

The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Divine Service

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In Philippians 3:3 Paul claims that those who belong to the new Israel, with its circumcision of the old self, 'serve' by the Spirit of God. They are able to 'serve' God because they are animated by the Holy Spirit. But he does not explain how they are empowered to do so.

This may, at first glance, seem a rather abstruse matter. Yet our understanding of the Spirit's role in Christian worship does, in fact, determine what is done in the divine service, and how it is done. My question is: how can those who serve as ministers in the 'ministry of the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:8) promote the operation of the Holy Spirit in the divine service? How can they be sure that they are agents of God's Spirit?

There are, as far as I can ascertain, two common ways of understanding how the Holy Spirit empowers Christian worship. Both assume that this happens subjectively apart from any external mediation. Some argue that Holy Spirit works through the faith and love of God's people. They therefore hold that in Philippians 3:3 Paul contrasts the ritual performance of worship in the old covenant with the inward service of the heart in the new covenant.¹ Those who lead in worship therefore need to pray for empowerment by the Spirit for themselves and their congregation, so that they can be sure that they worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Others argue that the Holy Spirit works by empowering the faithful with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the reception of certain charismata. Those who are filled with the Spirit can lead others in prayer and praise. Both agree that the Spirit works inwardly apart from any outward ritual enactment.

Luther gives a different answer to the question of empowerment by the Spirit, an answer that has not received much attention in our modern debates about worship, even from those who are his modern heirs. He agrees that it is the Holy Spirit who produces faith and love. He agrees that the Spirit gives gifts to empower the faithful in their service of God. Yet he also teaches that the glorified Lord gives the Holy Spirit through the external ministry of the word in the divine service for the performance of worship. He maintains that 'God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external word which goes before.'² By the external word Luther does not just refer to the words of the written Scriptures but also to their liturgical enactment. His claim is that God the Father gives the Holy Spirit through the proclamation and enactment of Christ's words in the liturgical assembly. We can therefore only be sure that we are empowered by the Spirit in our service of God if God's inspiring word is proclaimed and enacted in it.

¹ See, for example, Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Bible Commentary Vol 43, revised and expanded by Ralph P. Martin, Nelson, 2004, 176.

² *The Smalcald Articles* 3, 3, 8:3. See also *LW* 34, 286 and 40, 146-149.

I would like to develop this insight about God's word as the means of the Spirit to explore how the Holy Spirit works objectively through physical means in the divine service. My question is: how can we be sure that we serve God by his Spirit in our performance of the divine service?

1. Christ gives the Spirit to the church through his word.

In John 6:63 Jesus says: *'The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.'* That short sentence sums up the connection of God's Spirit with the spoken word in both testaments. By his word Jesus speaks the Spirit to his disciples; by his word he puts his Spirit into them.³

The association of 'spirit' with spoken words was obvious to all Hebrew and Greek speakers in the ancient world. For them 'spirit' meant 'wind' and 'air,' 'the life-breath' and 'life-power' that was used in breathing and speaking. Speaking made use of air and breath to form words and to carry them into the ears of the hearer. So breathing air and speaking words went together. Thus in the Old Testament God's word is associated with his Spirit, as in Psalm 33:6: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath (Spirit) of his mouth.*⁴

This applies too in the New Testament! Thus we read in John 3:34: *He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.* St John tells us that the risen Lord Jesus spoke the Spirit to his apostles when he commissioned them (John 20:22). And he stills speaks the Spirit, the Spirit who speaks God's word to the household of God (Heb 3:7).⁵ Since God's words are filled with the Spirit, they do what they say. His words are effective and powerful (1 Thess 2:13; Heb 4:12). When God speaks, the Spirit acts through the words that are spoken. They are Spirit-filled, Spirit-giving words. The performative power of his words, their force, their spiritual charge, depends on the Spirit who energises them; through those words the Spirit animates and energises those who hear them and put their trust in them.

When Jesus speaks he speaks with the Holy Spirit; his words convey the Spirit. By speaking to believers Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them, just as he breathed the Holy Spirit into the apostles on Easter Eve by saying: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:22).

This understanding of the giving of the Spirit through the word is summed up in article five of the Augsburg Confession. Since 'the Holy Spirit is given through the word of God' (AC 18, 3), this article maintains that God has appointed human agents to teach the gospel and to administer the sacraments as the means by which 'he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel' (AC 5). Luther

³ See Luther's helpful remarks on this passage in *LW* 23:173-177.

⁴ See also Ps 147:18; Isa 59:21.

⁵ For additional references to the speaking Spirit, see Ezek 3:24; 8:3-5; 11:15; Mark 13:11; Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2; 20:3; 21:11; 28:25; Heb 10:15-17; Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 22:17).

calls that the external word,⁶ the embodied word of the gospel,⁷ the vocal word that is heard in the reading of the Scriptures, spoken in the absolution, proclaimed in the sermon, sung in songs, the word that is enacted in baptism and in the Lord's Supper.⁸ God's word in all its forms is the means of the Spirit.⁹ So then, the ministry of the word is 'the ministry of the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:8).¹⁰ That ministry conveys the Spirit to the faithful people of God through his word in the liturgical assembly.

If that is so, then every celebration of the holy liturgy is little Pentecost. In every service Jesus gives his Holy Spirit to those who listen to him and put their trust in him. In every service the faithful assemble in order to receive the Spirit and the Spirit's empowerment for self-giving, prayer, and praise. Whenever God's word is faithfully enacted and proclaimed, the church can be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work. There and then!

2. By his word Christ institutes the divine service and empowers it with God's Spirit.

The teaching of the connection of the Spirit with God's word explains why Luther and his followers were so concerned with the issue of divine institution. Whenever they touched on the practice of worship, they asked whether it was divinely instituted or not. In doing so, they distinguished those things that were divinely instituted through Christ and his apostles¹¹ from those that had been established by human tradition and authority.¹²

⁶ Note the words of the condemnation in AC 5, 4: 'Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that we obtain the Holy Spirit without the external (embodied) word of the gospel through our own preparations, thoughts, and works.' Luther explains what he means by 'the external word' most fully in SA 3, 3, 8, 3-13. It is the opposite of 'the internal word' that is received by the enthusiasts who believed that they had God speaking his words immediately and prophetically to them in their hearts. In contrast to this exaltation of immediate spiritual inspiration Luther taught that the Spirit was mediated through the external word, the embodied word. It is telling that his teaching on the external word comes in the article on confession which focuses on the value of private absolution as God's spoken word of pardon to the sinner. By the use of this term he refers to the written words of the Sacred Scriptures that are preached and heard in the divine service, spoken in the absolution and enacted in the sacrament of the altar, and meditated on and assimilated in daily devotions.

⁷ The German for this is 'das leiblich Wort,' the bodily word.

⁸ For a discussion on the close connection between the external word and the ministry of the word, see Norman Nagel's essay on 'Externum Verbum: Testing Augustana 5 on the Doctrine of the Holy Ministry,' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 30/3 (1996), 101-110.

⁹ For the bestowal and work of the Spirit through the word, see AC 5:1-4; 18:3; 28:8; *Apol* 4§135; 12§44; 24§58, 59, 70; SA 3.3.3§3-13; *LC* 2§38, 42, 58; *FC Ep* 2§1,4, 13, 19; 12§22; *FC SD* 2§5, 38, 48, 52, 54, 55, 56, 65; 3§16; 11§29, 33, 39, 40, 41, 76, 77; 12§30. See also Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* Oliver and Boyd: Edinburgh and London, 1955, 170-192) for the treatment of this topic in Lutheran Orthodoxy.

¹⁰ See the remarks on this in *FC SD* XI, 29.

¹¹ The letter to the Hebrews touches on the issue of divine institution by speaking about 'the ordinances for service' in both covenants (9:1). Yet it also distinguishes the ministry of Christ as the heavenly 'liturgist' whose 'liturgical ministry' is not founded on a new law but on far better promises than the provisional 'ordinances of the flesh' which are unable to deliver a clean conscience (9:10).

¹² For a good treatment of this topic, see Heinz Eduard Tödt, 'Institution,' *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* Vol 18, Gerhard Müller (ed), Walter de Gruyter: Berlin & New York, 1987, 206-220.

The purpose of this approach to worship has, I think, seldom been fully understood.¹³ It is, of course, true that the concept of divine institution was not invented by the Lutheran reformers, nor is it limited to them. It goes back to the Old Testament and to the work of the Jewish rabbis. It is integral to the catholic understanding of the priesthood and the Mass. It is a key term in Calvin's theology. Yet all too often it seems to function only as a legal-theological term, without due appreciation that divine authorisation necessarily implies divine empowerment. The assumption is that by his ordinances God authorises certain agents to act on his behalf here on earth; by his ordinances he gives them the legal warrant for what they do in the divine service. The accent in this understanding of divine institution therefore falls on active obedience and legal responsibility.

While Luther and his followers did not disagree with their contemporaries on the legal character of divine institution, they emphasised its performative function. For them, as for Aquinas in his understanding of the sacraments,¹⁴ the present, operative power of the divine service derived from its divine institution. They understood it, evangelically and liturgically, as Christ's ongoing provision of the Holy Spirit for the spiritual empowerment for the church.¹⁵ By instituting what was necessary for the life of the church, Christ established the creaturely means by which he delivers his gifts to people through people here on earth. Take, for example, Luther's teaching on baptism. By instituting baptism, Christ empowered it with his word and Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The same word that instituted the rite of baptism regenerates a person and produces the new regenerate life of the baptised by the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Christ's words for the institution of Holy Communion do not just provide the legal warrant for what is done in the Eucharist; they consecrate the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ and deliver his blessings to those who put their trust in what he says.¹⁷

So then, if some practice is instituted by Christ through his apostles, the church can be sure that it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit may indeed be at work elsewhere. But no one can be certain whether the Spirit is at work apart from God's word, and how. When the church faithfully does what Christ has given for it to do in his word, it can be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work there. Hence Luther claims: *God has so ordered it that the Holy Spirit ordinarily comes through the Word* (LW 23:174).

¹³ For an appreciation of divine institution as foundational empowerment, see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*; tr. Thomas H. Trapp; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2008, 249-253.

¹⁴ See *Summa Theologicae* III, 64, 2-6.

¹⁵ So AC 28:21 claims that whatever is divinely instituted 'is done not by human power but by God's word alone.'

¹⁶ In answer to the question about how the water of baptism could bring forgiveness of sins, redemption and eternal salvation, Luther teaches in *the Small Catechism*: 'Clearly water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a "bath of new birth in the Holy Spirit" (Robert Kolb and Timothy John Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2000),' 359. See also *the Large Catechism* 4, 23-31, 52-63 (Kolb-Wengert, 458-460, 463-464).

¹⁷ See *the Large Catechism* 5, 4-32 (Kolb-Wengert, 467-469).

3. The church receives the Holy Spirit by faith in God's word as it is proclaimed and enacted in the divine service.

The New Testament teaches that all those who have been baptised and believe in the Lord Jesus, receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). There is only one baptism (Eph 4:5) through which we are born again by water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Since all Christians have been baptised into Christ's body, they have all been given the one and same Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:13). Yet it is not right to conclude, as some do, that since they have received the Spirit, they somehow own the Spirit as their personal possession.

I hold that since the Holy Spirit is not an object but a person, Christians keep on receiving the Spirit, without actually ever possessing the Spirit.¹⁸ They 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 life-long business that has its foundation in a single event, the ceremony of marriage. So too the giving and receiving of the Holy Spirit has its foundation in baptism (Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5, 6)! Christ's disciples keep on receiving the Spirit daily for as long as they live; they cannot live by the Spirit without receiving the Spirit.

That ongoing process of receiving the Spirit begins with a single event, just as breathing begins at 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 gives the Holy Spirit to us through Jesus in baptism. But that's not the end of it! Those who have been given access to the Spirit in baptism keep on receiving the Holy Spirit from God the Father for as long as they live here on earth. So, in that sense, they never possess the Spirit, just as they never possess the light of the sun; they keep on receiving the Holy Spirit. That's why Paul tells the Christians in Ephesus to 'be filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18), even though they have already been baptised and 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit' (Eph 1:13).

The Biblical teaching on the operation of the Holy Spirit in the church makes full sense only if it is understood that Christ does not just give his Holy Spirit, once for all, at one point in person's life, but continually. And not just individually, but corporately, as on the day of Pentecost! Jesus is the fountain, the spring from which his disciples receive the Holy Spirit, like drinking water from a tap (John 7:37-39). When Jesus declares that his words are 'Spirit and life' (John 6:63), he affirms that he gives his life-giving Spirit to them through his word. In Galatians 3:1-5 St Paul maintains that his readers receive the Spirit by faithfully hearing God's word. So wherever God's word is proclaimed and enacted, there Christ gives the Holy Spirit to those who put their trust in him and his words.

¹⁸ When Paul speaks about 'having' the Spirit in Rom 8:9 and 1 Cor 6:19; 7:40, this refers to reception of the Spirit as an available gift rather than his ownership of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:12).

Since that is so, Christians go to church in order to receive the Holy Spirit. They go to church to be filled with the Spirit. This does not just happen as they hear the word of God in the Bible readings and the sermon, but also as they receive Christ's body and blood. The body and blood of Jesus are Spirit-filled, Spirit-giving food and drink for God's people, spiritual nourishment for their journey through this world to their heavenly homeland (1 Cor 10:3-4). In Holy Communion all those who have been baptised by one Spirit are given the same Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:13).¹⁹ So, as the church hears God's word and receives Christ's body and blood, it prays for the Spirit and receives the Spirit, just as Christ promised in Luke 11:13: 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.'

4. The Holy Spirit works together with the Father and the Son in the divine service.

There are two sides to the operation of the Spirit in the divine service. On the one hand, through Christ's presence in the assembly and his service of the church, the faithful receive the Holy Spirit as the Father's gift to us. There Jesus speaks the word of God the Father, his word from heaven.²⁰ There Jesus proclaims his Spirit-filling word to earthlings; through his word Jesus brings the Holy Spirit to the church on earth. Lutherans call this the **sacramental** side of the divine service; the eastern Orthodox tradition calls this the **descending** work of Christ.²¹

On the other hand, those who are animated with Christ's Spirit, are empowered by his Spirit for service with him as his co-priests. The Spirit joins them with Jesus. As their high priest Jesus represents them before God the Father (Heb 9:24) and intercedes for them, so that they can approach the Father through him (Heb 7:25). Just as Christ offered himself to the Father by the eternal Spirit (Heb 9:14), they offer themselves to God by that Spirit, the Spirit who moves them to respond to their reception of gifts from God the Father by presenting their God-pleasing, Spirit-produced²² offerings to him together with Jesus (1 Pet 2:5). Lutherans call this the **sacrificial** side of the divine service; the eastern Orthodox tradition calls it the **ascending** work of Christ.²³

¹⁹ Even though Paul speaks about 'drinking' in connection with Holy Communion in 1 Cor 10:4 and 11:25, 26, most exegetes hold that the provision of the Spirit for drinking is a metaphor for the Spirit's bestowal in baptism. Yet since all Christians in Corinth received the sacrament as soon as they were baptised, it is likely that Paul does not just refer to the Spirit's provision at baptism but to the ongoing reception of the Spirit in the Lord's Supper, their drinking of the Spirit with the blood of Christ from him as their spiritual rock.

²⁰ In Hebrews 12:22-25 the description of the church's participation in the heavenly liturgy culminates in God's gracious speaking from heaven to his people on earth.

²¹ See James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Paternoster: Carlyle, 1-57.

²² In Apol 24:26 Melancthon quite rightly asserts that when Peter speaks about 'spiritual' sacrifices he refers to 'the operation of the Holy Spirit in us.'

²³ These terms come from Melancthon's discussion in the article 24:71-75 of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* on 'the Mass' (Kolb-Wengert, 271). While these two sides can be formally distinguished, they cannot be separated or reduced to a chronological sequence of a divine action

The descent of the Spirit always comes first in the divine service. It is foundational for our worship. Peter speaks about that Trinitarian descent in his sermon at Pentecost. There he declares that Jesus the exalted Son pours out on the Church the promised Holy Spirit that he himself receives from the Father (Acts 2:33). The Father gives the Spirit through the Son.

Jesus speaks even more fully about the descent of the Spirit as a speaker in the farewell discourses of John's gospel. There he describes that descent from three different points of view. First, he describes the Father's role in that descent in John 14:26. The Father sends the Spirit to his disciples in the name of Jesus to 'teach' them what the ascended Lord was saying to them now from what Jesus had said to them before his glorification. Second, Jesus describes his own role in the Spirit's descent in John 15:26. Jesus sends the Spirit of truth from the Father to his disciples, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father, to 'bear witness' to him. Third, Jesus explains the purpose of the Spirit's descent in John 16:13-15. The Spirit glorifies Jesus by listening to what the Father was saying to Jesus and 'declaring' it to the disciples; the Spirit receives the Father's gifts from the Son and delivers them by his 'preaching' to the church.²⁴

That descending Trinitarian operation has, I maintain, provides the shape of the holy liturgy, the service of word and sacrament. In it the risen Lord Jesus delivers the Holy Spirit with all other heavenly blessings from the Father to the liturgical assembly (Eph 1:3). The church is therefore at the receiving end of that descent by which heavenly blessings are conveyed to people on earth.

The ascent of the Spirit corresponds to that descent and follows from it in the divine service. Paul sums up that dimension of our service succinctly in Ephesians 2:18 where he says: 'through him (Jesus) both of us (Jews and Gentiles) have access to the Father in the Spirit.' Since all Christians are justified by faith, they have access to God's grace (Rom 5:1,2). We can therefore present our offerings to God the Father, the offering of ourselves and our bodies, the offering of our prayers and praises, the offering of our possessions and the work of our hands. St Peter calls these our spiritual offerings, because they are built on Christ and produced by the Holy Spirit; these offerings are well-pleasing to God because they are sanctified by his Spirit-filled word and offered to the Father through Jesus the Son (1 Pet 2:5). So, even in the ascending dimension of the divine service the faithful do not operate by their own power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only brings the Father and the Father's gifts to them; it brings them and their gifts to the Father. The Spirit galvanises them for self-giving. And all this through Jesus the mediator!

followed by a human response. They can at times coincide and combine, as Melancthon notes, in a single enactment with 'a twofold effect' (24:75).

²⁴ See Luther's remarks on this in LW 24:362, 364: *Here Christ makes the Holy Spirit a preacher...For here Christ refers to a conversation carried on in the Godhead, a conversation in which no creatures participate. He sets up a pulpit both for the speaker and the listener. He makes the Father the preacher and the Spirit the Listener.*

Conclusion

How then can we be sure that the Spirit is at work in our worship? We can be certain of the Spirit's inspiration and operation when God's word is faithfully used as the means of the Spirit. This may be why all the classical ecumenical orders of service consist almost entirely of scriptural material. We absolve and bless with the word; we preach and meditate with the word; we baptise and perform the Eucharist with the word; we pray and praise with the word; we offer ourselves and our gifts with the word. Through the right enactment of God's word we participate in the descending and ascending operation of the triune God in the assembly, the work by which the Spirit not only brings God the Father to us through his Son but also brings us to God the Father together with his Son. Whatever is done with the word and by faith in the word is done with the Spirit.

It is by the faithful use of the Scriptures in the divine service that God's promise in Isaiah 59:21 is fulfilled: *And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: 'My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth shall not depart out of your mouth, or the mouth of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, from now and for ever.'*