

Ps 139:4,5
Hy 1B
Ps 37:9,10,11,12
Ps 25:2
Ps 143:6; Hy 37:3,4
Luke 3:21,22; 4:1-15
Galatians 5:16-26
Lord's Day 20

Yarrow, May 16, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

By the order of the Catechism, we are today to speak about the Holy Spirit. I want to do so today in the context of what the community around us thinks of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

I have no doubt that there are people in our community who have very positive thoughts of the Canadian Reformed Churches and its members. I find it very heartening to hear that our sports teams from Credo have a very positive reputation in the circle of those before whom they play – and then have that reputation not because they happen to be good but because of their very positive manner of playing and their response to the call of the referees. That is reason for gratitude.

But I am also aware that not all in our communities feel so positive about the members of the Canadian Reformed Churches. I am aware, for example, that there are those in the community around us who would typify us as the “frozen chosen”. The point of the label is that we present ourselves as persons going to heaven, but as these neighbours look at us they find us to be spiritually very cold. There’s a contradiction, then, between what we are heard to confess and what we are seen to do.

I will not this afternoon seek to pass a judgment on the accuracy of what these critics say. I need instead to stress that the existence of such a thought in our community *requires* us to engage in a measure of self examination. And Lord's Day 20 gives us the platform to help with that self examination. For in this Lord's Day we confess the delightful good news of Scripture that none less than God Himself (in the Holy Spirit) has made His home in our hearts. But if He has in fact made His home in our hearts, it follows that we shall invariably *demonstrate that reality* in how we live.

I summarise the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

THE SPIRIT NEVER LEAVES THE CHOSEN FROZEN.

1. The glorious identity of the Spirit,
2. The mighty work of the Spirit,
3. The inevitable fruit of the Spirit.

1. The glorious Identity of the Spirit.

The ascension of our Lord into heaven has resulted in some enormous and delightful consequences for the church. Back in Lord's Day 18 we confessed that as a result of His ascension the Lord Jesus Christ has sent us His Holy Spirit, “by whose power we seek the things that are above.” In Lord's Day 19 we added that “by His Holy Spirit [the ascended Christ] pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.”

Given this connection between Christ and His Spirit, it is fitting that in Lord's Day 20 we make confession of who this Spirit is. Yet it’s true that we find the person of the Holy Spirit rather difficult to

imagine. "Spirit": what are we to envision with that term?? I suspect that many of us think of something ghost-like, and that in turn is something we find hard to define or describe.

It turns out that the English word 'spirit' translates a particular Hebrew word (and Greek as well) that actually means 'breath' or 'wind'; in other words, 'air in motion'. Air in motion in turn (we know it from experience) can come in different strengths. Wind can be gentle, but can also be so forceful as to be damaging. In Biblical thought, the term 'spirit' in the subject matter of Lord's Day 20 is powerful, mighty.

Our Lord's Day attaches to the word 'Spirit' the word 'holy'. The term 'holy' catches the notion of being 'set apart', 'different'. In Biblical thinking, the term 'holy' means that one is set apart *from* what is earthly (and so in this fallen world from what is evil), and in turn is set apart *for* God and His service.

Putting the two terms together –as 'Holy Spirit'– brings up the notion of a divine wind from God and for God. This divine breath is not a thing (as the wind outside might be), but is in fact God Himself, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Scripture puts this third Person on the same level as the Father and the Son, so that those who are baptized (said Jesus) are to be baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). That is why in turn the Church repeats after God what we've heard God say in Lord's Day 20, like this: We believe concerning the Holy Spirit that "first, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God." He is, in other words, equal with the Father and the Son.

Yet, this Lord's Day continues, this Holy Spirit, this divine Wind or Breath, is not remote from us, out there in the wild never-never so that His identity does not touch us; instead, says the church in this Lord's Day, "He is also given to me...."

The 'me' of this Lord's Day, is, of course, the finite creature man. This is the creature God created in the beginning with the noble position to image God to God's creatures – and who therefore had both the *responsibility* to obey God's wishes and the *ability* to obey. This is the creature who threw this privileged position away through his wilful disobedience against his Creator. But for *this* creature the Lord God sent His Son into the world. For *this* creature the Son went to the cross to atone for sin, and reconciled this sinner to his Maker. For the benefit of *this* creature the Son ascended into heaven to intercede for us and to govern the world for the salvation of those whom the Father had given to Him. And 10 days after His ascension, *this* Christ returned in the Holy Spirit. This Saviour did not leave us alone, "orphans", as Jesus put it once (John 14:18), but He Himself with the Father came to make His home with us (John 14:23). That is why the Scriptures can be so plain on the point: the Holy Spirit is in fact none else than the Spirit of Jesus Christ, *is* Jesus Christ Himself returned (John 14:18)

It's this profound thought, a wonderful, marvellous thought. The Holy Spirit, this divine energy, is none else than *the very Saviour who laid down His life for me!* And He would make His home with *me*?? I struggle to understand how it's possible, but can do no better than settle for the words of Lord's Day 18.47: "with respect to His human nature [my Saviour] is no longer on earth, but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, *and Spirit* He is never absent from me." No, I can't understand how this all comes together. But I have learned it from Scripture, and so I readily confess with the church the reality I may believe: the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who is true and eternal God with the Father and the Son, is given *even to me!* I, a sinner, am a home for the Holy Spirit: how absolutely exciting, how marvellous!!

What, now, are we to expect of the Spirit of Christ as He indwells us? Does His presence make a difference? That brings us to our second point:

2. The Mighty Work of the Spirit.

To answer this question, I need to walk you through a series of Bible passages. The first is the very first reference to the Holy Spirit in the Bible, Genesis 1.

I read in Genesis 1:1f the following: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." The point is clear: God in the beginning made all things, from heaven above to earth beneath, complete with everything in and on them. The earth God formed in the beginning, however, was "formless and empty", chaotic and uninhabitable. This lifeless blob of a planet was covered with water, and hovering over the water was the Spirit of God. The next verse tells us that God spoke His word of command –"Let there be light"– and as result "there was light." That is: the Holy Spirit ensured that God's word of command resulted in action. Why I tell you this? The Holy Spirit is mighty to *accomplish*; He gets things done. More, the work this Spirit accomplishes brings about radical *change*. The world that was chaotic and uninhabitable became through His work ordered and habitable. See there what the Spirit who was given to you can accomplish!

The second passage I want to reflect on comes from Ps 104. The psalmist says in vs 30, "When You send Your Spirit, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth." That verse, congregation, describes something we've all seen so often; this is a reference to spring. The trees and the gardens were dead in the dormancy of winter. But the crocuses came out of the ground and began to bloom, and sometime later the trees began to swell and bud. We're so used to it, and can even give the scientific detail as to how the crocus gets growing and how the sap in the trees begins to move so that buds start to swell. But behind the process, says the Lord, is the work of the Holy Spirit – right there for your eyes to see! And let's face it: none of us can get a crocus to grow or a tree to bud. Sure, we can supply the conditions, the water and the warmth, but that's something different from making it happen. How is there life in a dried up crocus bulb? How is there life in a barren tree? How can the apparent lifeless tree swell up and turn green?? This, says the Lord, is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is God, and so is mighty to accomplish, powerful to get things done. More, the work this Spirit accomplishes brings about radical *change*; what is dormant and dead comes vibrant and alive. The book of Nature, beloved, is alive with instruction about the mighty work of the Holy Spirit!

The third passage we need to look at is Luke 4. Jesus had grown up like any other lad did so that He was commonly known as simply the carpenter's son. He did no miracles in His youth, didn't stand out as anyone special; just a young man among young men, like there are twelve in a dozen. But the day came when He was baptized, and with the baptism "the Holy Spirit descended on Him" (Luke 3:21). This Holy Spirit took hold of Jesus so that Jesus now did things He previously did not do. Luke 4:1: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, ... was led by the Spirit in the desert," where for forty days Jesus was tempted by the devil. No easy thing: in great hunger to turn down the suggestion to turn stones into bread. No easy thing either, to travel the road to the cross of Calvary when a quick nod to the devil would make Jesus King of the world. But Jesus resisted these temptations! How could He resist? From whence His strength to overcome the devil? This, congregation, is the mighty working of the Holy Spirit. That's also why after His temptations in the desert we read in Luke 4:14 that Jesus "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit," and subsequent chapters tell us of Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, stilling storms, and so much more. These were actions Jesus did not do before His baptism at age 30, and He was now able to do these things because this true man –who fully shared in our humanity (Hebrews 2:14)– was filled with the Holy Spirit. To say it in Peter's words in Acts 10: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power" and as a result Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him" 9vs 38). The point? This divine Breath who indwelt Jesus was mighty to accomplish things, mighty even to overcome

the prince of darkness. So things began to change in Galilee and Judea; the sick were healed and demons were cast out.

This is the Jesus who died, and on the third day arose from the dead. That resurrection, says Peter in his first letter, occurred by the mighty working of the Holy Spirit. Chap 3:18: Jesus “was ... made alive by the Spirit” (cf 1 Tim 3:16). As a result, the resurrected Christ became a “life-giving Spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45). Again, the point? This Spirit is mighty to get things done, and the work He accomplishes involves *change*; the dead come alive, mightily so.

Hence the fourth passage we need to consider. The crowds of Jerusalem were blood-thirsty on Good Friday and demanded ruthlessly the death of innocent Jesus. So ensnared were they in their evil that Pilate could not talk them out of their thirst for blood. But seven weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, 3000 come to faith and so share all their possessions with others and readily give for the benefit of the needy (Acts 2:44f). Whence this change?? We realise: this is the mighty work of the Holy Spirit, poured out earlier that very day. This Spirit is powerful to change hearts, so that those dead in sin may be alive in the Lord and show it in concrete and obvious ways.

What work, then, characterises the activities of the Holy Spirit? This Spirit, congregation, does not do things by half. He’s not content with a mediocre product either. When the Lord God saw how the Spirit had brought into being what God commanded, God said it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). After the psalmist had described the Spirit’s work in creation each spring, he concluded his psalm with the command to “praise the LORD” (Ps 104:35) – and we understand that the reason people are to praise this God is because His work is so wonderful, including His work in renewing creation spring after spring. Jesus’ work after He received the Holy Spirit was wonderful, with as result that the people marvelled and praised God. And the mighty work of the Spirit in the hearts of the early believers was so obvious to the community of Jerusalem that “everyone was filled with awe” (Acts 2:43); indeed, “they were highly regarded by the people” (Acts 5:13). That’s how wonderful the Spirit works; He changes sinners so mightily that the community responds with praise. Nothing by halves indeed!

What encouragement that reality gives to those who believe, those in whom the Spirit dwells! These Christians are not perfected, true. But because of the Spirit’s presence, these sinners receive from Him the wherewithal to do the right, to fight sin and the devil, to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f). In truth, how marvellous! We need never consider ourselves weak!

That brings us to our third point:

3. The Inevitable Fruit of the Spirit

Might it be possible for a person indwelt by the Spirit to look like and live like a person who does not have the Spirit? Brothers and sisters, given who the Spirit is, given His power and the change He invariably works, a person indwelt by the Spirit obviously *cannot look like and live like a person who does not have the Spirit!* That’s why the apostle can *contrast* the lifestyle of those who don’t have the Spirit with those who do have the Spirit, and urge the Galatians to “live by the Spirit” (5:16). He’s very descriptive of the sort of conduct that typifies the natural man, and what sort of conduct typifies the spiritual man. “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19ff). In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit looks very different. The fruit those indwelt by the Spirit bear “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22f). Those works of the flesh come naturally to all people, ourselves included. But the fruit of the Spirit is so different, obvious evidence of the Spirit’s presence.

Now the question is: do the people on your street, do the people you sit with in the coffee shop, do the people you rub shoulders within your executive meetings see you as characterized by the acts of the sinful nature or as characterized by the fruit of the Spirit? I trust they know you go to church. And with going to church, specifically going to the Canadian Reformed Church, they know of your conviction that you will go to heaven – are chosen to life eternal. But: why would people in the community attach the term 'frozen' to the term 'chosen'? I.e., what's there about us that makes people think we are spiritually cold, immovable, frozen? It's possible, of course, that people have heard the term, it has a ring to it, and so they hurl that bit of abuse that anyone they don't like. But humility requires us to do some self-examination, and at least give some consideration as to why folk around us might characterize us with such a term. So: what would they actually see of us? Consider the following:

They would see us as somewhat insular, isolated from the community. We have our own church, our own school, and our own hockey team and perhaps even our own hockey league. They see us gathering at church faithfully, and of course attending school per government regulations, and they see us too putting hours upon hours into our hockey. But what do they see of community involvement? What of being ready to help the neighbour? What of seeking out the needy of town or further afield? Do they see us putting as much energy into what the public recognizes as deeds of love as they see us putting into hockey? Might we be giving others the impression that hockey is more important to us than helping people in need? Could that generate a label as 'frozen chosen'? In fact, would pouring more energy and time into sport than into helping others be a fruit of the Spirit?

Another thing. The people of our community know well which church we go to. They also see us sitting in the coffee shop and notice our choice of language and the sort of jokes we tell or laugh at. It's no secret to the world that Christians are not meant to use foul language or enjoy course jokes. Course jokes, after all, catch more of the flavour of the works of the flesh than of the fruit of the Spirit. Might they conclude from watching and listening that we are in fact not really that different from the rest of town? Might it be that they see people who claim to have the Spirit sounding little different from those who never go to church? Could that generate a label as 'frozen chosen' – they say they're on their way to heaven but they're spiritually cold, don't show the fruit of the Spirit?

Or what about the way we do business? Do any of us have a reputation out there for being mean and ruthless in business? Could that perhaps encourage the community around us to see a disconnect between who we say we are (renewed by the Spirit and so characterized by the fruit of the Spirit) and what others see of us? Again, might it be that we're giving others reason to call us 'frozen chosen'?

What do our families look like to the people of our street? Do they sense that there's something different about the way our families function and the attitudes we portray or let our children portray compared to the family next door? Do they see us as gracious and kind and gentle, or do they hear us shouting at each other in our homes? What signal would that give to the neighbours?

The list could continue. But I trust it's clear: if we've received the Spirit –and everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has in fact received the Spirit– if we've received the Spirit a particular form of conduct invariably must follow. Lord's Day 20 is a personal confession, where each one of us says that we believe the Holy Spirit to be true God with the Father and the Son, more, this divine Breath has been given even to *me* so that I might share in Christ and all His benefits. If I dare to claim that confession –and because of God's covenant with me, I must dare– if I dare to make that confession I need to be consistent in my lifestyle. That is, I need to live in such a way that those who know me can see that I am in fact changed by the Holy Spirit.