

Who  
is the  
Holy Spirit?  
What does  
He do?

by Leopoldo A. Sánchez

**T**hese questions have led some Christians to an unhealthy emphasis on the third Person of the Trinity, and others to virtually neglect Him.

A trinitarian approach to the Holy Spirit that respects the centrality of Christ in the history of salvation avoids the dangers of these theological extremes—“Spirit only” and “Spirit void”— that often lead respectively to wild emotionalism and arid intellectualism.

To avoid the “Spirit only” approach, the Spirit and the Son must be seen as inseparable, working together in a joint mission to bring sinners into communion with the Father. The Spirit is not alien to the Son, and the Son is not alien to the Spirit. Where one is, the other one is right there.

To express this relationship in the Father’s plan of salvation, we say that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the bearer and giver of the Spirit. Or we may say that the Spirit of the Father rests on and is sent by the Son for us.

To escape a “Spirit void” approach, the Spirit whom Christ bears must also be seen as the Spirit whom Christ gives to us, or as the Spirit of Christ in us. We must see what the Church that lives in the Spirit of Christ looks like.

## Inseparable Companions

The Gospel writers portray Jesus as the bearer of the Holy Spirit, the one filled with the Spirit of God, the One on whom the Spirit rests.

Because the Holy Spirit rests permanently on Christ, He accompanies Christ at all times. Like inseparable companions, the Son and the Holy Spirit enter history together and work together to bring about the Father’s plan of salvation for the human race. The Holy Spirit appears in the story of salvation from the very first moment of the Son’s human life. The Gospels attribute the conception and holiness of the virgin’s child to the Holy Spirit.

At the Jordan, the Father anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit for His redemptive mission as Yahweh’s suffering and exalted Servant. Anointed with the Holy Spirit, Jesus establishes His Father’s gracious kingdom among us by delivering us from Satan’s bondage, proclaiming good news, giving His life unto death for us, and opening the way to eternal life through His resurrection from the dead.

The Spirit is involved in all these events.

The Spirit is with Christ in His struggle against the devil and his demons who oppress God’s creatures. Immediately after the anointing at the Jordan, Jesus is

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led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He heals and casts out demons by the Spirit of God. By resisting Satan and driving out demons, Jesus establishes the Father’s kingdom among us. And where God rules through Christ by His Spirit, the evil one and his evil spirits can no longer rule. The Spirit accompanies Jesus to the cross and is united with Him in His resurrection.

## Spirit-breathed Word

The Spirit is united inseparably to Christ’s words. Jesus is anointed with the Spirit of the Lord to proclaim the Gospel. As the fulfillment of all the prophets, Christ speaks in the Spirit, calling people to repentance and forgiving their sins.

There is, of course, a key difference between Christ and the Spirit-led prophets. The prophets spoke of the sufferings and glory of the Christ who was to come. But the words of Christ point to Himself. As St. John puts it, the incarnate Son speaks Spirit-breathed words that lead to faith and eternal life in Him because God the Father has given Him the Spirit without measure.

At the Jordan, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit as the suffering Servant, the rejected one who takes our sins upon Himself. As the Servant, Jesus gives His life as a ransom for many. He describes His suffering unto death as a baptism.

Jesus’ baptism in the water of the Jordan leads to His baptism in blood at Golgotha. Through the eternal Spirit, Jesus offers His sinless life to the Father on the cross to cleanse us from our sins and render us fit to worship God.

But the suffering Servant is also highly exalted. The Father establishes Jesus as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by raising Him from the dead. In the Spirit, the Son dies and is raised to new life.

# Baptism in the Holy Spirit

**O**n Pentecost Day, St. Peter preaches, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

The hearers are contrite and ask, “What shall we do?”

The apostle responds: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children.”

Pentecostals and Lutherans understand Peter’s words differently. Pentecostals see an order of salvation in Peter’s response. First, people are to repent. Such repentance or conversion occurs when one accepts Christ as Lord and Savior and renounces sin.

Second, they are to be baptized. Here, water baptism symbolizes one’s confession of sins and lifetime commitment to Jesus.

Finally, they are to receive the gift of the Spirit, which Pentecostals call the baptism in, or with, the Holy Spirit.

The key in the order is not the number of stages, but the idea that baptism in the Holy Spirit occurs *after* the new birth or conversion. Because the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and spoke of God’s works in other tongues, most Pentecostals assert that this fullness of the Spirit for witness with the ability to speak in tongues is available today to those believers who desire it and yield to the Spirit.

Lutherans see repentance, water Baptism, and the gift of the Spirit as one reality, “one Baptism” in water for the forgiveness of sins that offers the fullness of the one Spirit.

On Pentecost, the exalted Jesus receives the promise of the Spirit from the Father and pours Him forth to empower the Church in her preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all nations. In Scripture, such preaching is intended to lead to Baptism and is inseparably united with it.

And so, through the word spoken by Peter, God brought many to repentance, led about 3,000 of them to Baptism for forgiveness, and gifted them with the fullness (not only part) of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is not our work. It is neither a symbol of our commitment to Jesus nor conditional upon our yielding to the Spirit. Baptism is God’s work, sure promise, and means of grace for us. Baptism is God’s gracious “little Pentecost” with a lasting significance, which Luther (following Paul) referred to as a daily return to one’s baptism where the old man in us is drowned (convicted of sin) and a new man is raised to new life (forgiven).

Through the convicting and comforting Word, the Spirit sent to us in Baptism continues to make us faithful witnesses of Jesus according to the vocations and gifts He chooses to give us.

— L.A.S.

## Our “little Pentecost”

There is an unbreakable link between Christ bearing the Spirit and giving the Spirit. The Gospel writers are of one accord in teaching that the Son on whom the Spirit descends and remains is the One who baptizes with the Spirit. Indeed, the incarnate Son bears the Holy Spirit for Himself from conception.

But that indwelling of the Holy Spirit from conception is unique to Christ. It is not transferable to the rest of humanity. From the days of Adam, we are born in sin and we are without the Holy Spirit.

How then are we to receive the Spirit whom Christ bears?

After Christ’s coming in the flesh, His anointing unto death becomes a condition in the Father’s plan of salvation for the universal giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. In other words, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit at His baptism so that we too might receive, upon completion of His redemptive mission, His Spirit or anointing in our Baptism.

From Pentecost onward, every Baptism becomes a “little Pentecost,” a means of grace through which the exalted Jesus forgives our sins and sends the gift of the Spirit from the Father to dwell in us (see “Baptism in the Holy Spirit”). When we are baptized into Christ, God sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts and makes us His sons and daughters and heirs of His promises in Christ. Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jordan. The one baptized at Jordan becomes the one who baptizes from Pentecost onwards.

So Christian Baptism is also a “little Jordan”—the event in which the Father anoints us with the Spirit of His Son, calls us His beloved children, and sends us on a mission to be faithful witnesses of Christ according to our stations in life.

For St. John, the giving of the Holy Spirit does not occur until Christ’s glorification, which includes His death and resurrection. The point is not to say that the Spirit had never been active before the coming of Christ, but to link the glorification of Christ to His giving of the Spirit to the disciples for the purpose of sending them out into the world to forgive the sins of the penitent and retain the sins of the impenitent.

But how can these disciples absolve people of their sins unless the risen Jesus had died for their sins? There is no giving of the Spirit to forgive sins apart from the death of Jesus. When St. John states that Christ handed over His Spirit (*pneuma*) on the cross, he seems to allude, in a symbolic way, to this unbreakable bond between Christ’s death for our sins and His breathing of the Spirit (*pneuma*) upon the disciples to forgive sins. Christ’s sending of the Spirit from the Father is, in this sense, the fruit of the cross.

## Our lives in the Spirit

In light of Christ's life in the Spirit, we can now ask what our daily life in the Spirit looks like. It is a Christoform life, one shaped after Christ's life. For the same Spirit whom Christ bears, Christ has also given to us.

The Spirit anoints us for a life of struggle against Satan. The resting of the Holy Spirit on Christ did not make Him immune to the devil's attacks. The same is true for us. Like Jesus, the Church is led by the Spirit

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into the wilderness to face the devil's temptations. We all have deserts in our lives where we are most likely to fall.

As one who was tempted in every way, Jesus sympathizes with our struggles. But when Christ sends His Spirit into our hearts, He also gives us "the sword of the Spirit" (the Word of God), and access to His *Abba* (Father) in prayer to resist the devil.

In other words, we receive the same Spirit-breathed Word and access to God in the Spirit by which Christ resisted Satan in the desert and at Gethsemane.

Through the Word and prayer, the Spirit does not make us immune to temptations, but He does assure us of God's help in the midst of such struggles and reminds us that Christ has defeated Satan and gone to the cross for us so that, by His death, He might free us from the evil one who held the power over death.

## Anointed to serve others

The Spirit anoints us to proclaim the Word. As the Father sends the Son and gives Him the Spirit to speak words that are "Spirit and life," so also does the Son breathe the Spirit on His disciples so that they might speak words that bring people to faith in Christ. Like Jesus, the Church is led by the Spirit into the world to call sinners to repentance and forgive their sins.

## Early Heresies Regarding the Holy Spirit

In the 1st century A.D., the Corinthians tended to appraise their teachers on the basis of their human wisdom. St. Paul warns them that their faith does not rest on human or worldly wisdom, but on what the Spirit from God has taught them through the proclamation of "Christ crucified." A true apostle speaks words taught by the Holy Spirit when his preaching points not to his own wisdom but to Christ, the wisdom of God.

For St. John, a true prophet speaks by the Spirit of God, or according to "the spirit of truth," when he acknowledges that Jesus Christ came "in the flesh." Otherwise, he is a false prophet who speaks according to the spirit of deceit of the antichrist.

No one can claim to speak by the Paraclete (Holy Spirit), "the Spirit of truth," unless his words remind us of the words of Jesus, who is the Truth, the One whose words and works reveal the Father's love for us.

During the 2nd century A.D., the Church had to test the spirits in Phrygia, modern day Turkey. There, the Montanists (named after their leader Montanus) prophesied in ecstatic speech, foretold the imminent descent of the New Jerusalem, and acted as if their leader were an incarnation of the Paraclete. Since then, the rise of Montanist-like prophets has led the church to be wary of anyone who claims to speak words by the Spirit contrary to the apostolic message concerning Christ's words and deeds for our salvation.

During the 4th century, the Church defended the divinity of the Holy Spirit against the *Pneumatomachoi* ("enemies of the Spirit") and others, who spoke of the Spirit as a creature through whom God works in us. Like an angel, the Spirit is a minister of God, but not God.

The Church argued for the Spirit's divinity on the basis of His works. How can a mere creature bring us into communion with God? God alone can. Since the Spirit sanctifies us through the Word and Baptism, He is God. For St. Basil (who died in 379), our Baptism in the name of the Triune God reveals that the Holy Spirit shares in the divine name and in the worship due the Father and the Son.

The Creed of Constantinople (in 381) sums up the church's historic response to the *Pneumatomachoi* by confessing the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of life ... who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified."

— L.A.S.



Through the spoken Word, the Spirit convicts and comforts, kills and makes alive, preaches Law and Gospel, leads the sinner to die to self in order to be raised anew (see “Baptism in the Holy Spirit”).

That the Spirit works through the Word is not a Lutheran invention, but a teaching deeply rooted in the Spirit’s inseparable union to Christ and the words He speaks to lead people to eternal life in Him.

The Spirit anoints us to be servants of others. We are often self-serving and prefer to be served. Christ is not like that. The Father anointed Jesus as Servant for a life of self-giving unto death for others. Like Jesus, the church is led by the Spirit to die to self in order to make room for the neighbor.

## Christ “in here”

The Spirit does not simply have us look to Christ “out there” in order to follow Him, but actually shapes Christ “in here”—in our hearts and minds—so that our lives in service to others mirror Christ’s own humility and self-giving to them.

Paul’s teaching on the fruit of the Spirit makes little sense apart from Christ’s own life in the Spirit in humble service to all.

The Spirit also anoints us to share in the sufferings and glory of Christ. Again, Jesus’ life in the Spirit did not make Him immune to suffering. The same is true for us. Those who put their trust in Christ have His Spirit and anointing even as they experience sufferings in this life.

Like the Son, the Church does not measure the Spirit’s presence in her midst according to her lack of suffering but according to her trust in the God who can comfort and raise His suffering people from the dead. Indeed, the same Spirit in whom the Father raised Christ from the dead now dwells in us as the firstfruits of our bodily redemption, our final adoption as children of God. The resurrection at the last day is the fulfillment of the Father’s outpouring of the Spirit upon us to conform us to the image of His Son.

In the midst of our present sufferings, when it is hard to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us in accordance with God’s will and leads us to pray for the final revelation of the glory of Christ and the life of the world to come: “Come, Lord Jesus!” Amen.

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