

Sermon on Lord's Day 20
By Rev. Stephen t'Hart

Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

From: 1984 Book of Praise

Psalm 143:1,6,7

Psalm 25:2,3

Psalm 139:1,4,13

Hymn 37:2,3,4

Hymn 62:4

Read: Romans 8

Text: Lord's Day 20

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe in the Triune God. We believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We are baptised into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and we believe that we need the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for our salvation.

But sometimes we hear the criticism, from both outside and inside our church, that we do not focus enough on the Holy Spirit. It is also said by some that traditional, conservative protestant Christians (and for all intents and purposes, that includes us) have neglected the anointing of the Holy Spirit and are not Spirit filled. Our focus, it is said, is too much on God the Father and on God the Son, at the exclusion of God the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps it is true that as individuals we fail to sufficiently comprehend the person and the work of God the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it is true that we often fail to keep in step with the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it is true that amongst us the Holy Spirit is the forgotten Person of the Holy Trinity.

Or perhaps not.

Today the preaching will focus on the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. And as we consider the Holy Spirit, we will begin with learning what the Bible teaches us and the church confesses concerning the Him. And through this, the Lord, Willing, we will gain a greater understanding and appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in us, and be comforted by the fact that He has been given to us.

I preach to you the Word of the Lord as we have read it in Romans 8 and the church confesses it in Lord's Day 20 under the following theme:

The Father and the Son give us all things through the Holy Spirit.

1. The unique work of the Holy Spirit.
2. The enduring comfort of the Holy Spirit.

1. The unique work of the Holy Spirit.

A common criticism of the Heidelberg Catechism is that while it teaches a lot about God the Father and even more about God the Son, it is very brief in its teaching about God the Holy Spirit: Just one Lord's Day, and one question and answer in that Lord's Day. If the Catechism was written today, it is argued, it would give much more attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

If the Catechism was written today, perhaps it would have some extra questions concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit: both the Charismatic movement and the rise of Pentecostalism has forced us think hard and long about what we confess concerning Him. But those who argue that the Catechism fails to pay enough attention to the Holy Spirit perhaps need to read the Catechism more carefully, for the Catechism actually has a heavy focus on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. However, on account of the nature of the Holy Spirit, the teaching about Him is not found in just one Lord's Day but is spread throughout the entire Catechism.

In the first place, the Holy Spirit is spoken of not just in Lord's Day 20, but also in 21 and 22. We learned in Lord's Day 8 that we can divide the Apostle's Creed into three parts, with the third part concerning God the Holy Spirit. And so, above Lord's Day 20 we find the title, "God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification." We are therefore encouraged to consider the last part of the Apostles' Creed in the context of the Holy Spirit and the blessings He pours out upon us. Christ gathers, defends and preserves His church through the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is through the direct work of the Holy Spirit that we receive the blessings of the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

But that is not all that the Catechism has to teach concerning the Holy Spirit. He is already mentioned in Lord's Day 1 where it says,

"Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him."

Further, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Lord's Day 3 where we are taught that we are so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil

"unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God."

Then Lord's Day 7 teaches us that we are saved by a true faith in Jesus Christ. And this faith, we are taught, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts by the gospel. This is underlined in Lord's Day 25 where it says that faith comes

"From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments."

And answer 67 of the Catechism says that

"The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross."

Then in the teaching of Holy Baptism we learn in Lord's Day 26 that in baptism we are washed with Christ's blood and Spirit and answer 70 says,

“To be washed with His Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life.”

Lord’s Day 27, answer 74 says that

“Through Christ’s blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to [infants] no less than to adults.”

Then in the teaching on the Lord’s Supper, answer 76 teaches that eating the crucified body of Christ and drinking His blood means in the second place,

“to be united more and more to His sacred body through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us.”

Lord’s Day 30 repeats that we are grafted into Christ through the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit is also mentioned at the beginning of the third part of the Catechism, Lord’s Day 32. In answer 86 we learn that we must do good works

“Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits, and He may be praised by us.”

The Catechism refers to the Holy Spirit again when explaining the Ten Commandments, and in the context of prayer, Lord’s Day 45 teaches us that

“God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them.”

Lord’s Day 48 has the prayer,

“So rule us by Your Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to You.”

And Lord’s Day 52 has the prayer in answer 127,

“Will You, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Your Holy Spirit so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat.”

And so rather than say very little about the Holy Spirit, the Heidelberg Catechism actually says very much about Him! In fact, the Holy Spirit is mentioned by name in twenty nine different answers in the Catechism. But the reason why the teaching of the Holy Spirit is spread throughout the Catechism is because of the manner in which the Holy Spirit works.

Sometimes people have a wrong idea about the Holy Spirit and think about Him as some sort of a power or influence, as a force that moves people and things in certain directions. But the Holy Spirit is not a mere force; He is the true and eternal God. He is equal to God the Father and God the Son, and yet distinct from them. We can see this for example in the command of Matthew 28:20 to baptise in the name of the one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We can also see from the Bible that the

Holy Spirit is a Person. And by the word “person” we do not mean that He has a body like you and I, but the Holy Spirit is able to speak (Acts 13:2), to teach (Luke 12:11,12), to pray (Romans 8:26), and He is able to grieve, to be sad (Ephesians 4:30).

But the Holy Spirit does not work independently of the Father and the Son. In John 16:13,14 the Lord Jesus Christ said,

“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”

And so we must see that although the Holy Spirit is equal to the Father and the Son, His work is not something altogether new. Instead, the Holy Spirit takes what Christ has done and He causes us to be blessed by it. As the Catechism says in Lord’s Day 20,

“He is also given to me to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits.”

That’s what the Holy Spirit does, and He does so by causing us to be born again, to have faith, to be renewed and made holy. He also assures us of our salvation in Jesus Christ, and He gives us the comfort of eternal life. And because the work of the Holy Spirit is to impart to us what we have in Christ, the Catechism rightly teaches us about Him in the context of our salvation in Christ.

That is also how the Bible teaches us about the Holy Spirit.

We read together from Romans 8. Romans 8:1 begins by saying,

“There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But then these verses go on to explain that we are “in Christ Jesus” through the work of the Holy Spirit and that we are also changed by the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit we follow the law of sin and death. Without the Holy Spirit we walk according to the flesh, following our own sinful desires and doing what we want for ourselves. Without the Holy Spirit are separate from God, carnally minded, even God’s enemies. But the Holy Spirit changes all of that. The Holy Spirit comes into each one of us, God’s children, and He breathes new life into us. He changes us so that we want to do what is right. By the Holy Spirit who is given to each one of us personally, we put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13) and we live a new life in Him.

But the work of the Holy Spirit is more than just setting us free from sin and death. The Holy Spirit also causes us to become God’s children! Verse 14 – 16 of Romans 8,

“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

When we are in Christ Jesus, we are not condemned, but we are declared to be the children of God. And the reason for this is because the same Holy Spirit who is in Christ is in us. The Holy Spirit has been given to us personally to make us by a true faith share in Christ and all His blessings. And because we

are in Christ, united by the One Holy Spirit with Him, we are called children of God. And therefore we are not condemned but all that belongs to Jesus Christ is given to us.

So let's ask the question again: Does the Catechism adequately teach us who the Holy Spirit is and what He does? Is the focus in this church too much on God the Father and on God the Son, at the exclusion of God the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit the forgotten Third Person of the Holy Trinity?

Inasmuch as we might grieve the Holy Spirit by neglecting His work and not asking for God's grace and the Holy Spirit with the fervent prayer that we should, and inasmuch as we act as though we can resist sin and be good Christians in our own strength, apart from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, this is not a fault of the catechism, nor of what this church believes and confesses. If there is any truth in the claim that we are not sufficiently focused on the Holy Spirit, it is because we have failed to confess and appreciate the full work of the Holy Spirit. Because we have failed to confess and appreciate the manner in which He does His work.

We believe and confess that the Father and the Son give us all things through the work of the Holy Spirit. And we believe and confess that the Holy Spirit takes the benefits and the blessings that Christ has accomplished and He makes them ours. That is the unique work of the Holy Spirit.

2. The enduring comfort of the Holy Spirit.

One of the names that the Bible gives for the Holy Spirit is the Greek word "Paraclete" which is best translated as "Comforter". He is then the One who comforts us, as we confess in Lord's Day 20.

Now Lord's Day 20 is not the first time that the word "comfort" is introduced. In fact, the entire Catechism is a catechism about comfort and Lord's Day 1 teaches that my only comfort in life and in death is that I belong, with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. We belong to Jesus on account of what He has done for us by dying on the cross, but Lord's Day 1 teaches us that we get to enjoy the benefits of what Christ has done for us through the Holy Spirit, the One who assures us of eternal life and who changes us from being sons of darkness to sons of light. But to what extent can we enjoy that comfort that we belong to Jesus Christ and we will live eternally with Him?

There are times when most of us do not feel that comfort very strongly. Romans 8:1 assures us that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. But then Romans 8 continues to explain that we are in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit, and when the Holy Spirit is in us, we experience a change in our lives where we want to stop sinning and we want to do what is right. In Romans 8:6-8 the Bible says,

"For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

And then in verse 9 the apostle Paul immediately adds,

"But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His."

The problem, however, arises when we begin to truly examine ourselves. For when we examine our hearts, we begin to wonder: Do I always hate sin and delight in all righteousness? If so, then why do I struggle so much to do what is right? Why do I find myself falling into sin again and again? Since I am not perfect, or anywhere near perfect, how can I be assured and comforted that the Holy Spirit lives in me and that therefore the promise of no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus is for me?

You see, a believer is not always living on an even keel. For every child of God, there are highs and lows in his or her life, and life is a spiritual struggle. But the apostle Paul, who wrote Romans 8, knew all about that struggle that we go through, and He is not teaching us that it is only when we don't have that struggle that we can be comforted that the Holy Spirit is in us and will remain with us forever. To the contrary, he wrote very openly about his own spiritual struggle in Romans 7. He wanted to do what was right, but he did not do it. His carnal, fleshly sinfulness was always there and he would sin and then be devastated that he, a Christian, had fallen into sin yet again. To the point that he cried out in Romans 7:24,

"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

But the good news is that the spiritual struggle that we have inside us is not evidence that the Holy Spirit is not at work. Instead, this spiritual struggle and our hatred of sin is evidence that the Holy Spirit is in fact in our hearts! It is if you don't care, if you wilfully sin, if you live a life of sin and if you stop fighting sin that you need to ask yourself if you do in fact believe, if you see evidence of the Holy Spirit working in your life.

To receive the assurance of the enduring comfort of the Holy Spirit, do not begin with yourself or with considering how good or godly you are. Rather, begin with the Holy Spirit's seal, His promise of the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through the one sacrifice and death of Christ on the cross. Begin with the confession that the Holy Spirit who works faith was promised to you when you were baptized. Romans 8:16 says,

"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

The Holy Spirit gives us the comfort and the assurance that we belong to Jesus Christ and that in Him we are not condemned but are heirs to everlasting life. Our spirit is weak. Our flesh and heart may fail. But we confess that the Holy Spirit is given to me, is given to you, personally, that He strengthens us and that He fills us with the love of God. We believe that the Holy Spirit focuses our weak and faltering spirit on the grace of Jesus Christ and that He comforts us with the sure promise that we are His, that we are the children of God. Concerning the comfort we receive through the Holy Spirit who lives in us, Ephesians 1:13,14 says,

"In [Christ] you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."

God gives to us the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with the promise that He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. And that gives us peace, that gives us comfort. For we may then be confident that the Holy Spirit will remain with us forever.

Forever. In all of life, as well as in death. In all that we experience in this life of sorrow. In all the ups and downs, the high points and the low points of our spiritual journey. Every day and every night we may live and rest in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

And that is why nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ. And that is why when we cry “Abba! Father!” the Spirit witness bears that God made us His children and we, with Christ, are heirs. Because of the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit, in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

That is what we confess concerning the Holy Spirit. That is the comfort we have in Him. Hold on to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, believe it and confess it. And you too will have a foretaste of the life and peace that comes through Him. Amen.