

## The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Second London Baptist Confession

Sunday morning worship was over when a visitor sought to meet the preacher. The stranger told him bluntly, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The preacher was glad for him and said he also believed in the Holy Spirit. The visitor formed a slightly different reply saying, "But I believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit" Again the preacher replied in the affirmative. The stranger then told the preacher that he believed in tongues, prophecy and words of knowledge from God. The stranger thought the lack of charismatic manifestations in the worship was a sure sign that the Church and pastor did not believe in the work of the Holy Spirit. This brief story illustrates the different ideas that people have about the Holy Spirit. A summary of the theology of the Holy Spirit for these sorts of inquirers would be helpful. Where can we look for a doctrinal summary of the person and work of the Holy Spirit? How about looking in our common Confession?

I wonder what the stranger would have said to the committee who penned the Second London Baptist Confession as there is no chapter on the Holy Spirit in that Confession. Did the committee feel that there was sufficient material in the Confession on the Holy Spirit without the need for a separate chapter devoted to the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Is there a vigorous theology of the Spirit to be found and used?

This is not the first time the issue of the Holy Spirit in the Reformed creeds has been raised. The statement has exercised the minds of some in other branches of the confessing Church. In fact it so exercised the minds of the Presbyterian Church in the USA that they formulated two extra chapters adding them to the American Edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). One chapter was entitled 'On the Holy Spirit,' the other, 'On Missions'. The formulated new chapters were approved by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1903.

These two chapters were constructed and then adopted because of a perceived deficiency in knowledge on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and Missions. They were placed at the back of the Confession of Faith as chapters XXXIV & XXXV. At the 1942 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the US, these chapters were incorporated into the Confession as chapter IX & X with chapter X being titled "Of the Gospel." The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the two largest American Presbyterian denominations were reunited in June 1983 as the Presbyterian Church (USA) and have kept these two chapters as XXXIV & XXXV.

The absence of a chapter on the Holy Spirit in the *Second London Baptist Confession* is not due to a lack of systematic instruction on the topic available to our Particular Baptist forbears. Owen, Goodwin, Charnock, and others, had written treatises on the Spirit or on His work in salvation. B.B. Warfield said "...[T]he developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit is an exclusively Reformation doctrine, and more particular still a Puritan doctrine." Insomuch as early Particular Baptists can be shown to be "puritan" and "reformed" they are in that rich theological and ecclesiastical heritage.

Warfield supplies a reason why there is not an additional chapter on the Holy Spirit. While commenting on the WCF, the source for over 90% of our Confession, he wrote, "The sole reason why it does not give a chapter to this subject, however, is because it prefers to give nine chapters to it; and when an attempt was made to supply the fancied omission, it was found that pretty much all that could be done was to present in the proposed new chapter a meager summary of the contents of these nine chapters".

Warfield was specifically thinking of the chapters X-XVIII dealing with the *ordo salutis*, the application of redemption by the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. This is not to imply that the Holy Spirit is not cited in the earlier chapters of the Confession as well. A quick scan of the Confession clearly

demonstrates something of the Spirit's work more generally. We learn that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and is equally divine, LBC II: 3. The Spirit created and sustains all life LBC IV:1. It was the Spirit that Inspired the men who wrote the Scriptures, LBC I:1, 2, 4. We discover that it was the Spirit that superintended the Incarnation of Jesus, LBC VIII:2. It was the Spirit that anointed Jesus to accomplish the great work of redemption, LBC VIII:2. The Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, LBC VIII:6.

In attempting to survey the teaching on the Holy Spirit in the Confession, it is worth keeping in mind the great epochs of God's working among men. In each epoch of God's work, one person of the Trinity is predominant. That is not to divide the Trinity into hermetically sealed units as if the other two persons of the Trinity did not have a role in that epoch but it indicates economic roles within the Godhead. God the Father had the predominant role under the old covenant. God the Son is the predominant person in the new covenant age. God the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Lord Jesus after the Lord's ascension to continue and to apply the work He began. The work of salvation is Trinitarian from start to finish. The section in the Confession where the work of the Spirit is highlighted is from chapters X through XVIII.

A quick study of chapter X-XVIII supplies the reader with at least ten different operations of the Holy Spirit in the life of those savingly joined to Christ.

1 The Holy Spirit sovereignly calls and regenerates a person while he is dead in his trespasses and sin LBC III:6; VII:2; X:2.

2 The Holy Spirit confirms the authority of Scripture as the word of God in the heart of the believer LBC I:5.

3 The Holy Spirit illumines the Scriptures for the individual believer and for the church as a whole LBC 1:6.

4 The Holy Spirit works in the heart of the believer to grant him assurance of his salvation LBC XVIII:2, 3, 4

5 The Holy Spirit guarantees the perseverance of the saints until the end LBC XVII:1, 2, 3.

6 The Holy Spirit applies and seals to the believer all the various benefits of his redemption LBC XI:4; XXVI:1; XXVII:1; XXX:1

7 The Holy Spirit sanctifies the church of Christ LBC VIII:8; IX:4; XIII:1, 2, 3; XXI:1, 3.

8 The Holy Spirit enables the believer to bear the fruit of saving graces and good works LBC XIV:1; XVI:3; XVI:3, 5.

9 The Holy Spirit provides gifts by which the whole body of Christ is strengthened and edified LBC XXVI: 9, 11.

10 The Holy Spirit resurrects the body of believers, just as he brought Christ from the dead LBC XXXI:3.

The Confession has ample development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Confession supplies us with further mind-stretching truth regarding the third person of the Trinity. We see the Holy Spirit as: the

revealer of truth, the highlighter of the Christ, the indweller of the saint, the suppressor of our sin, the giver of all needed grace, and the raiser of the spiritually dead.

Perhaps it is that the Confession is really not deficient. It might be that we need to teach what is contained in the Confession to our people more often in these days when there is so much incorrect understanding of the work of the Spirit.

The Confession had a different historical and theological context when it was being penned. This context was over three hundred years ago. We should not expect it to answer all the questions being posed in the 21st century. J.B. Torrance's somewhat amusing remark which he made about the WCF when he said it had nothing to say about "race relations" is a good illustration of that. However, with the knowledge we have gleaned from the Confession we are enabled to work on the contemporary questions being asked of us with some degree of historical, theological and exegetical reference.

It is clear that in the Confession there is an outline of the work of the Spirit that relates to doctrine and experience. As pastors, we can demonstrate the experimental dimensions of the faith for those who think Reformed Baptists are overly intellectual in their grasp of the faith. This reputation comes from the motivation to be careful with the text of Scripture and to put away error. It is an error itself to denigrate the work of the Spirit in Christ's Church—the ones to whom the Lord sent Him according to promise. The Confession is a good framework wherein to test those subjective experiences as a summary of the objective truth found in the Word of God.

The Confession as it stands also safeguards against the opposite extreme of mere intellectual assent. It stresses that the work of the Spirit is what brings the Scripture to life in our personal and corporate Christian lives. A sterile cold faith is never the work of the Spirit. A merely historical faith is no sign of his presence.

Perhaps the chief reason why there is no chapter in the Confession is the fact that the place given to the Spirit in the Confession is similar to that which is given Him in the Scriptures. The stranger that buttonholed the preacher had his focus on the wrong person of the Divine Trinity. He should have been talking about the Christ. That would have been a better test of his spiritual experience. For the work of the Spirit is to focus on Christ, rather than himself.

“[The Holy Spirit's] ministry is a floodlight ministry in relation to Jesus, a matter of spotlighting Jesus' glory before our spiritual eyes and of matchmaking between us and him. He does not call attention to himself or present himself to us for direct fellowship as the Father and the Son do; his role and his joy is to further our fellowship with them.” — J.I. Packer

What we do have in the Confession is a full and balanced presentation of the work and witness of the Holy Spirit. We can conclude with an admonition from B.B. Warfield “Whenever men are busying themselves with holy and happy meditations on the Holy Ghost and His work, it is safe to say the foundations of a true spiritual life are laid, and the structure of a rich spiritual life is rising.” May it be so for each of us.

Matthew Brennan