

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

The *Study Catechism*: Questions 53–61

Question 53. What is the third article of the Apostles' Creed?

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

Question 54. What do you believe when you confess your faith in the Holy Spirit?

Apart from the Holy Spirit, our Lord can neither be loved, nor known, nor served. The Holy Spirit is the personal bond by which Jesus Christ unites us to himself, the teacher who opens our hearts to Christ, and the comforter who leads us to repentance, empowering us to live in Christ's service. As the work of the one Holy Spirit, our love, knowledge, and service of Christ are all inseparably related.

John 14:26 "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

1 Cor. 12:3 "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

Rom. 5:5 "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

1 Cor. 6:17, 19 "But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?"

1 Cor. 3:16 "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

John 4:24 "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Question 55. How do we receive the Holy Spirit?

By receiving the Word of God. As the midwife of the new creation, the Spirit arrives with the Word, brings us to rebirth, and assures us of eternal life. The Spirit nurtures, corrects and strengthens us with the pure spiritual milk of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2).

Eph. 6:17 "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

John 14:16-17 "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

John 3:5-6 "Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'"

Luke 11:13 "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

1 Thess. 1:5 "Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake."

John 16:8 "When he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment."

Rom. 8:15-16 "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

1 Peter 2:2 "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation."

Question 56. What do you mean when you speak of "the Word of God"?

"Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to

trust and obey in life and in death" (Barmen Declaration, Article I).

John 1:1–5 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Question 57. Isn't Holy Scripture also the Word of God?

Yes. Holy Scripture is also God's Word because of its content, its function, and its origin. Its central content is Jesus Christ, the living Word. Its basic function is to deepen our love, knowledge, and service of him as our Savior and Lord. And its ultimate origin is in the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets and apostles, and who inspires us with eager desire for the truths that scripture contains.

2 Tim. 3:16 "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

John 5:39 "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf."

Question 58. Isn't preaching also the Word of God?

Yes. Preaching and other forms of Christian witness are also God's Word when they are faithful to the witness of Holy Scripture. By the power of the Spirit, preaching actually gives to us what it proclaims—the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith comes by hearing God's Word in the form of faithful proclamation.

Mark 16:15 "And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'"

2 Cor. 4:5 "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake."

Rom. 1:15–16 "Hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Rom. 10:17 "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Question 59. Does the Holy Spirit ever speak apart from God's Word in its written and proclaimed forms?

Since the Spirit is not given to the church without the Word, true proclamation depends on scripture. Since the Word cannot be grasped without the Spirit, true interpretation depends on prayer. However, as the wind blows where it will, so may the Spirit speak or work in people's lives in unexpected or indirect ways, yet always according to the Word, never contradicting or diluting it.

John 3:8 "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Acts 8:29–31 "Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him."

Eph. 6:18 "Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints."

2 Peter 1:20–21 "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

Isa. 45:4 "I call you [Cyrus] by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me."

Num. 22:28 "Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'"

Question 60. Aren't people without faith sometimes wiser than those who have faith?

Yes. The important question for the church is not so much where an insight may come from as the norm by which to test it. Truth is where one finds it, whether inside or outside the church, and whether supporting or contradicting one's own most cherished opinions. Our faithful discernment of what is

true, however, depends finally on God's Word as conveyed in Holy Scripture. The church is therefore reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God.

Titus 1:9 "He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it."

Question 61. Doesn't modern critical scholarship undermine your belief that Holy Scripture is a form of God's Word?

No. The methods of modern scholarship are a good servant but a bad master. They are neither to be accepted nor rejected uncritically. Properly used they help us rightly and richly interpret scripture; improperly used they can usurp the place of faith (or establish an alternative faith). Wise interpreters use these methods in the service of faithful witness and understanding. The methods of modern scholarship remain a useful tool, while Holy Scripture remains reliable in all essential matters of faith and practice.

Prov. 1:5-6 "Let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles."

Prov. 10:14 "The wise lay up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near."

1 Cor. 1:20, 25 "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Reflections

With this session we begin the third and final section of the Apostles' Creed. We have talked about God and Jesus Christ. The third part of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that dwells with us today. Following the resurrection Jesus told the disciples that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit just before he ascended into heaven. On the day of Pentecost it is the Holy Spirit who descends upon the early believers, creating the church. With our study of the Holy Spirit we will study the church, the people within the church and the three great promises given to all believers.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the one who opens our hearts to Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us to repentance by helping us to examine our lives. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live in Christ's service. All that we do within the church and as a community of believers is because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is through the Holy Spirit that we are united with Jesus Christ through the Word of God.

The Gospel of John tells us "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Word of God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. We know about Jesus Christ through the Holy Scriptures. The central content of scripture is Jesus Christ. The function of scripture is to deepen our love, knowledge, and service of Jesus Christ. The origin of scripture is the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets and apostles. As God's Word, Holy Scripture is reliable in all essential matters of faith and practice. Preaching is another form of the Word of God when the preaching is faithful to the witness of scripture.

Whenever we are trying to discern what the Word of God is for us today we must study the scriptures, hear the *word* proclaimed, seek God's guidance through prayer and then use the consistent message of the scriptures as a measuring rod. Through the centuries many scholars have done just this, and they provide us with many resources to aid us on our journey of faith. It is always important when reading the work of critical scholars to return to scripture and balance their insights with the Word of God. As members of the Reformed faith we have a motto: "We are reformed and always being reformed." This means we are always open to the scriptures read under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to blow fresh insights into our understanding and cause us to think afresh about God's Word for us.

The Holy Spirit is at work in our world today. Where have you seen the Spirit at work? For some, the experience of the Holy Spirit is as powerful as the events of the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2. For others, it might be as simple as the sharing of the meaning of scripture, as Philip did with the Ethiopian eunuch. The Holy Spirit is alive and well in our world today. Look around you for signs of God's wind blowing anew.

Keeping a Journal

1. Reread the catechism questions and answers for this session. Choose one sentence or phrase to reflect on for the week. Here are some ideas:

