

We believe in the Holy Spirit

January 29, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I have to admit that when I was younger, I really didn't know much about the Holy Spirit. I don't know if our minister just didn't talk about the Holy Spirit or if I just wasn't paying attention. But when I came to faith and made the decision to follow Jesus seriously, I realized that I needed to get to know the Holy Spirit better.

So over the years, I paid attention whenever the Bible talked about the Holy Spirit and wouldn't you know it – our statement of faith pretty accurately reflects what the Bible says about the Spirit.

You can see it there on the handout – statement number four – let's read it together:

We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit through Whom man is born again to saving repentance and faith and by Whom believers are sanctified and enabled to live a godly life.

That's what we believe about the Holy Spirit. It's not as long as last week's statement, but again I think that this statement can be broken down into three parts – 1. The personality and deity of the Spirit, 2. The role the Spirit plays in our salvation and 3. The role the Spirit plays in our sanctification – that is, in the ongoing process of making us holy.

So let's look at those one at a time.

First, the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. This one we can handle pretty quickly.

When I was younger, I just assumed that the Holy Spirit was like a force, a power that God wielded to get the job done. So for example, if God wanted to tell me something, He would send the Holy Spirit to communicate with me, the way that I might send you a text message.

Now think about that for a minute – when you send a text message, that text message is a *reflection* of your personality – it expresses your thoughts and your will – but it's not actually a person. If I want to know if Julie's got a text from me, I don't say 'hey, did you get him?' We would say 'did you get it?'

But time and time again, the Bible refers to the Holy Spirit as 'Him.' I gave you this example a couple of weeks ago (and there are many more) – Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit in John 16:13 and He says "...when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all 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" (John 16:13 NIV). The Holy Spirit is a 'He' which tells us that 'He' is a person.

There are other passages too that tell us that the Holy Spirit has the same characteristics that you would expect to find in a person. For example, at various points in Scripture, it says that the Holy Spirit knows things, He has a will, He has a mind and intelligence, He can be grieved. He's not just some impersonal force - He has the characteristics of a real and honest-to-goodness person. And that's what we mean when we say that we believe in the personality of the Holy Spirit. He is a real, personal Being.

Now in addition to that, we also believe in the deity of the Holy Spirit, or the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This means that the Holy Spirit is not just a person; the Holy Spirit is in fact God. He is just as much a member of the Trinity as the Father and the Son.

There are a handful of places in the Bible that say that – Acts 5:3-4 – Peter says that lying to the Holy Spirit is the same as lying to God¹ - and then there are the many Trinitarian triads where Father-Son-Holy Spirit are presented with equal billing. Matthew 28:19, for example, Jesus says “19 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...” Not baptizing them into the *names* of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, implying that they are separate gods, but into the *name* of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, implying that they are united the equal.

We believe in the deity of the Holy Spirit.

So we believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, through Whom man is born again to saving repentance and faith. I would put it like this: we believe in the Holy Spirit who gives us new birth.

That idea comes from passages like John 3:3-7 where this important Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. And in the course of that conversation, Jesus says to him (and to us):

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now, Nicodemus is thinking in purely human terms and he says ‘what, am I supposed to get back in my mother’s womb and be born again?’

And then Jesus says ‘No, silly – I’m not talking about being born again in a physical sense; I’m talking about being born again in a spiritual sense.’ And then He goes on to tell us what it means to be born again.

Verse 5, He says – “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”

Being born again means being born anew into a new spiritual state by the Holy Spirit. The first time that we are born, we are born into bodies that have been tainted by the Fall, flesh that tends to lead us away from God rather than towards Him. And so, to enter into the Kingdom of God, we have to be born – again – not of flesh, but this time by the Spirit.

Verse 7, Jesus says - “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

I know that ‘born again Christians who support a ‘born again’ Trump’ have given ‘being born again’ a bad reputation lately, but let’s not miss what God is saying to us on their account.

When we are born the first time, we tend to do whatever WE want. We live for our own pleasures and desires and that separates us from God. It earns us the wages of death and puts us in the path of God’s wrath against sin.

But God is so rich in mercy, so full of love, that He sent His (human-divine-still at work) Son to stand in our place and restore of us Him. He sent His Son to redeem us and deliver us and make us His children.

But here's the thing, for that to happen, we need a fresh start, a clean break with the past. We need a radical alteration at the core of our being that changes our attitudes, our emotions, our priorities, our very existence.ⁱⁱ We're not talking about a 'New Year's resolution' here, where you resolve by your own willpower to turn over a new leaf; this is a fundamental, unalterable as bread-becoming-toast transformation from the inside out. And the Spirit alone can do that.

Jesus tells us that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we need to be born again, and we affirm that it is the Holy Spirit gives us that new birth.

Now that's what being born again looks like from God's perspective; what does it look like from our perspective? What does it look like from our point of view? That's where the repentance and faith part in our statement of faith comes in. 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, through Whom we are born again to saving repentance and faith.'

From our perspective, being born again means turning from sin (that's repentance) and turning to God (in faith). And it's the Holy Spirit that enables us to do that too.

Without the Spirit's help, we just keep going on living our lives, eyes blinded to the fact that we are far from God and living in sin.

But John 16:8-9 says that the Holy Spirit comes along to convict us of guilt and sin so that we are able to recognize just how far we are from the righteousness of God. He gives us the ability to repent – that is, He enables us to admit that we have sinned against God and that we need His redemption.

And then He gives us the capacity to turn to God in faith. He enables us to take hold of the forgiveness that Jesus has offered us and to trust in God to redeem all the parts of our lives. And as we do that – by the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit gives us new birth. Through repentance and faith, by the Holy Spirit, we experience that radical break with the past and we are born again.

Just to give you a sense of what that looks like in real life, I remember the months leading up to my conversion. I was struggling hard against the Holy Spirit. I knew in my heart of hearts that I was far from God, more interested in my own will than His and doing things that He said not to do. And yet I couldn't shake the sense that I was lost in sin. And try as I might, the resolutions I made to make myself better never stuck and I just kept falling back into the patterns that flowed from my sinful nature.

But little by little, the Holy Spirit chipped away at my defenses, showing me the depth of my sin and the greatness of the Saviour. He opened my eyes to see the true condition of my heart and I finally realized that I needed to stop living for myself and starting living for Him.

I remember one night after church on campus, I prayed 'Lord, I don't fully understand all of this, but I know enough to admit that I've fallen far short of your goodness and I trust that You know what You're doing. I hate my sin; I repent of it and put my faith in you.'

There is no way, in my human will power, in all its pride and self-centredness, that I could have humbled myself to pray like that by myself. It was the Holy Spirit that gave me the capacity to pray like that and in that moment I was born again to spiritual life. The Holy Spirit gave me new birth.

I was fascinated to find a very similar testimony from a very important church leader a hundred years ago. R. A. Torrey wrote:

“...if it had not been for the love of the Holy Spirit, coming into this world in obedience to the Father and the Son and seeking me out in all my ruin and following me with never-wearying patience and love day after day and week after week and month after month and year after year, following me into places that it must have been agony for Him to go, wooing me though I resisted Him and insulted Him and persistently turned my back upon Him, following me and never giving me up until at last He had opened my eyes to see that I was utterly lost and then revealed Jesus Christ to me as an all-sufficient Saviour, and then imparted to me power to make this Saviour mine; if it had not been for this long-suffering, patient, never-wearying, yearning and unspeakably tender love of the Spirit to me, I should have been a lost man today.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I know exactly what he’s saying. And I think that what he’s saying exactly reflects the process of new birth, repentance and faith that the Holy Spirit gives.

Now I don’t know if you have a born again story like mine, and I don’t know that you NEED to have a story like mine, but I think we all need to ask ourselves – ‘Have I been born again by the Holy Spirit?’

A lot of people think of Christianity as a being essentially a ‘morals’ thing. If you’re a Christian, you gotta be polite, you gotta do good works, you gotta show that you are an upstanding citizen, high in moral fibre. And there’s something to that. But let me tell you a secret: upstanding citizens, high in moral fibre can be FAR from God. They can be pursuing their own desires and agenda and from God’s perspective, they’re lost in sin.

Christianity is not primarily a morals thing; it’s a transformation thing. It’s about the Holy Spirit breaking into your self-centred existence and changing you from the inside out, if you will only let Him.

Look at your life. Is there a clean break with the past, where you stopped living for sin and self and began living for God alone? If so, then you’ve been born again. If not, turn from sin and trust in God and invite the Holy Spirit to transform you from the inside out.

Now why is it important to know that? It’s important to know if you have new birth, because if you have new birth, you will necessarily live a new life.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we are born again to saving repentance and faith - *and by Whom believers are sanctified and enabled to live a godly life*. The Holy Spirit doesn’t just give us new birth, He gives us new life.

That’s what this talk about sanctification and a godly life it all about.

Now in a sense, that clause is kind of a case of Captain Redundant striking again for the second time. It’s a little redundant to say that ‘by the Holy Spirit we are sanctified and enabled to live a godly life’ because ‘being sanctified’ *means* ‘living an ever-increasingly godly, holy life.’

Now, I know WHY our statement of faith says it like this. Sanctification technically has two meanings because sanctification is both a one-time thing and an ongoing thing.

In the first case, we are entirely sanctified, we are made entirely holy when we are born again. When we turn from sin and turn to Him, God wipes away our sin, He makes us pure and spotless and blameless. Titus 3:5 says that we are saved '...through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.' 1 Corinthians 6:11 says that '...you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' When we are born again, as far as God is concerned, we are sanctified. We are entirely holy.

And that's why our statement says that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. When we are born again, we are made holy in God's eyes once and for all.

But, here's the thing. When we are born again as new spiritual beings, we are still living in these old, fleshly bodies. And we're so used to living for ourselves and for sin that we have old sinful habits that we need to get rid of. We have new spiritual behaviours that we need to adopt in our lives. And so the Holy Spirit enables us to live godly, holy lives – He gives us new life where we grow more and more into the holiness that we have in God's eyes. (*Kids growing into clothes a size too big illustration?*)

And Galatians 5:16-25 is helpful on that point. Turn to it with me. Galatians 5:16 says –

16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

17 For the sinful nature (what we were before we were born again) desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature....

19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;

20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions

21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

(I always think the early church must have been crazy – I'm glad I don't have to tell you not to engage in orgies – but there are still things we probably do that are inconsistent with the character of God. You've got big ones here, but 'socially acceptable' ones too, right – envy, selfish ambition, doing what I want at the expense of the church as a whole (dissensions), putting other things before God, not actively cultivating your relationship with God (idolatry).

As people who are born again, there's no room in our lives for this sort of thing, and so God has come in the person of His Holy Spirit to help us to live good and God-honouring lives.

And verse 22 shows us what that looks like -

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Notice that when the Bible tells us what holy life looks like – it's not a list of things that you should do or not do. It's not – 'don't dance, don't play cards, don't go to the movies, wear a dress if you're a lady and pants if you're a man.' Life in the Spirit is all about character, it's how you interact with people at work, in your neighbourhood, it's what you do in your free time, it's how you determine your priorities and goals – with love, joy, peace, patience, etc.

When the Spirit is in us and we are walking with Him, He produces in us all the characteristics of a godly life.

Galatians continues – “24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:16-25 NIV).

The Holy Spirit makes us holy and enables us to live increasingly holy lives.

Let’s look at our statement of faith once more - *We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit through Whom man is born again to saving repentance and faith and by Whom believers are sanctified and enabled to live a godly life.*

Which is to say – we believe in the Holy Spirit who gives us new birth and new life.

Let me give you two points of application and then we’ll wrap up.

First, are you born again by the Spirit? Have you invited the Holy Spirit into your life to toss out the old and bring in the new? Have you experienced a radical break from the past where you turned from sin to trust in God? You might not have a flashy conversion story – it’s not like I was sleeping around and getting drunk every night – my heart issue was that I fundamentally cared more about what I wanted and what I desired than what God laid out as a good and abundant life. I had no scandals in my life but there was no shortage of sin. If you’re still dabbling in sin, ask the Spirit to change you from the inside out. Will power is not going to cut it; only the Holy Spirit will. Let Him give you new birth.

Second, if the Spirit HAS given you new birth, what are you doing with it? If He’s given you new birth, then He’s given you new life. Are you walking with Him, day by day, investing in your relationship with Him so that you are growing more and more mature and holy every day? At various points in the Bible, it says that the Holy Spirit will teach us (John 14:26) and guide us (John 16:13), comfort us (John 16:7KJV) and intercede for us (Romans 8:26-27), empower us for ministry both as a church (Acts 1:4-8) and as individuals (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). Let the Holy Spirit shape your life by taking the time in prayer and Bible reading to listen to Him!

The Holy Spirit who gives new birth and new life is at work in you.

As we close, I just want to tell you that in working through our statement of faith, I’ve been leaning pretty hard on this really important book in the history of Christianity – *The Fundamentals of the faith*. It was written by a series of evangelical authors in the 1910’s to make a case for historical Christianity in the face of those who wanted to take God out of it. Our statement of faith flows directly out of the tradition that the Fundamentals represents and it’s been really neat to sense this continuity and kinship with believers a century ago. I want to close with the final words of one chapter which was literally titled ‘The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.’

100 years ago, R. A. Torrey wrote:

To sum it all up, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A PERSON. The Scriptures make this plain beyond a question to any one who candidly goes to the Scriptures to find out what they really teach. Theoretically, most of us believe this, but do we in our real thought of Him, in our practical attitude toward Him, treat Him as a Person? Do we regard Him as indeed as real a Person as Jesus Christ, as loving, as wise, as strong, as

worthy of our confidence and love and surrender as He? The Holy Spirit came into this world to be to the disciples and to us what Jesus Christ had been to them during the days of His personal companionship with them. (John 14:16, 17.) Is He that to us? Do we walk in conscious fellowship with Him? Do we realize that He walks by our side every day and hour? Yes, and better than that, that He dwells in our hearts and is ready to fill them and take complete possession of our lives?... Do we know this personal fellowship, this partnership, this comradeship, this intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit? Herein lies the secret of a real Christian life, a life of liberty and joy and power and fullness. To have as one's ever-present Friend, and to be conscious that one has as his ever-present Friend, the Holy Spirit, and to surrender one's life in all its departments entirely to His control, this is true Christian living."^{iv}

The Holy Spirit gives us new birth and new life. Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit.

ⁱ 3 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?

4 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 to men but to God."
(Act 5:3-4 NIV).

ⁱⁱ This is a paraphrase of Stanley Grenz: "[This] involves a total, radical alteration within the core of our personal being. It includes a mental change, as we gain a new attitude toward our actions... It means admitting our spiritual poverty... [It] likewise entails an emotional change. We feel regret, sorrow, even hatred for our conduct and our pathetic spiritual situation." In *Theology for the Community of God*, 407-408).

ⁱⁱⁱ R. A. Torrey, "The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit," *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, CrossReach Publications, 224-225.

^{iv} Torrey, *The Fundamentals*, 227-228.