes in Ezekiel’s famous prophetic message concerning the ‘valley of dry bones’ in Ezekiel 37:1-14: *The hand of the Lord was on me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.*² *He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.*³ *He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘Sovereign Lord, You alone know.’*⁴ *Then He said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!”*⁵ *This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.*⁶ *I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*⁷ *So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.*⁸ *I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.*⁹ *Then He said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, “This is*

what the Sovereign Lord says: come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.¹¹ Then He said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ Then you, My people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.¹⁴ I will put My Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”’ In its immediate context, the reference was to the exiled scattered nation of Israel to declare that they would be reconstituted as a nation again in their own land. It looked impossible at the human level, but not with God. Likewise, there are people you and I may be praying for who for years to date may be showing no interest in the gospel of Jesus, but the equivalent of the same miracle of the gift of physical life can take place when the Holy Spirit awakens someone to grant them spiritual life and a relationship with the living God. Who will you commit to praying for to come to Christ or back to the Lord in the coming months? Who might you be praying for about inviting to a Christmas service this year?

2. The activity of the Holy Spirit

(a) **He convicts of sin** (John 16:7-11) *But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.⁸ When He comes, He will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:⁹ about sin, because people do not believe in Me;¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see Me no longer;¹¹ and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*

There are probably quite a few ways to bring to a quick end, a conversation with a work colleague or neighbour; one of these surely has to be bringing up the problem of sin and human sinfulness. Maybe you might get away with it in the context of the current wars in Ukraine or the Holy Land and you are speaking about the bad things taking place there. But it is not a cool topic to bring up our human sinfulness! If pushed to be honest, the vast majority of people would admit that in their thoughts, words and deeds, they have not lived up consistently to their own standards, let alone God’s, but this is about as far as things would normally get, unless the Holy Spirit was at work. Around about ten days ago someone claiming to be from a particular telecommunication company phoned me to express concern about my computer and internet connection. They promised that they could fix it if I let them have access to my computer. I politely thanked them for their concern for me but declined their generous offer. The conversation ended soon after! The reality was that I did not believe that my device was suffering from the alleged problem they had identified. Therefore, I was not motivated to accept the ‘solution’ offer to me on the phone that day. You and I cannot convert anyone. High pressure sales tactics might work to a degree in some forms of sales, but they are not ethically right, nor are they likely to succeed as we share our faith and the good news of the gospel with people who have not yet come to faith. This is where we need to pray for God the Holy Spirit to be at work. What does Jesus say here about the coming Advocate? *He will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:* We need God the Holy Spirit to open people’s hearts and minds to see that they are sinners in need of a Saviour. That their plight might be worse than they ever realised, but the One making the offer is a God who loves them more than they had ever dreamed was possible. A person will only want the good news of medicine for treatment to address a health need if

they have first become convinced that they have a health problem in the first place. Once they know there is a problem, only then will they seek a solution. You and I who are Christians thank God for the work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of our sin, because it led us to reach out to the Saviour of the World. However, when we first become Christians, that commitment is only the beginning on the journey of faith. The Holy Spirit continues to highlight areas of our lives we need to work on. This can be hard to deal with at times, but with His help we can grow to be more like Jesus. It is so easy to want to compare ourselves with others around us here on earth. But that is not the test God has for us. The challenge is this: can other people see something of Jesus' love and grace in the way I live? Just like seeing physical changes in the appearance of another person we haven't seen for a while; so the same can happen spiritually. It is exciting seeing someone growing in grace and maturing as a believer. This can be most encouraging.

How does a person sense their own sinfulness and their need of a Saviour? It is only the Holy Spirit who can do that opening a person's spiritual eyes to grasp how much they need to put their faith in Jesus. We cannot convert anyone, but we come in prayer to ask for the assistance of someone who can and does bring people to faith every day across the world. Are you and I praying persistently and expectantly for God to work in people's lives at this time. If we truly believe in the person and work of the Spirit we will be a praying people seeking His face and desiring others to come to know and love Him too.

(b) **He is the seal of our salvation** Does anyone here wear an engagement ring? Can you recall the time it was given to you? More importantly, can you remember why it was given to you? It is not the kind of gift you purchase to pass on to a random stranger! On the contrary, it is a token of love and a physical tangible expression of love and commitment from the person from whom you received that special gift. It is a promise for the future –for a shared future with that other person. Your acceptance of the ring was a statement that you shared that desire, symbolised through the giving and receiving of a ring. It is not the final statement or expression of love, but the promise of an anticipated future together. In Greek, the word used today for an 'engagement ring' is exactly the same word that the apostle Paul uses to describe the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers in Jesus in the Christian Church. Listen to what Paul says in these three examples of statements in his letters to the first Christian churches. The first statement was to the church in Ephesus in western Turkey. *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. **When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ 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). Then, twice in his second letter to the church in Corinth in Greece; in II Corinthians 1:20-22, he states: *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through Him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.²¹ Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us,²² **set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*** The second example in that letter is II Corinthians 5:4-5: *For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, **who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*** In other words, the gift of the Spirit is that tangible reminder of God's love to us and of His commitment to keep the promises He has made about our future relationship with Him. How special does that make you feel today when you grasp this truth?

(c) **He encourages believers to be fruitful Christians** John 14:25-27; 15:26;

John 14:25-27: ²⁵ *All this I have spoken while still with you.* ²⁶ *But the Advocate, 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.* ²⁷ *Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

John 15:26: ²⁶ *When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father – the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father – He will testify about me.*

Following Jesus is a call to be fruitful disciples of Jesus. It is about our character as well as our conduct. In John 14:26, Jesus told those first disciples that the Holy Spirit, ‘the one called to be alongside them’ (translated as Counsellor, Advocate, Encourager in different Bible translations) would be there to *teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*. In the gym I attend in my city, each time I am there, the majority of people are doing their own routines, but there are a minority who have a personal trainer with them to advise on how to do particular exercises or to encourage them that they can do it when they are tempted to quit when it is hard going. On a few of the noticeboards in the gym are testimonials from people about how a particular personal trainer has understood their needs and helped them to fulfil their personal fitness goals.

The Holy Spirit is there alongside followers of Jesus to encourage us when we are struggling to keep going so that we may live in a way pleasing to Him. He is there as our counsellor to give us wisdom when we don’t know what choices to make in our lives or in which direction to go. In the toughest of times when we are too weak to even pray for our needs, He speaks to the Father on our behalf. Listen to these amazing words from Romans 8:26-27: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.* ²⁷ *And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because **the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.*** How amazing is that! You are not on your own. The Holy Spirit is there with you each step of the way till we enter our eternal home. No wonder Jesus said to His followers: *Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (John 14:27). We have His peace in our hearts because He is with us through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. This is why we need not be fearful for the future. How are you viewing the future personally or for your family? How are you seeing the future in your country or for people in other places? We can only view the future in the way Jesus describes in His message at the Last Supper, if the Holy Spirit is with us to empower and equip and encourage us to be the person He has called us to be.

How might we know if we are being fruitful Christians? In his letter to the churches in southern Turkey (Galatia), Paul wrote these words: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* ²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* ²⁵ *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* (Galatians 5:23-25) It might be worth going through this list and asking ourselves from time to time – how am I getting on? Am I exhibiting these character qualities in my life or am I at least trying, for example, to be more loving...patient or gentle?

(d) **He gives gifts to believers** *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,* ⁵ *so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* ⁶ *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;* ⁷ *if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;* ⁸ *if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully* (Romans 12:4-8).

As the book of James declares: *faith without works is dead* (James 2:26). There are many spiritual gifts and several lists of them in the New Testament. These lists are illustrative of the range of gifts God gives to His children, not an exhaustive and complete listing. There are gifts of speaking in other languages, healing, or words of knowledge, for example, from the list in I Corinthians 12:7-11, but equally, listed in the Romans 12 list, are gifts of serving, encouraging, giving and showing mercy. Every child of God has gifts from God to use for Him in His service. God deals with us personally and gives us gifts in accordance with our needs. A flourishing church will have a variety of giftings in evidence in its various ministries and worship services. The challenge is always this: Am I open to use the gifts God has given to me in His service? I hope and pray each of us can say 'yes' to that, for Jesus' sake Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

Which character quality (fruit of the Spirit) do I need the Holy Spirit to help me develop more fully at this time?

How open am I to the Holy Spirit giving me gifts to use in His service?

Song for reflection: 'Holy Spirit you are welcome here'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNwnOfZ5N8A