

*Unlocking Scripture: The Apostles' Creed, Pt. 11*

## ***The Holy Spirit***

*Romans 5:5b; Ephesians 2: 1-10*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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This morning we celebrate our Reformation heritage. It's fitting that we take up the third section of the Apostles' Creed which begins, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Lots of people forget that Presbyterians are deeply Pentecostal. We heartily embrace the kingly gift which the ascended Jesus gave his church on the first Pentecost Sunday. That gift was the Holy Spirit. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus poured out his own Spirit upon the believers. And he still does.

John Calvin was one of history's great theologians of the Holy Spirit. He had a lively understanding of the Spirit's crucial role in uniting us to Jesus. So did Calvin's disciple John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism. So if anyone ever asks "Are you a Pentecostal?" you can reply, "Yes, I am a charismatic, Pentecostal Presbyterian! There is no salvation without the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no growth in Christ without the Spirit. There is no mission without the Spirit. There is no worship without the Spirit. He is active in my heart and constantly shaping my life. The Spirit is the power that fuels our quest for Christ. He gifts us for his service. He grows fruit in us that makes us taste like Christ to the world. So, yes, John Knox, John Calvin and I are definitely charismatic, Pentecostal Presbyterians!"

OK, now that we have that settled, I have a more important question. Are you a *normal* Christian? There are certain Biblical experiences of the Holy Spirit that are normal to the Christian life. If these experiences seem strange to you, you may be *abnormal* as a Christian. In other words, there may be some blockage that needs to be cleared up. Or you may not yet be joined to Christ by his Spirit. That's how important these normal experiences are.

To explore the normal work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, I thought it might be fun to turn to the writing of John Knox himself. Knox was the lead author of the *Scots Confession*, a fiery document from 1560 explaining the essentials of the faith. From the sections on the Holy Spirit, we can highlight four normal experiences of his work: conviction, creation, conflict and conquering.

## 1) Conviction.

For by nature, we are so:

- *Dead*, that we can't even feel when pricked,
- *Blind* so we can't see the light when it shines,
- *Perverse* that we can't do God's will.

Knox fiercely declared the helplessness of humanity in relation to God and his truth. He based this statement on Ephesians 2, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of the world...by nature children of wrath." The normal human state without Jesus Christ is being spiritually dead. Helpless to save ourselves. Under sentence of death.

Now no one naturally likes to think this way. It's humbling. And therefore infuriating to our pride. What do you mean I'm a child of wrath? A son of disobedience? Swept along by the devil's devices? That's absurd. And offensive!

We don't come to the knowledge of our desperate state by ourselves. Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit. In John 16:8, Jesus said, "And when he [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." One of the great works of the Holy Spirit is to awaken us to our true state. He convicts us of sin. He makes us aware of our plight. Our first membership question asks if we have received the convicting work of the Holy Spirit: Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, without hope for your salvation except in his mercy?"

The normal Christian experience is the conviction of sin. Are you a normal Christian? Have you made peace with the fact that you cannot save yourself? Have you found the immense relief of acknowledging your sinfulness? A person without the Spirit bristles at this truth. Our pride is offended. We get outraged that some would dare to suggest we are not great and good in ourselves. But the normal Christian has experienced the Spirit's convicting work. We know we need a savior, and it's a glorious release to admit that truth. So moved by the Holy Spirit, Knox states the plain truth that we cannot even see light when it shines or feel when we are pricked, unless the Spirit is at work. And that work includes an act of creation.

## 2) Creation

Unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus:

- *Quickens* that which is dead,

- **Removes** the darkness from our minds,
- **Bows** our stubborn heart to the obedience of his blessed will.

The passage from Ephesians 2 goes on, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” The Spirit of the Lord Jesus has to recreate our dead selves. He shines a light in our darkness so that we who were blind can now see: Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners.

Knox declares that “For as soon as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus...takes possession of the heart...so soon does he regenerate and renew us...” The Spirit regenerates us by his own power and grace. We come awake and are joined to Jesus.

Paul could joyfully tell us in Romans 5, “God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit dwells in the hearts of those who have been joined to Jesus. He creates faith in us. He glues us into Christ. He keeps us organically connected to Christ.

So Paul would go on to assure us, “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8: 15-16). Normal Christian experience is to have the assurance within that we belong to Jesus. The Spirit cries out through those joined to Christ. He stirs within us so that we call out, “Father!” By the saving work of Jesus and the creating work of the Spirit, we know God the Father to be our Father. We know ourselves to be his beloved children.

That is normal, Biblical Christian experience. Are you a normal Christian? Do you know God as your dear Father? Do you feel assured that you are his son or daughter? Did you know that once but can't feel it anymore? Something may be blocking you. Ask the Father to show you. It could be unconfessed sin: ask the Spirit to convict you so you can confess, repent, and enter the joy of your salvation.

### **3) Conflict.**

Knox knew by experience that being recreated in Christ puts into awareness of constant conflict. Our old sinful nature battles with the Spirit of Jesus within us. The new man and the old man fight it out. So he writes,

For as soon as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus...takes possession of the heart... we begin to hate what before we loved, and to love what we hated before.

Thence comes that continual battle which is between the flesh and the Spirit in God's children.

Other men do not share this conflict.

It is normal to feel a conflict between our old sinful desires and our new desire to love our heavenly Father and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. That is usual. Until Christ returns or takes us to heaven, we will normally feel conflict between the old life and the new. Are you a normal Christian? Do you get frustrated by not being further along in your growth? Do you wrestle with conflicting desires? That's a good sign that the Holy Spirit is within you, leading you in the process of becoming more and more like Jesus.

Do you feel no conflict with an old self? Do you feel no temptations? Let me say plainly that if you have no rub against sin, the odds are 10 to 1 it's not because you're super spiritual! It's because the Spirit of God is not within you. Or because you have just stopped paying attention and striving. That warrants some serious soul searching.

#### **4) Conquering.**

John Knox has some hope for those in the struggle. He wrote,

The Spirit of God bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God, makes us resist filthy pleasures and groan in God's presence for deliverance from the bondage of corruption, and finally to triumph over sin so that it does not reign in our mortal bodies.

The sons of God fight against sin; sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and if they fall rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance. They do these things not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing.

The struggle with sin is part of normal Christian experience. So is the realization of some victories along the way. We strive. We fall. We sorrow. We confess. We repent. We get up and go after living for Christ Jesus again. And again, and again. And over time we see that the Spirit has given us growth. We do not stay the same.

There may be seasons of dormancy. There may be decades of struggle. But the Spirit normally gives us the hope of final triumph. He gives us signs along the way that sin will not have the final word in our lives. This is normal Christian experience of the Spirit at work in our lives.

So, are you a normal Christian? I want you to be normal. Because normal is far from boring. It's a life of bracing realism: I'm a sinner. I'm dead and hell bound on my own. But the Spirit created faith in me to turn to Christ. He brought me to life and joined me to Jesus. That put me into conflict with my sinful self. I'm in a battle for the rest of my life, but the Spirit provides victories along the way. He gives me ultimate assurance that I will be made like Christ. So I call out "Abba, Father" in worship and prayer, even as I go into each day ready to serve my Savior.

If you aren't normal, may I invite you into normal Christian experience? Is the Spirit convicting you of sin and separation from God? Don't resist that humbling conviction. Turn to your Savior. For is the same Spirit creating longing in you right now to know Jesus? Go with that. Ask him. Ask him to join you to Jesus. Ask him to give you grace to repent. To give over your control to Jesus' Lordship. Ask him to put you into the fight against sin, the fight for the world's redemption. Ask to be made a normal, Spirit-filled Presbyterian Christian. Bow the heart, bow the knee and let the Spirit raise you up to see the Father shining upon you as his beloved child through the work of his only Son Jesus.