

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 27, 2018**

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND YOU (2)

Acts 2:1-21

“Dear Theophilus.”

If you heard last Sunday’s message, you understand why I begin this way. Theophilus is the otherwise unknown person to whom Luke addressed both the Gospel he wrote and its sequel, the Book of Acts. The name Theophilus, as I said last week, can mean either “one who loves God” or “one who is loved by God.” I hope you are and will always be the former: one who loves God. You are and will always be the latter: one who is loved by God. *Your* name is Theophilus. *My* name is Theophilus. *Every person* you meet is Theophilus. I just wanted to remind you of that this morning.

Last Sunday was the day of Pentecost, the Christian church’s annual celebration of the dramatic events that took place on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, on the fiftieth day after the resurrection of Jesus and ten days after His ascension into heaven. On the Day of Pentecost, as we read in Acts 2, with Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman world gathered in Jerusalem, God in the person of the Holy Spirit came in power on the followers of Jesus, giving birth to the church and sparking the first great evangelistic harvest in the history of the church, when, as it says in Acts 2:41, about 3,000 new believers – 3,000 new disciples – responded to Peter’s sermon and were added to the church that day.

Last Sunday I used Corrie ten Boom’s analogy of the glove and the hand to try to explain the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of the church, and in your life and mine. Do you remember? A glove cannot do anything by itself. But it is a different story when there is a hand in the glove. It is not the glove but the hand in the glove that acts. You and I are like gloves. The Holy Spirit is the hand in the glove that functions in us and through us. Without the hand of the Spirit in us, we are spiritually helpless. Powerless. But when the glove of your life is filled with the hand of the Spirit, God can do amazing things with you, just as He did with Peter and the rest of the believers following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

In addition to the hand in the glove, here are ways some others have described the role or ministry of the Holy Spirit. Pastor-author Tony Evans says the Holy Spirit is like a moving sidewalk, the kind you find at most airports. When we walk in the Spirit, he says, the Holy Spirit comes underneath us and carries us along in His power. We’re still walking, but we are dependent on the power He gives for life and service (Evans, “Liberating Grace,” *Decision*, July 2002, 25). Attempting to serve God without the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit is more like walking the wrong way on a moving sidewalk or trying to go up a down escalator.

J. D. Greear says that, for a lot of people, the Holy Spirit is like our pituitary gland. You may not understand its purpose, but you know it’s there for a reason and you’re glad you have it. You don’t want to lose it. But you’re not sure exactly what it does. That is the way it is with

the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit serves a vital function – several vital functions – in the life of a Christian and in our life together in the church, which I hope will become clear. (Adapted from Steve Brown, *Hidden Agendas*, 81)

Mark Batterson explains the work of the Holy Spirit with an analogy from the world of boxing. Before there was UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship), before there was MMA (Mixed Martial Arts), before WWE’s “Smackdown” was the thing it is today, the sport of boxing was a much bigger deal than it is these days. Probably the most famous boxer of all time was Muhammad Ali. He was famous, among other things, for being able to “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” In Ali’s corner, literally, for more than 20 years, was his trainer, Angelo Dundee, who also trained 15 other world boxing champions, including Sugar Ray Leonard and George Foreman (who became as famous for his grill as he ever was for boxing).

Dundee described his role as a cornerman this way: “When you’re working with a fighter, you’re a surgeon, an engineer, and a psychologist.” I won’t try to dissect exactly what that all means, but I agree with Mark Batterson when he says: “As followers of Jesus Christ, we have something” – *Someone* – “even better than a surgeon-engineer-psychologist in our corner: the Holy Spirit” (Batterson, *If*, 249).

Another pastor-author, Sam Storms, explains our need for the Holy Spirit with this sailing analogy. Suppose you decide to go sailing. The problem is that, unlike Don Colley and Ken Masson (and perhaps others of you), you know next to nothing about sailing. So you search the internet and you go to the bookstore and purchase several books to find out what’s involved. You read everything you can. Then you talk to a veteran sailor who answers your questions. The next day, you rent a sailboat. You check it over carefully to be sure you have everything you need and that everything is in good working order. Then you take your boat out on the lake. Your excitement is at a fever pitch, though you are also feeling anxious about the whole experience because of your lack of experience. But you follow the instructions you’ve read and the advice you’ve gotten, and you launch your boat into the water. You carefully go through your checklist and hoist the sail.

At that moment, says Storms, you learn a crucial lesson. You can study sailing. You may even be able to build a sailboat. You can seek counsel from the wisest and most experienced sailors. You can cast your boat onto the most beautiful of lakes under a bright, inviting sun. You can successfully hoist the sail. But – and this, he says, is a big “but” – only God can make the wind blow! (Storms, *Practicing the Power*, 34)

Comprenez? Do you see it? All the best laid plans of mice and men, all the spiritual strategies in the world will produce no lasting spiritual benefit if the animating wind of the Holy Spirit does not blow in and through our lives. The work of the Holy Spirit does not have to be accompanied by the sound of a mighty, rushing wind or tongues of fire or speaking in languages we’ve never learned, as took place in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. That is more often *not* the way the Holy Spirit works. What happened on the Day of Pentecost was remarkable in part because it was so out of the ordinary. It was not meant to be the Holy Spirit’s normal way of revealing His presence and power. As Christians in the Reformed

tradition, we steadfastly affirm our belief in the sovereignty of God, which means that we do not insist that God must work in a certain way or restrict the Holy Spirit from working in the manner He chooses. Instead of trying to force God into a box of our choosing, we rest and rejoice in His sovereign grace, knowing, as Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3, that “the wind” of the Spirit “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8). Wherever, whenever, and however.

The point of all this is that, as a sailboat depends on the wind for its power, so we depend on the sovereign wind of the Holy Spirit to give us the power we need to live and serve and witness as Christians in the world today.

Without the Holy Spirit, as John Stott has written, Christian discipleship – what we call the Christian life – would be inconceivable, even impossible. As a body without breath is a corpse, he says, so the church without the Spirit is dead. We cannot be effective witnesses without His power. We cannot have a Christ-like character apart from the fruit He produces in us. We can have no real spiritual life without the life-giver. We can have no understanding of spiritual truth without the Spirit of truth (Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 60).

One of our church membership questions in the EPC and here at Faith is: “Do you now resolve, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?” The most important part of this question is the middle, where it says: “In humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit.” Why? Because, otherwise, the Christian life is impossible. You can’t do it without the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is a supernatural life. It requires supernatural strength. It requires a supernatural power. You can’t do it on your own. It requires the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, as hard as you try, you will be doomed to disappointment, defeat, and frustration. You will not be able to do it.

You *need* the Holy Spirit. *I* need the Holy Spirit. *We all* need the Holy Spirit. The good news is that the Holy Spirit has come. The Holy Spirit has been given to us – to you, to me, and to everyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin and guilt and eternal separation from God.

Here are five basic things we all need to know about the Holy Spirit:

1. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A PERSON.

First, the Holy Spirit is a person. Not an “it.” Not a thing. Not an element in the atmosphere. Not an impersonal power or force (as in *Star Wars*). The Holy Spirit is a person. Like God the Father and God the Son, the Holy Spirit is a living personal being. Like the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, eternally existing and fully God, co-equal with the Father and the Son in deity, dignity, honor, and glory.

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A PROMISE.

Second, the Holy Spirit is a promise. The Holy Spirit is a promise fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit whom Jesus promised to send descended upon the followers of Jesus with displays of wind and fire, and the praises of God being declared in languages those first followers of Jesus had never learned. The promise of the Holy Spirit fulfilled on Pentecost is God's promise to all believers in all times and places, including us here today. We are not promised the wind or the fire or the glossolalia (which is a fancy word for speaking in other tongues or languages). But we are promised the presence of the Holy Spirit not only to be *with* us or *alongside* us, but, as Jesus says in John 14:17, to be *in* us. To live in us.

The Holy Spirit is God-with-us today. Just as Jesus was Immanuel – God-with-us – in the time of His incarnation, the Holy Spirit is now our Immanuel. Not only God *with* us, but God *in* us. Having made you spiritually alive in Christ, the Holy Spirit is the presence of God in you, carrying out His gracious work of sanctification in your life, molding and shaping you into the likeness of Jesus, and equipping you with His gifts and tools to serve His purposes in this generation.

The same Holy Spirit Jesus promised to send, the same Holy Spirit who came on the Day of Pentecost, has been given to you and to every true believer in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. If you belong to Jesus by faith, you have received the Holy Spirit, whether the Spirit's coming to you was accompanied by dramatic signs or not.

The Holy Spirit is a person. The Holy Spirit is a promise.

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A POWER.

Third, the Holy Spirit is a power. As Jesus said to His disciples in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” The Holy Spirit is the Christian's source of spiritual power. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to stand firm in the face of temptation, to resist the devil, and to gain victory over the enemy of our souls. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to grow spiritually. It is the Holy Spirit who produces in us the fruit of the Spirit – such qualities as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) – as we follow the Spirit's lead in our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who endows every believer with some spiritual gift(s), about which the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, and Romans 12, so that each of us may discover our place in God's family and use our gifts to bless others and glorify God.

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GIVEN FOR A PURPOSE.

Fourth, the power of the Holy Spirit is given for a purpose. When Jesus promised the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8, He said: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses.” The purpose for which the Holy Spirit is given to us is witness. We are to bear witness to the message of Jesus and His saving love. We are to be witnesses to the truth and power of the gospel. We are to tell others who Jesus is, what He did, what it

means, why it matters, and how unworthy sinners like us can get in on His grace. The Holy Spirit gives us power to be witnesses. The Holy Spirit enables us to spread the word to people in our community, to people all around us, so that through our witness they may come to faith in Jesus and become His disciples. The Holy Spirit gives us power for service – to serve and care for each other in the family of believers, and to serve and care for the needs and hurts and ordinary (or extraordinary) difficulties our neighbors face.

The Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual power as the followers of Jesus. But, of course, you have to be connected to the power source if you expect to have any power. If you're not plugged in to the Holy Spirit, if you are not attuned to His voice, if you are not being nourished and sharpened in your heart and mind by God's Word on a daily basis, if you are not letting God speak to you through His Word, if you are not regularly seeking after God in prayer, if you have a "ho-hum" attitude toward worship – if you are not practicing the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life – you shouldn't be surprised if you feel spiritually weak or even powerless.

The sense of spiritual weakness or powerlessness or frustration that too many Christians feel too often is not the way it is supposed to be. The Bible tells us to "be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18), which suggests that we cannot fill ourselves with the Holy Spirit and that we must allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, not just once but again and again and again, by drawing near to Him and surrendering our hearts and dreams and desires to Him on a daily basis. We must consciously and willingly let the hand of the Holy Spirit fill every finger of our glove.

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS OUR PARACLETE.

Fifth, the Holy Spirit is our Paraclete. "Paraclete" is a title Jesus uses in John 14-16 in speaking about the Holy Spirit and His role in the lives of His followers. The word Paraclete means "one who is called alongside to help, or to give strength." It can be translated as Helper, Counselor, Comforter, Advocate, Ally, Friend, Encourager, and even Champion. All of these words describe what the Holy Spirit does, can do, or will do in your life, if you let Him. He will give you help. He will give you wisdom and guidance. He will give you grace when you need it. He will be your Counselor. He will give you comfort. He will give you spiritual protection. He will give you encouragement. He will give you strength when you are emotionally or spiritually weak. He will be your advocate when Satan accuses you. He will be your faithful friend and ally in every spiritual battle. He will be with you always to point you to Jesus and His love, to remind you that God's grace is always sufficient, and to guide you safely home, though you may have to endure many hardships along the way. As the Paraclete, He is God-with-us. *God-with-you*. And, as the Lord promised Joshua and the people of Israel, He will never leave you nor forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6-8; Hebrews 13:5). He is and will be with you always.

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT

Many of us have a lot to learn about the Holy Spirit. Many Christians have misunderstandings about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, either because we ignore the

Holy Spirit or because we put too much emphasis on the Holy Spirit and think that we must have the same experience as the first believers did on the Day of Pentecost. Not the wind and fire so much, but the speaking in tongues as evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit. We'll come back to that.

For now, I leave you with this affirmation, taken from the official EPC Position Paper on the Holy Spirit, adopted by the General Assembly of our denomination in 1986: "We believe (the Holy Spirit) is God, one with the Father and the Son. We believe 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 – (the Holy Spirit) manifests the life of Christ in a variety of ways that includes both fruit and gifts. We believe that the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the believer" – that means *you* – "to enable God's people" – that means *us* – "to do what otherwise (we) 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."

May we too commit ourselves to these beliefs. Not just with our minds. Not just as a matter of intellectual or doctrinal agreement. But as a matter of daily living – in faith and love and witness and service – in personal connection and communion with the Holy Spirit.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.