

Holy Spirit

Included in the seal of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a descending dove, the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit. It also raises the question, “What does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church believe about the Holy Spirit?”

In our doctrinal statement of faith called “The Essentials of the Faith,” we read, “The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior. Indwelling our hearts, He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth and seals us for the day of redemption.”

Our beliefs about the Holy Spirit—drawn from Scripture—are summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, where the following description of the nature of the Holy Spirit is found:

“The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son, of the same substance and equal in power and glory, is together with the Father and the Son, to be believed in, loved, obeyed, and worshiped throughout all ages” (Chapter 34, The Holy Spirit).

Therefore, we believe the Holy Spirit to be God, just as we believe the Father and the Son to be God in the mystery of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit remains, however, the least understood of the three. God the Father has a title that helps us define Him, and the Son took to Himself a body like ours. But the Holy Spirit by name seems less comprehensible to us and is therefore subject to greater misunderstanding than either the Father or the Son. How, then, does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church understand the Holy Spirit?

As previously stated, we understand Him to be fully God. His primary function in this age is to glorify Christ by reconciling lost humanity to God.

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask Him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates men by His grace, convicts them of sin, and moves them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith” (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 34:3).

The activity of the Holy Spirit accomplishes what Jesus declared to Nicodemus as the only means by which an individual is able to enter the Kingdom of God, through the new birth. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5).

In our redemption, the Holy Spirit accomplishes several things. He convicts us of sin and brings repentance. He enables us to believe, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. He seals the believer unto the day of redemption.

“In Him, you also, after listening to the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14 NASV).

The Holy Spirit functions within the life of the believer, unfolding and expressing the life of Christ in ever deepening, life-changing ways. This is the process of sanctification by which the believer is enabled to grow in grace throughout his lifetime. Sanctification is never complete short of glorification. Some Christians believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace, subsequent to the new birth. What is the position of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in this matter?

As a denomination in the Reformed tradition, we subscribe to the ancient affirmation of orthodox Christian faith and believe in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). This baptism, while visibly expressed in the covenant sacrament that bears its name, is invisibly the work of the Spirit that takes place at the time of the new birth. Paul expresses this truth in 1 Corinthians 12:13, when he tells the Corinthians “...we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...”

Thus, we hold to the concept of the baptism in or with the Holy Spirit as the act of the Spirit that takes an unregenerate individual and, through the new birth, adopts him into the family of God. All the works of the Spirit that follow, then, are because of this initial baptism rather than separate from it.

Since Christians are called to “...be filled with the Spirit...” (Ephesians 5:18), all believers in Christ having been baptized into His body by the Holy Spirit should seek to experience the fulfillment of this command. We believe that Christians are called upon to proclaim “a grace that reaches out to forgive, to redeem, and to give new spiritual power to life through Jesus Christ and the infilling of the Holy Spirit” (Book of Worship, 1-3).

Regardless of what term is used, we recognize this deepening work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer as being both valid and necessary, producing evidences of His presence in the process. What do we believe to be these evidences of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer?

Some would require that Christians manifest a particular gift, such as speaking in tongues, as evidence of a deeper work of the Spirit within. Others would have us believe such a gift is no longer available or acceptable. As a Reformed denomination, we adhere strongly to our belief in the sovereignty of God, a belief that does not allow us either to require a certain gift or to restrict the Spirit in how He will work. Rather, we call upon all Christians to open their lives unto God's Spirit to fill, empower, and "gift" as He sees fit.

The Holy Spirit is evidenced, then, in part through the giving of spiritual gifts. Some of these gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. Our position with regard to the gifts is best summarized in the publication "Questions Most Often Asked About the Evangelical Presbyterian Church" where we read:

Q. How does the EPC view the gifts of the Holy Spirit?

A. The EPC affirms the gifts of God's Spirit as biblically valid for today, and counsels that they be exercised under the guidance of God's Word and the authority of the local Session. Since the Holy Spirit is the source of Christian unity, we must ever guard against any use of the gifts which would lead to division within the Church. We also affirm the priority of the fruit of the Spirit over the gifts in the Christian life.

Because of our affirming of the validity of spiritual gifts in the Church today, we are sometimes asked if we are a "charismatic" denomination. The publication just referred to answers this question well.

Q. Is the EPC charismatic?

A. If you mean are we Pentecostal, the answer is no. If you mean are we open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the answer is yes.

We believe that the word "charismatic" should not be limited to specific manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues. However, "charismatic" does refer to the fact that every Christian receives a gift, or gifts, from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). In Romans 6:23, Paul states "...the wages of sin is death, but the gift (*charism*) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." This means that all who are born again, receiving the gift of life in Jesus Christ, are by virtue of the gift "charismatic" in the broadest sense of the word (Ephesians 4:7).

What is the purpose of the work of the Holy Spirit? Obviously, it is to bring individuals to new life in Christ for their own sake, but it does not end there. When Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower His followers individually—and the Church corporately, which occurred on the day of Pentecost—He said that the Spirit's power would

have a particular purpose: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Because of this primary function of the Holy Spirit to bring men and women to saving faith in Christ, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church sees the evangelization of the world as an urgent priority: “The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations” (The Essentials of the Faith).

Basic to all we have said here is our conviction that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16), and that He illumines our minds to understand the truths of God’s Word (John 14:26 and 16:13).

In summary, what does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church believe about the Holy Spirit? We believe that He is God, one with the Father and the Son. We believe that He is the inspirer of Scripture and the enlightener of the believer. We believe that His primary function in this age is to bring lost humanity to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through the new birth. We believe that subsequent to the new birth—and because of it—He manifests the life of Christ in the believer in a variety of ways that include both fruit and gifts. We believe that the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the believer to enable God’s people to do what otherwise they could not do; namely, fulfill the Great Commission through missions and world evangelization, as well as build up the Body of Christ on earth.

To these basic beliefs about the Holy Spirit we commit ourselves. We invite others of like mind and spirit to join us, to the end that on the day of His appearing, “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Amen.

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