

## God Bestows the Spirit and Creates the Church

John 3:1-8; Acts 2:1-4; I Peter 2:9-10

Most historic creeds are divided in good Trinitarian fashion into three parts: God, Christ and Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit part includes what we believe about the church. So the Nicene Creed says, “We believe...in the one, holy catholic and apostolic church.” That may be more than you are prepared to believe. It is never *one*, splintered into a thousand denominations and only sporadically holy! And as for *believing in it*, some people worship the church more than God or Christ.

So what do you believe about the Holy Spirit and the Church?

### I

Here is the portion of the U.C.C. Statement of Faith I want to reflect on today. Speaking of God, to God, it says:

You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races. You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship....

So let's start with the Holy Spirit. It not only creates and renews the *church*, as the statement says, but all life and everyone. *God is Spirit*. To use the Hebrew word, God is *Ruach*. It means wind and breath. Say it with me, *Ruach*. Now say it with your hand in front of your mouth. You feel its breath.

The New Testament word is *pnuema* as in pneumonia, or pneumatic drill. It means wind and breath too. Where there is breath there is life. There is always the moment the mother and doctors hold their breath when a baby is born—until the baby takes its first breath. Breath is life.

The Creation story in Genesis tells that the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep and brought forth the world. And in the second Creation story God forms us of clay and breathes into us God's own breath; *then* we became living souls! So the Spirit is there from the beginning, a Creating and Creative Spirit.

It is also a Birthing and Rebirthing Spirit. So in John we have the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus says, "You must be born again, anew, from above." When Nicodemus asks *how*, Jesus speaks of the mystery of the Spirit. We see its effects but we can't see it—like leaves blown about in the fall. We don't know where it comes from and where it goes. So there is a wildness to it—like the Celtic Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose. James Forbes the famous preacher of Riverside Church in N.Y. City, grew up in a black Pentecostal

church in eastern North Carolina. He says of our uncomfortableness about the Holy Spirit: “We fear being grasped by an invisible presence we cannot control.” But what is important about the Trinity to me is that it says that the nature of the Spirit is the same as the nature of Jesus, so we need not fear it.

Another dimension of the Spirit: that it is an Anointing and Calling Spirit—as Jesus was anointed at his baptism and called to his mission as the son of God in the world. So Jesus said: the Spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, help the blind see and heal the bruised.

So let’s return to the Celtic Christian image of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose. It can cause some holy havoc in our lives. The Wild Goose of the Spirit leads us out to where we most need to go and where God needs for us to go. We will not return unchanged.

## II

Now we move to the role of the Holy Spirit as the creator, renewer and reformer of the church.

We think of Pentecost as the birthday of the church. The disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost. Suddenly the wind of the Spirit swept into the room, and tongues as of fire rested on their heads. Then it swept out into the streets and before you knew it people of

different tongues and races and nationalities were speaking and hearing one another as if they spoke the same language! Pentecostals emphasize the gift of the Spirit as the gift of *tongues*, but Pentecost is more importantly the gift of *ears*, the capacity to listen to one another, really listen, and understand. How we all need this gift.

James Baldwin, the great black writer, was as a young man going through an apartment building trying to get signatures on a petition on behalf of black people. He got to the basement to the room where black men were shoveling coal. Through the door he heard them arguing loudly and merrily about who was the best opera singer, the diva they loved most! He thought it strange and nervously knocked on the door. They let him in, and they signed his petition. He asked them about their debate over opera singers. How did these coal shovelers know so much about the opera? They told him that in their off hours they all went to the Metropolitan Opera, put on their costumes and went on stage as the extras.

We all make assumptions don't we, that make listening difficult. The Spirit helps us here.

Which brings us to the gift of the Holy Spirit emphasized in the New Testament, the gift of *unity*. As Paul calls us to "be *eager* to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). The Spirit helps us transcend our differences and experience the miracle of *reconciled diversity*.

The fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, enumerating nine are:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

These are the nine colors of love—like the seven colors of the light: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

### III

The Spirit, as the Statement of Faith suggests, also renews, and reforms the church, The Protestant Reformation described the church as “reformed and always being reformed.” The church is often resistant to “always being reformed”. We think we are just fine as we are!

We need the Spirit for this, and the Spirit has brought reform and renewal movements all through our history. Phyllis Tickle has observed that the Church has a giant Rummage Sale every 500 years, letting go of what it needs to let go of. We are at that 500-year point today—and none too soon.

### IV

There are many images of the church in the New Testament. The New Testament scholar Paul Minear counts thirty-two minor images and four major images.<sup>1</sup> Paul’s favorite was “The Body of Christ”, we, Christ’s hands and feet in the world, we members of one another in the Body.

Our text from I Peter gives us a few more. We are, he says, “a royal priesthood.” The Protestant Reformation gave us the theology of “the priesthood of all believers.” We are all called to be priests, priests to one another; or, as Luther put it, “a priest at every elbow.” Grace Baptist emphasizes this in its belief and practice that we are all ministers here.

There is also what I call the “prophethood of all believers”. We are a community of prophets, a prophetic community who sees what is right and calls the community and nation to live by what is right. The Black Church in America has kept prophetic Christianity alive in our nation. There have been too few others.

Then there is this phrase I love: “*God’s own people*—that we may declare the wonderful deeds of God who has called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light!” And this because:

Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Because of the mercy of God now we become a community of mercy in the world. Could anything be more important today?

Sometimes it’s hard to believe in the church. The story of the church through the years has been a play of shadow and light, a confounding mixture of

faith and unfaith, of discipleship and denial, like Peter, here the rock of faith, there a series of shabby denials.

The church has been the face of Christ, and the church has been an anti-Christ, a betrayer of his face and name. But, but, by the mystery and mercy of God's grace, God has been good on God's promise that the Living Christ and Holy Spirit have been with us throughout the centuries so that the true church has been present somewhere in all times and places. We pray our church to be part of that true church in our time and place.

## V

Now, finally, to the call of discipleship. We have been called, as the Statement says, to the "cost and joy" of discipleship. The true church has often been swimming against the tide of the culture, and followers of Jesus often face opposition, derision, even persecution. To take up the cross of Jesus means being willing to take up the suffering of others, bearing *their* crosses, and sometimes this is hard, painful work.

But there is joy too, the joy of discipleship. Sometimes it is what David Brooks calls "moral joy", the joy we feel when we know we are doing what is right. And there is spiritual joy as we experience God's pleasure in us. There is the joy we experience in Christian community as we take joy in the faces of each other.

Joy was what Jesus bequeathed to us in his last days:

These things I have spoken to you that my joy will be in you and that your joy may be full (John 15:11)

Mary Oliver wrote in a poem:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly

feel joy

don't hesitate. Give in to it....

Whatever it is, Don't be afraid

of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

There are days discipleship is hard, and some days we are brave enough to bear a cross and bear its cost. But don't neglect joy. There is joy too, aplenty.

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1. Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960)