

# Truths of the Reformation

## (9) The Holy Spirit

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This morning we will continue our series of sermons called “Truths of the Reformation.” We are doing this in connection with the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. As part of our marking of this event we have been reviewing some of the key truths from the Bible which were recovered and given prominence in the teaching of the Reformers and which are still important and precious to us today. This morning we will look at some of the biblical teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. This subject is not as well-known as, let’s say, justification by faith alone, however, Reformation scholars tell us that highlighting and expounding the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life was an important part of the contribution of the Reformers to our understanding of the Bible and of the gospel of salvation.

The Holy Spirit is important because he is God, one of the three persons of the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son tend to get more of our attention than does God the Spirit and to a certain extent that is because God the Father and God the Son are more prominent in the Bible. But the Holy Spirit belongs to the Godhead and he plays an important role in our salvation. There is no salvation without the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Loving God with all our hearts includes loving the Holy Spirit. Understanding and appreciating God’s work of saving us from our sins includes understanding and appreciating the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now it is interesting and significant that different ways of thinking about the work of the Holy Spirit result in very different understandings of the experience of the Christian life. Since the Holy Spirit works inside of us – in our hearts – how we understand his ministry results in different emphases when it comes to the experiential aspects of salvation and Christian living. One of the great emphases of the Reformation was that salvation includes a change of heart and that means that salvation is a

matter of the heart among other things. That emphasis comes from proper biblical attention given to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in salvation.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the focus was more on the Church and sacraments than on the Holy Spirit when it came to the application of salvation. Grace is dispensed through the sacraments and the sacraments are controlled by the Church. Here is how Sinclair Ferguson makes this point in an article called, "How the Reformers rediscovered the Holy Spirit and True Conversion." "Increasingly over the centuries, the Church had usurped the role of the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. The most obvious indication of that emerged in the way—indeed quasi-physical way—grace and salvation were mediated to the individual through the sacraments. In a sense, for all practical purposes, salvation was *locked up* in the sacraments—with the keys kept safely in the pockets of the priests and prelates of the Church."

The Reformers taught that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace: the Word of God, the sacraments and prayer, but also that he works sovereignly so that he is free to bless the means of grace as he pleases. In the Roman Catholic system, the sacraments were understood to work automatically. In the biblical and Reformed understanding, the Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the Word of God and the sacraments and prayer, but the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit is maintained. He works when he decides to work, and he is not automatically tied to the means of grace. So, for instance, he uses the Word to save people, but he does not automatically work every time the Word is preached. The result of this is that the Holy Spirit dispenses his grace as he wills, and he is not controlled by the Church as it administers the means of grace.

Well let's now consider some of the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit and how he works in his people. First, we will look at how the Holy Spirit gives the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God. This was a significant emphasis in the teaching of the Reformers. There are a pair of verses in 2 Corinthians 4 which give us the general idea. In 2 Corinthians 4:3, 4 we are taught that before God works in people's hearts they are blind to the glory of Christ in the gospel. "3And even if

our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." <sup>4</sup>In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." That is a very clear statement of the spiritual blindness of unsaved people. The god of this world is the devil and he blinds the minds of unbelievers. If they hear the gospel, they are blind to the glory of Jesus. This is the condition of every unsaved person. They can hear or read the Bible, but, for them, it is just another book. They do not see that God is speaking to them in it.

But notice what happens when God works in our hearts. 2 Corinthians 4:6, "<sup>6</sup>For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." When God is going to save someone, he shines in their hearts "to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." He takes away their blindness. They see what they could not see before. And they are convinced that the Bible is the Word of God. These verses do not mention the Holy Spirit specifically, but from others verses we learn that it is the task of the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of people so that they see the glory of Christ in the Bible.

In 1 Corinthians 2:9–10, Paul writes, "<sup>9</sup>But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him' — <sup>10</sup>these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit...."

So, we have the Bible which is the Word of God. But we are blind to the true nature of the Bible until the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see that the Bible is truly God's Word. According to the Bible, the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God comes from the Holy Spirit.

The Roman Catholic Church taught that we are to receive the Bible as God's Word because the Church tells us to. In Roman Catholic teaching, the confidence that the Bible is God's Word comes from the Church. But in biblical Reformed teaching, God himself convinces us that he is speaking in the Bible by the powerful inward working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Here is how John Calvin puts this point in his *Institutes*. "[T]he testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will

not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded" (1:7:4).

It is helpful to reflect on the difference between the Roman Church and the Bible on this matter. According to the Roman Catholic Church we are to accept the Bible as God's Word because that is what the Church teaches. This teaching addresses the mind, but not the heart. The biblical teaching takes into account the blindness that we all share by nature. 1 Corinthians 2:14, "<sup>14</sup>The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." That being the case we need more than the outward witness of the Church telling us that the Bible is God's Word. We need the inward change of heart that only the Holy Spirit can bring about.

This is an important point for apologetics, but also for our own confidence that the Bible is God's Word. This perspective of the inward witness of the Holy Spirit does not negate the importance of intellectual arguments that demonstrate that the Bible is the Word of God. Neither does it deny the importance of the teaching of the Church that the God speaks to us through the Scriptures. Paul was a missionary sent out by the Church and one of the things that he did in his evangelism was to seek to persuade people that his message was from God. After he spoke with a number of people in Athens we are told in Acts 17:4 that "some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas." The Lord does not by pass our minds and the usual way of persuasion when it comes to convincing us that he is speaking to us in his Word. But the Holy Spirit is involved with this and at the end of the day, the certainty that the Bible is God's Word comes from his work in our hearts.

What this means is that while accepting the Bible as God's Word is something that we do with our minds, it is more fundamentally something that the Holy Spirit works in us. And the result of the Holy Spirit's work is not simply an intellectual persuasion, but an inner spiritual perception of the glory of God as revealed in the Scriptures and

an inner spiritual perception of the authority of God speaking in the Scriptures. This idea is conveyed by a verse that I quoted already, 2 Corinthians 4:6 where Paul writes that God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” This is more than an intellectual persuasion that the Jesus revealed in the Scriptures is God. It is an inner spiritual perception of his glory. That is what the Holy Spirit gives when he works in us. We see the glory of God in the Scriptures. We hear the voice of Christ speaking to us in the Scriptures. Jesus speaks of this when he says in John 10:27, “My sheep hear by voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

There is something experiential about this. It is a matter of the heart. It is more than an intellectual persuasion, even though it is not less than that. It is seeing. It is perceiving. It is experiencing the reality of God in the Scriptures. This Reformed emphasis on the Holy Spirit is also an emphasis on Christian experience because the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that they become hearts of flesh rather than hearts of stone. The biblical teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation involves the inner experience of salvation. When the Holy Spirit works we experience things that we did not experience before. He changes our hearts and the result of that is things become real for us that did not seem very real before. And this begins with this inner certainty that when we read or hear the Bible, God himself is speaking to us. The Bible affects us in ways that it did not affect us before. When we reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation part of the subject- matter is Christian experience.

So, the Reformers recovered the biblical teaching of the Holy Spirit in connection with the certainty of believers that the Bible is the Word of God. And in the process, they critiqued the Roman Catholic teaching that we are to receive the Bible as God’s Word because of the authority of the Church.

But they also critiqued another error that arose among some on the Reformation side of things and that was the idea that the Holy Spirit speaks to Christians directly apart from the Scriptures.

Calvin spoke of fanatics who believed that the Holy Spirit spoke new revelation to them apart from the Bible. He wrote of “those who, having

forsaken Scripture, imagine some way or other of reaching God, ought to be thought of as not so much gripped by error as carried away with frenzy. For of late, certain giddy men have arisen who, with great haughtiness exalting the teaching office of the Spirit, despise all reading and laugh at the simplicity of those who, as they express it, still follow the dead and killing letter” (*Institutes* 1:9:1).

We still have such people with us today – people who believe that the Holy Spirit reveals new truths apart from the Scriptures. We must be careful not to paint all such people with the same brush. There are different emphases and nuances, and some are more problematic than others. However, Luther and Calvin, in particular, and those who followed them insisted on an inseparable relationship between Holy Spirit and the Bible. They understood the Scriptures to teach that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the Bible and that we are not to expect new revelation beyond what has already been given in the Bible.

Here is Calvin’s expression of this idea. “For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word” (*Institutes* 1:9:3).

Now the reason that any Christian believes that the Holy Spirit speaks to them directly, apart from the Word is that this happens in the Bible. And so, people say, if he did it then, why would he not do it now? But in evaluating this claim, we must take into account the fact that the Scriptures were not yet complete when the events recorded in the NT were taking place. Furthermore, Scripture itself teaches that once the Bible was complete, the Church should not expect any new revelation. For instance, in the latter books of the NT we do not read of new revelation being given, but rather that believers should preserve and pass on the revelation that was already given by the apostles. So, Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:13-14, “<sup>13</sup>Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>14</sup>By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” We also have Hebrews 1:1-2 which says,

"<sup>1</sup>Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." These verses speak of the revelation by the Son as the ultimate revelation of God and the implication is that we are not to expect anything further. Jesus spoke to us himself, but also through his appointed agents, the apostles, and he has given us all that we need to know.

It is important that we understand the close relationship between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has given us the Word in the first place and then the Holy Spirit works in conjunction with the Word to convert and lead his people. The Reformers, like Luther and Calvin, saw from the Scriptures that they are the Word of God and that the Holy Spirit speaks through that Word. They also saw how much damage was done when Church leaders and regular Church members believe that they are getting messages directly from the Holy Spirit outside of the Bible. You end up with people saying all kinds of strange things that supposedly come with divine authority.

Jude wrote of "the faith that was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). As far as infallible revelation from God is concerned, we have the Scriptures. And the Reformers and the Reformed tradition following them have guided us well by teaching the close relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures.

Now our focus so far has been on the Holy Spirit as the one who gives us the confidence that the Bible is the Word of God. And we have looked briefly at the error of thinking that the Holy Spirit speaks apart from the Bible. We will now look at another facet of the work of the Holy Spirit and that is in bringing sinners from spiritual death to spiritual life.

This is related to what we have been thinking about so far, but I want us to think not only of coming to accept the Bible as the Word of God, but the renewal of our whole nature. The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who applies the salvation that Jesus accomplished to the hearts and lives of believers. John Calvin speaks of "the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits" (*Institutes* 3:1:1).

One of the ways that the Bible speaks of this is by teaching that the Holy Spirit gives new hearts to the people whom he is saving. We read of this in Ezekiel 36:26–27, "<sup>26</sup>And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup>And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." This is an OT prophecy that speaks of what God is going to do in the future. These words are fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. God promises to put his Spirit within his people and the result will be that the people will walk in God's statutes and will "be careful to obey" God's rules.

The NT then has lots to say about the Holy Spirit and his role in the salvation of his people. John the Baptist says that Jesus would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). That was initially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the risen Lord Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon his Church. Jesus taught Nicodemus that "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:6). Paul in Ephesians 3:16 prays for the Ephesians that they may "strengthened with power through [the Holy] Spirit in [their] inner being...." There are many passages that refer to the Holy Spirit as the one who changes people from enemies of God to friends of God.

This is a deep and radical change. It is described in many different ways. The Bible speaks of believers receiving the Spirit, or being baptized by the Spirit. It speaks of new birth by the Spirit or new hearts by the Spirit. Jesus dwells in us by his Spirit. We are made holy by the Spirit. Our inner being is strengthened by the Spirit. We are sanctified by the Spirit.

Now as I mentioned in connection with the Holy Spirit assuring us that the Bible is the Word of God, also here the work of the Holy Spirit results in inner heart experience. The Holy Spirit changes our hearts and the result of that is a very different experience of the world. We love what we used to hate and hate what we used to love. The Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that we come to hate sin and love God and his law. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and our need of salvation. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost many people responded to Peter's preaching by asking what they had to do to be saved. In Romans 14:17, Paul writes that "the kingdom of God is not



a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” He says in Galatians 4:6 that “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” In Philippians 3 he writes that believers, “worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh....”

When we look at the role that the Holy Spirit plays in our salvation, it becomes clear that he changes us from the inside out and that affects our inner life in many different ways. It affects what we love and what we hate. It affects our sorrows and our joys. It affects our fears and our hopes. It affects our longings and our desires. This is why the Bible says that Christians are new creations. We are renewed in the inner man. The Holy Spirit changes us in very profound ways. And we experience those changes in our inner life.

All of this is the result of Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. In John 7:37-39 we read, "<sup>37</sup>On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup>Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” <sup>39</sup>Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

The great outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost could not happen until Jesus had been glorified. And Jesus was glorified in his death and resurrection and his ascension into heaven. From there he poured out his Spirit upon the Church. And on that great day Peter preached the glorious gospel, Acts 2:38, “Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

All of this is clearly in the Bible, but it had been obscured through the centuries in the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy Spirit was understood to be distributed by the Church through the sacraments. And the sacraments were understood to work in some kind of automatic way. Here is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says about the efficacy of baptism. “The different effects of Baptism are signified by the perceptible elements of the sacramental rite. Immersion in water symbolizes not only death and purification, but also regeneration and

renewal. Thus, the two principal effects are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit.”

By God’s grace to his Church, the Reformation focused on the Scriptures and part of what they recovered is the scriptural teaching about the Holy Spirit and the way in which he works in the hearts of people through the Word of God and the sacraments and through prayer. But they understood that this never works automatically. The Holy Spirit works where and when he wills. He works through the Word and through the sacraments and through prayer, but never automatically. And always in connection with faith.

The result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is heart religion – loving God and hating sin – trusting in Christ and hearing his voice in the Scriptures – delighting in the worship of God and sorrow over our sins and failures – but in hope knowing that in Christ our sins are forgiven, and we are right with God. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, true Christianity is not a religion of externals, but it is life in the Spirit which is life with God.