



Core Seminar Systematic Theology II Session 17: The Work of the Holy Spirit (pt. 2)

PRAYER

Introduction

Last week when we discussed the work of the Holy Spirit, we ended talking about his work to regenerate, to bring about the new birth.

For that heart of stone to become a heart of flesh (Ez 36), God must do a supernatural work through the Spirit. For the Christian, that is a sweet reminder of God being “rich in mercy¹.” As the hymn says,

“As I ran my hell-bound race
Indifferent to the cost
You looked upon my helpless state
And led me to the cross
And I beheld God’s love displayed
You suffered in my place
You bore the wrath reserved for me
Now all I know is grace.²”

We didn’t seek God because of any moral superiority – we were *spiritually dead* (Eph. 2:1). We didn’t receive what we deserved, we received His mercy.

This is a helpful reminder for evangelism too. No one becomes a Christian because we are brilliant apologists or because the circumstances of that person’s life are *just right*. The task of evangelism is to walk into a spiritual graveyard and to raise the dead. None of us can do that by our self – it is a work done by God’s Spirit – and Him alone. So we share the gospel, love, and pray.

When the Spirit of God gives a new heart to an individual, when a person goes from being spiritually dead to alive, they are sensitive to the Spirit’s work of conviction.

1. Conviction

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, so in John 16:7, Jesus says, “**But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will**

¹ Eph. 2:4

² From *In Christ Alone*

not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8 When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; 10 in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; 11 and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”

To help us understand what the conviction of sin is, we can look at what it is not. First, it is not simply a guilty conscience or even shame over sin. Such feelings are naturally experienced by almost everyone. But this is not true conviction of sin.

Second, conviction of sin is not a sense of trepidation or a foreboding of divine punishment. These feelings, too, are commonly experienced in the hearts and minds of sinners. But, again, true conviction of sin is something different.

Third, conviction of sin is not merely knowledge of right and wrong; it is not an assent to Scripture’s teaching about sin. Many people read the Bible and are fully aware that the wages of sin is death ([Romans 6:23](#)). They may know that “no immoral, impure or greedy person . . . has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” ([Ephesians 5:5](#)). They may even agree that “the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God” ([Psalm 9:17](#)). Yet, for all their knowledge, they continue to live in sin. They understand the consequences, but they’re far from being convicted of their sins.

The truth is, if we experience nothing more than a pang of conscience, anxiety at the thought of judgment, or an academic awareness of hell, then we have never truly known the conviction of sin. So, what is real conviction, the kind the Bible speaks of?

The word *convict* is a translation of the Greek word *elencho*, which means “to convince someone of the truth; to reprove; to accuse, refute, or cross-examine a witness.” And that describes the work that the Holy Spirit does to bring about conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit acts as a prosecuting attorney who exposes evil, reproves evildoers, and convinces people that they need a Savior.

This is exactly what we see happening in Acts following Pentecost. Peter preaches, and in **Acts 2.37**, **“when they heard, they were cut to the heart (or came under deep conviction), and said, what shall we do?”** To which Peter responds, repent! Believe! Turn from your old ways, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We can’t make others feel convicted over their sin. Some of us need to hear that since maybe we have thought otherwise. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t speak the truth in love to each other, but it means we aren’t in control of the results of our words. Instead we need to trust God in prayer.

So for instance, in Paul’s instruction in **2 Timothy 2:24** he writes, **“The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”** And why does the Lord’s servant act in these ways? **V25: “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.”** Who grants repentance? Who convicts and moves in the hearer’s heart? It’s God the Holy Spirit. We’re simply the mailman/mail-lady. We bring

God's word and then pray trusting its his work to change hearts. And because God is the one who works – *no one* is beyond his reach.

True conviction is the influence of the Holy Spirit in an unsaved person's that life will lead that person to the realization that he is guilty, that God is just, and that all sinners are deserving of judgment. Once a sinner has been awakened to his soul's great need, the Spirit will point him to Christ, the one and only Savior and Refuge from judgment ([John 16:14](#)). In all of this, the Spirit uses His "sword," the Word of God ([Ephesians 6:17](#)), and the result is a regenerated heart. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" ([Romans 10:17](#)).

Comments, questions?

2. Union with Christ

A second blessing is the believer's union with Christ. On that day when the Counselor comes, Jesus says in Jn 14.20, you will realize that I am in the Father, you are in me, and I am in you. The work of the Spirit is to bring us into union with Christ. No longer does Christ merely dwell *among* us, as he did with the disciples, but he dwells *in us* through the Spirit.

This is important – in fact the central role of the Spirit is to reveal Christ and to unite us to him to all those who participate in his body³. The phrase "in Christ" shows up some 160 times in Paul's writings in the NT!

In the New Testament we find literally hundreds of references to the believer's union with Christ. To cite merely a few examples, believers are created in Christ (Eph. 2:10), crucified with him (Gal. 2:20), buried with him (Col. 2:12), baptized into Christ and his death (Rom. 6:3), united with him in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5), and seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6); Christ is formed in believers (Gal. 4:19) and dwells in our hearts (Eph. 3:17); the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:27); Christ is in us (2 Cor. 13:5) and we are in him (1 Cor. 1:30); the church is one flesh with Christ (Eph. 5:31–32); believers gain Christ and are found in him (Phil. 3:8–9).

Furthermore, *in Christ* we are justified (Rom. 8:1), glorified (8:30), sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2), called (1:9); made alive (Eph. 2:5), created anew (2 Cor. 5:17), adopted (Gal. 3:26), and elected (Eph. 1:4–5). Whew! All this without reference to the Gospel and letters of John! Suffice it to say, union with Christ is an absolutely fundamental gospel conviction of the Apostles—dear to them because it was so dear to their Lord.

How does this happen? In Isaiah 59:2, we're told that our sin has "made a separation between you and your God." Left in that position, there is no hope for us when we stand before God. That is one of the beautiful realities of the gospel – we know that Christ lived the perfect life we failed to live. The first Adam failed (and every descendant after that, including you and I); but the second Adam, Christ succeeded.

³ Ferguson, 100

When Jesus was baptized in Matthew 3, the Father said of Him, *this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased*. Far from being separated from God, Jesus pleased the Father in every way. He then died a death not that he deserved to die, but died as a substitute, a sacrifice to atone for the sin of others. One of the central questions of the NT then becomes, *how do we receive the benefits of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death?*

The answer? We must be united to Christ! This happens by faith – so Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:8**, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith.”** But we must go a little further. In **1 Corinthians 12:13** Paul writes, **“For in⁴ one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – all were made to drink of one Spirit.”**

When we repent of our sin and trust in Christ, the Spirit unites us to Christ by faith. The Spirit applies what the Son accomplished. No longer is the individual separated from God because of sin – instead they are united to Christ which means they receive all the benefits of His death and resurrection. Amazingly, that means God sees us as He sees His Son, with whom we are clothed (Gal. 3:27). So when you read the Father say *this is my Son with whom I am well pleased...* he is saying that of you if you are in Christ!

That is our position before God. But still, our *actual* holiness must be wrought out in our humanity. This is what Christ's ministry through the Spirit does for us. It not only applies the blessings of Christ's righteousness to us (justification), but also brings those resources to bear upon the lives of believers. Which brings us to the third aspect of the Spirit's work in the individual Christian...

3. Sanctification

The Holy Spirit works in the act of regeneration to unite us to Christ through faith, the goal of his work is to transform us into the likeness of Christ. And the process of that work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ is what the New Testament describes as *sanctification*. The word means *to make holy*.

I realize that the word *sanctification* may sound irrelevant to you, but let's consider a number of scenarios in which *sanctification* is at work to see how vital and crucial it is in the Christian life.

Suppose you've always concealed private sources of income when filling out your tax returns. Then you come to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and begin to tell the truth on your tax returns—*that's sanctification*. Suppose you're always on your spouse's case, and then the Word of God pricks your conscience and you begin to preach less and look for ways to show respect—*that's sanctification*. Suppose you're sleeping with your girlfriend, and you meet Jesus Christ and get the courage to move out—*that's sanctification*. So while *regeneration* refers to birth, *sanctification* refers to growth. Growth in fervently living out obedience to God.

And this change, this moral renovation of our souls is a work of the Holy Spirit. Consider what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:11- “And ^ysuch were some of you. But ^zyou were washed, ^ayou were sanctified, ^byou were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

⁴ Greek ἐν – see pg. 197 Ferguson; Christ is the baptizer

- 1) Second, our growth in holiness, our sanctification is a divine work – it is the fruit of the Spirit, Peter writes in **2 Peter 1:3** **“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.”** It’s His divine power!
- 2) Third, this gospel reality, this divine work is not void of effort. Instead, the Spirit of God dwells in us and works and empowers us to live up to our responsibilities. So hearing Peter reminder that it’s God’s divine power that provides all we need for life and godliness doesn’t mean we do nothing. He goes on in **2 Peter 1:5** to write, **“For this reason (namely because God’s power has given you everything [position]), make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue...⁵”**

And the result of God’s power working powerfully through his sanctifying Spirit is a fruit-filled life.

Recall what Paul says about the fruit the Spirit produces in sanctification.

Galatians 5:22-23 says, **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”** The Spirit-filled life is one in which the Holy Spirit is at work in us producing these fruits. If the central role of the Spirit is to reveal Christ and unite us to Him, then the main goal of the Spirit is to remake us into the image of Christ.

4. Intercession

Another work of the Spirit in our lives is intercession on our behalf in prayer. Prayer is an expression of worship and adoration as well as of personal need. So, consider what the Scriptures says, no-one can call Jesus ‘Lord’ except by the Spirit. Paul says in 1 Cor. 12:3- *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.*”

Likewise, no-one can call God ‘Father’ by that same Spirit. Paul says in Galatians 4:6, *“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”*”

It is the Spirit who is at work in us revealing to us Jesus as Lord, and God as Father. And so when Paul instructs believers to ‘pray in the Spirit’ in Ephesians 6:18, he is not instructing Christians to pray ecstatically or unintelligibly. No, ‘praying in the Spirit’ is analogous to ‘walking in the Spirit’. ‘Walking in the Spirit’ refers to living all of life in conformity to God’s word. And so, ‘praying in the Spirit’ is praying in conformity to the will and purpose of the Spirit. And where is the will of the Spirit revealed? In the word of God. We could think of ‘praying in the Spirit’ as this: Committing oneself to holding on to the promises of God until they take effect.

At another level, prayer is an expression of weakness and need. The clearest affirmation of the Spirit’s role in our prayer life is expressed in Paul’s letter to the Romans in chapter 8, when he says, **“...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”**

The believer here is portrayed as being so weak that coherent prayer is impossible. It becomes but a groan. But this groan is an indication of the presence and ministry of the Spirit. Some Christians think this refers to speaking in tongues, or ecstatic utterance. But the picture here is of something more

⁵ See also Philippians 2:12-13, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Colossians 1:28-29

common in the Christian life. It's a picture of absolute weakness and need, where the believer is to weak to express his or her need coherently.

And the great grace of the Spirit's ministry is that even when Christians are too weak to speak coherent prayers, he effects the Father's determination to gather his children into his arms and engage them in his purposes.

What a glorious truth this is. When we don't know what we should be asking God for in our lives as Christians and when we don't know what we should be petitioning Him for as a church, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. In fact we know this intuitively when we think about our conversion. Before we were Christians, we did not seek God. We did not know what we needed. But the Spirit intervened for us. He regenerates, convicts, and then continues to intercede for us.

Those times when we're at a loss for words, confused and don't know where to turn, it's in those times, out of his great compassion and kindness that the Spirit intercedes *in accordance with God's will*. The Spirit prays for us, not simply in our weakness, but in our ignorance, leading us into the will of God. What an awesome reality to reflect upon.

Comments, questions?

5. Assurance

Finally, the Holy Spirit brings us assurance that we belong to God. Romans 8:16 says, "**The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.**" This is the highest form of Christian assurance. You can have no greater assurance that you are a Christian than on those blessed occasions when the Spirit testifies to you that you belong to God. And this is more than an intellectual assurance. The Spirit also gives us an experiential assurance worked in our hearts spiritually and emotionally.

Think of a father and his young son walking along the beach together hand in hand. The son knows he is loved by the father. But let's say that the father bends down, scoops up his son, and gives him a big hug. The son's experience of his father's love in that moment will be particularly assuring. Well, so it is with assurance in our own lives – there are seasons where the Spirit manifests God's love to us in a special way.

Now, the believer's subjective experience is not the reason we have assurance of our salvation. That is, we don't say that we have assurance because we *feel* like we have the Spirit. No, instead we have assurance based on objective realities: God's promises in Scripture, the finished work of Christ on the cross, the evidence of God's work within us, etc.

Paul writes in Romans, "[**the sinful mind] does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you**" (Rom. 8:7-9).

There may be times in a believer's life where he is not experientially aware of the Spirit's presence, but the Lord has promised never to leave us or forsake us, and he will not take His Spirit from His children.

Comments, questions?

VI. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The work of the Holy Spirit is not merely for individual edification but for the building up of the church, and this is where we now want to turn our attention. The Holy Spirit works to build up the church.

The first thing that we should consider is the Spirit's role in the inspiration of Scripture. In John 14:22-26 Jesus says the divine words he has brought to his people will not cease when he leaves them. Rather, he will send the Counselor, and when he comes, "he will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you." We think of this as the Spirit's work in the life of the individual believer, and it is. But first, this promise was given to the apostles and finds its fulfillment in the writing of the NT Scriptures.

II Peter 1:21 says, **"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."**

In addition to inspiring the Scriptures, the Spirit raises up leaders within the church, such as pastors, elders, and deacons, to lead his people and help explain these life-giving words. In instructing the elders in the church at Ephesus, Paul says, **"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood"** (Acts 20:28).

The Holy Spirit also actively works to strengthen and encourage the new covenant church, as we see of the early church in Acts 9:31: **"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit; it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord."**

If there are any good things happening here at CHBC, if we're being led well by those in authority to teach and govern, and if we're being encouraged by the growth that we're seeing, then we have an obligation to give God the praise for that because He is the source of that strength.

So we see then that the Spirit is actively working in us both individually and corporately.

This may be a good place to close in prayer, thanking God for His work in our lives and our church.

Before we do though; any questions?

PRAYER

Next week will be our last class on the Holy Spirit. We'll be looking at three important, and sometimes misunderstood, questions:

- 1) What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?
- 2) What is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

3) How should we think about the gifts of the Holy Spirit?