

“What We Believe about the Holy Spirit”

John 16:7-15

May 7, 2017

Does the topic of the Holy Spirit ever make you feel a little... uncomfortable? Most of us like our personal space. We don't really like to have other people in our "bubble." You know, that imaginary space around you where people aren't supposed to get too close. Yet the Bible teaches that the very presence of the Holy Spirit lives inside of Christ followers. Talk about invading our personal space! Yowzah! As Christians, I think we've convinced ourselves that we can handle the Heavenly Father, we figure He mostly runs things from up there in heaven, from a distance. And, Jesus, well, He became flesh and blood, so we can at least relate to Him on some level. But, this Holy Spirit stuff is just... well, not to be rude or disrespectful but... it's kind of... weird!

At Pentecost,¹ God's Spirit worked in a powerful, tangible, and supernatural way in the church. Just 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, when the Holy Spirit came, amazing things happened; people spoke in tongues, buildings shook at prayer meetings, and God's people were emboldened to proclaim His Word.² The early church embraced Pentecost. That's where we get our word "Pentecostal." And it's a good word. Some of us have come to view it as a bad word or a dangerous word. At the very least, Pentecost can make conservative Evangelicals uncomfortable. Well, today's sermon might be a little uncomfortable for some of us. But, even if the Holy Spirit might make some of us a little uncomfortable, do we really have any right to limit God; to tell Him what He should or shouldn't do in "our" personal lives or in HIS Church? Would you welcome a supernatural Holy Spirit empowering, if God wanted to bring that into your life? Perhaps God is not here to make us comfortable. Perhaps He is here to invade our personal space and overwhelm us with His holy presence. Perhaps God, the Holy Spirit, wants to radically revolutionize our entire life and our world view into something profoundly spiritual and other worldly.... Perhaps. This morning we are learning "What We Believe about the Holy Spirit."

1. Just who is the Holy Spirit? John 3:8 tells us that, "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." The Holy Spirit is mysterious; you can't see Him, because... well, because He's a Spirit.³ And yet, much like the wind, you can feel the effects of His presence. When we see the branches move up in the trees, we are not seeing the wind, just the effects of the wind. The Holy Spirit is like that; powerful, making an impact, causing change, but unseen and mysterious in His workings. This is part of what makes it hard for us to understand who He is. The Bible teaches us that the Holy Spirit is fully God. He is part of the Trinity; just like Jesus is fully God and the Heavenly Father is fully God, so also the Holy Spirit is fully God. Matthew 3:16-17 shows Him working in unison with the Father and the Son: "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 alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We see His equal authority and honor displayed in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son AND of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) This means that the Holy Spirit has the same power and attributes as God the Father. So, the Holy Spirit is infinitely perfect and He has sovereign power.

He has limitless knowledge: 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 teaches us that, "...The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." The Holy Spirit

¹ "According to church tradition, Pentecost is always about seven weeks after Easter Sunday, or 50 days after Easter, including Easter Day". Learn more at <https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/us/pentecost>

² See the book of Acts, especially 4:31 and context.

³ Check out the song "Spirit Thing" by the Newsboys: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc0C3qcmot4>

knows God's every thought because the Holy Spirit is God. He is eternally existing. Hebrews 9:14 tells us that, "...Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God..." The Holy Spirit is the one true and eternal God of the universe. The Holy Spirit is not an "it" but rather a "He."⁴

We need to guard against any idea that the Holy Spirit is some kind of impersonal force, like "The Force" in Star Wars. Now, I know that some of you celebrated "May the 4th be with you!" But the Holy Spirit is not like "The Force." He is an equally divine Person of the Trinity, existing in the loving unity of the godhead. The Greek word for Holy Spirit is "parakletos" which means someone who comes alongside to help us. The Holy Spirit is our friend, advocate, and helper. And, the great thing about a helper like the Holy Spirit is that He's omnipresent. So, unlike Jesus in His incarnation, the Holy Spirit is not limited to one place or being with one group of people at a time.⁵ He can be in multiple places at once.

But...2. What exactly does the Holy Spirit do? Well, the short answer is that the Holy Spirit does ALL KINDS OF THINGS. The Holy Spirit was involved in major events like creation, the recording of the Bible, and the incarnation. Genesis 1:2 says, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." 2 Peter 1:21 says, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:18 says, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit."

Our Statement of Faith highlights some of the Holy Spirit's work this way: "He convicts the world of its guilt. He regenerates sinners, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God." We read this earlier in John 16:8, "When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin. The Holy Spirit regenerates sinners who put their faith in Jesus. In John 3:3-6, "Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." The Holy Spirit does 5 other things as well:

1) Indwells. Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control..." Followers of Christ are temples in which the Holy Spirit continually dwells. It is because of the Holy Spirit within us, that the Fruit of the Spirit is displayed in and through our lives. So there's no place for boasting because it's not our fruit but rather the Holy Spirit's, who lives within us.

2) Illuminates. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because

⁴ **The Holy Spirit can feel grief and can be lied to. Ephesians 4:29-31**, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And **do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." **Acts 5:3-4**, "Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that **you have lied to the Holy Spirit** and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? **You have not lied just to human beings but to God.**" All of this shows the Holy Spirit is a very real Person of the Trinity.
⁵ See discussion on p. 138 of *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011.

they are discerned only through the Spirit.” We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand spiritual truth. This is why we pray; to shed light on God’s truth and how to apply it to our lives.⁶

3) Guides. A majority of the Holy Spirit’s guidance is in regard to our moral choices. But, there are also occasions when the Holy Spirit may prompt us in one direction or another. One example is in Acts 20:22-23, ““And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.” Now, this can be fairly subjective, so it’s important that we weigh things against Scripture and that we seek godly counsel from fellow believers. But, we should pay attention when God is prompting us and not ignore it.

4) Equips. The Holy Spirit equips us by giving us spiritual gifts.⁷ Gifts from the Holy Spirit should be desired for the building up of the church. It’s vital for the success of our local church that each brother and sister in Christ discover, develop, and then deploy their spiritual gift. We learned about this back in Ephesians 4:16 which says that “from [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” This is good for the church as a whole, so that 20% of the people aren’t doing 80% of the ministry. But this is also good for us as individuals, so that we each progress in our own spiritual development. It’s just like with our own children, we want to see them grow and develop healthy, productive lives. Our intention is not to coddle them through 65 years of infancy. We celebrate school graduations because we recognize our hopes and dreams of launching them into greater maturity and opportunity.

5) Empowers. The Holy Spirit empowers us for Christ-like living and service.⁸ This means we are able to resist temptation and maintain a life of purity and holiness. The Holy Spirit makes us holy. Ephesians 3:16 says, “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”⁹ This is not about us learning to be strong or to drum up our own strength. This verb is in the passive tense; God is the One at work here, strengthening us supernaturally through the Spirit.¹⁰

Any discussion of the Holy Spirit seems to lead to this question:

3. So, what about the Sign Gifts? Sign Gifts or “Charismatic Gifts” are things like supernatural healing, speaking in tongues, or futuristic prophecies. Theologically, many Evangelical Christians hold to a more cessationist view. Cessationist = A belief that the sign gifts have pretty much stopped (or ceased) after the start-up of the early church. A common idea is that the Sign Gifts were formative in the early church but not necessarily normative for churches today.

In the EFCA, we do not see this as a major issue of theology; we don’t divide over this. Overall, the sad reality is, far too much time and attention has been given to the issue of Sign Gifts in the Church-at-large over the years. This has been an unfortunate distraction from our primary mandate to proclaim the gospel of Christ together. So, whether you or I personally believe that the sign gifts have ceased or that they continue, we are welcomed into the fellowship of this church. The sign gifts have been a very divisive issue for some. I happened to grow up in a church where prophetic utterances and speaking in tongues were common, both as a private prayer language and as an expression in public worship services, where it included someone who interpreted the tongue. Overall, it was one of the healthiest examples of modern-day speaking in tongues I’ve ever encountered. So, I have a pretty

⁶ Ephesians 1:17-18, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.”

⁷ The Spirit equips each believer, giving a certain ministry to each. Various gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:6-8, and Ephesians 4:11-12.

⁸ P. 139, the book, *Evangelical Convictions*, puts it this way: “The Spirit glorifies Christ, **first, in evangelism** by convicting sinners of the truth; **second, in conversion** by bringing about a spiritual birth...; and **third, in discipleship** by empowering believers to be transformed into Christ’s likeness....”

⁹ Learn more about this verse and its surrounding context in the sermon, “*Power in the House*” preached on July 17, 2016. The audio and written transcript is available at www.efcbemidji.org or by contacting the church office.

¹⁰ “The Holy Spirit is powerful, but it is important to recognize that the Spirit is also personal.” (*Evangelical Convictions*, p. 136.)

positive view regarding the issue. However, unfortunately, I have heard many, many other very unhealthy and unbiblical examples of supposed modern-day speaking in tongues experiences. The stories that are hardest on my heart are the many close friends and relatives of mine who were pressured into faking speaking in tongues in order to feel accepted by the church community. Or, in some of the hardest situations, I've had dear friends doubt their very salvation because they never had a supernatural experience of speaking in tongues. They were told that if they didn't speak in tongues, then they must not be saved. This is simply not true. (See 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.)

So, what does the Bible actually teach us about this? Well, clearly there were sign gifts in the early church. There are multiple examples of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and physical healings. Frankly, I see no biblical reason why we should necessarily discount the possibility of God working in these same miraculous ways today.¹¹ However, the Bible does seem to indicate times of more or less activity by the Spirit. For example, I've always been intrigued by a verse in the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 3:1 says, "The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." It's also interesting to consider verses like Matthew 13:58, "And [Jesus] did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith." This had nothing to do with Jesus' lack of power or willingness to perform miracles, but rather people's lack of openness to His supernatural work among them.¹²

In Acts 10:45-46 we learn something very interesting about tongues: "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God." So, this tangible outward sign of tongues was formative in helping the early church realize that the gospel is for all peoples and every nation, NOT just the Jews. In fact, later on, Acts 15:8 says, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." This COULD BE one way of understanding why the gift of speaking in tongues was more needed in the early church than it is today.

Now, as the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji, we do not initiate or pursue public speaking in tongues or prophetic utterances. If we ever did run into a situation of public speaking in tongues or prophecy in one of our church services, our elder board would try to deal with it graciously and wisely. I imagine that 2 or 3 of us would ask to meet with the person(s) privately and we'd talk it through with them, just like we would with any other situation that comes up in a Sunday worship service. We don't want disorder or disruptive behavior in our services, (and not just because we're Scandinavian! But because we want to honor God in our worship services.) but we also don't want to limit what God is doing in and through His people.¹³

Generally speaking, as a church, we are fairly cessationist in our practice. That said, we do not prohibit or teach against someone speaking in tongues in their private prayer times. In fact, it wouldn't really be our place to prohibit people from doing that. So one could say that we are open but very cautious regarding the use of sign gifts. One of the best litmus tests for embracing the Holy Spirit's work among us is to remember His overarching purpose: John 16:13-14 teaches us: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me (Jesus) because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you." Therefore, whatever spiritual activity we are part of, should be evaluated with this question: "Does this glorify Jesus?" If not, then we need to be cautious of what is really going on.

¹¹ However, consider Acts 2:17-18 and Hebrews 1:1-2.

¹² Consider Jesus driving the demons into pigs. After such a great miracle, the people asked Him to leave their town! See Matthew 8:28-34, esp. v. 34.

¹³ See 1 Corinthians 14:26-33.

I find it fascinating that, even in the early church, we find people who were resisting the Holy Spirit. Acts 7:51 says, ““You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” This is an interesting verse. It’s written fairly early in the book of Acts, at a time when it seems like everyone is speaking in tongues all the time and miracles were being performed on every doorstep. And yet, we see it here referring back to the Old Testament, “just like your ancestors,” and pointing out that throughout time, various people have been resisting the Holy Spirit. And, it calls them out pretty sternly in the New Testament: “You always resist the Holy Spirit!”

LET’S NOT REPEAT THEIR MISTAKE! Even though the Holy Spirit may make us feel uncomfortable in certain ways, let’s agree to this prayer: “Holy Spirit you are welcome here. As You continually dwell within us, You have every right to do what You want to do in our lives and in this church. We ask You to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ through us. Thank You for convicting us as to what is right and wrong. Thank You for giving us new spiritual life; for baptizing us into union with Christ and sealing our adoption into God’s family. We are your people and we can’t live out our Christian lives apart from Your empowering presence. We need you. We can’t do this without You. Please continue to illuminate our minds and guide our decisions and behaviors. Equip us with all that we need to live our lives like Christ and to serve You well. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

The Holy Spirit ~ ARTICLE 6 “We believe that the Holy Spirit, in all that He does, glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. He convicts the world of its guilt. He regenerates sinners, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.”

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