**Ongoing Reception of the Spirit**

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Over the last fifty years or so there has been much discussion in all Protestant denominations about the gift of the Holy Spirit. Some of the discussion has been about when and how Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit. This issue was put on the agenda by the teaching of the Pentecostal churches that there are two stages in our Christian journey. For them the first stage begins with the experience of conversion when we are born again as children of God; the second begins with our experience of baptism by the Holy Spirit, the infilling of the Holy Spirit for our empowerment in doing the Lord’s work. The apparent proof of this, the initial evidence that it has occurred, is the fact that a person has spoken in tongues. Every converted person who has spoken in tongues is held to be a born–again, Spirit–filled believer. Some groups have modified the link between being filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues, but most Pentecostal churches still retain the teaching that each Christian must have a single definitive experience of baptism by the Holy Spirit apart from baptism with water.

In contrast to this, the New Testament teaches that all those who have been baptized and believe in the Lord Jesus have received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). What’s more, there are not two baptisms but only one baptism (Eph. 4:5), the baptism by which we have been regenerated by water and the Spirit (John 3:5) and given the one and same Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:13).

Yet, from misunderstanding this teaching we Lutherans can too easily fall into the same trap as the Pentecostals by concluding that every baptized person has the Holy Spirit as a permanent possession that can never be lost. The notion that we “possess” the Spirit misreads the Scriptures and misapplies the teaching of the Church. Even though Christ gives us the Holy Spirit through his word in baptism, we do not possess the Spirit, any more than a wife possesses her husband and his love because she is married to him. The giving and receiving of love in marriage is a lifelong business that has its foundation in the rite of marriage. So too the ongoing reception of the Holy Spirit has its foundation in baptism! After all, the Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing. A thing can be possessed, but not a person. That process of receiving what is given begins with a single event, just as breathing begins at our birth and married life starts with a wedding. Just as a husband gives himself and his love to his wife on the day of their marriage, so God the Father gave us his Holy Spirit through Jesus on the day that we were baptized, the Spirit who creates and maintains our faith in God. But that’s not the end of it. We who have been given the Spirit in baptism keep on receiving the Holy Spirit from God the Father for as long as we live here on earth. So, in that sense, we never possess the Spirit, just as we never possess the light of the sun. In fact, for the whole of our life as baptized people we keep on receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul therefore tells the Christians in Ephesus, who have already received the Holy Spirit as a seal of their redemption in baptism (1:13-14), to “be filled with the Spirit” whenever they assemble for worship (5:18).

The various aspects of the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit make sense only if we realize that Christ does not just give us his Holy Spirit once for all, at one point in our lives, but continually. And that not partially but fully (John 3:34)! Jesus is the fountain, the spring from which we receive the Holy Spirit, like drinking water from a tap (John 7: 37-39). When he declares that his words are “Spirit and life” (John 6:63), he tells us that he gives his life–giving Spirit through his word. Paul likewise teaches us in Gal. 3:1-5 that we receive the Spirit by hearing God’s word as it addresses us. So wherever God’s word is proclaimed and enacted, wherever it is used in meditation and prayer, we can be sure that Christ is there giving the Holy Spirit for us to receive as the greatest of all the gifts from him. Every Sunday the risen Lord Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into us as he did with his eleven disciples at the first Sunday service in Jerusalem (John 20:22).

Since this is true, we go to church and have our daily devotions in order to be filled with the Spirit. This happens when we hear the word of God in the Bible readings and the sermon. It also happens when we receive Christ’s body and blood as our Spirit–filled, Spirit–giving food and drink for our journey through life (1 Cor. 10:3-4). InHoly Communion we who have been baptized by one Spirit are given the same Spirit to drink (1 Cor. 12:13). That, too, is why we do well to begin each day with meditation on God’s word and prayer. Jesus encourages us to depend on the Spirit by giving us this promise in Luke 11:13: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will you Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” If we are going to live in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit on our daily journey through life with Jesus, we need to ask God the Father daily for his Holy Spirit.

That is what we pray for in the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer. In his Small Catechism Luther gives this explanation of how God’s kingdom comes to us: “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” The daily life of faith depends on our daily reception of the Holy Spirit through daily meditation on God’s word and daily prayer for what he has promised to give us in his word.