

Theology on Tap – The Spirit of God

- God’s “spirit” is a thoroughly Old Testament concept, from the very beginning. The Hebrew word “ruah” can be translated as “wind”, “spirit” or “breath”, and you’ll often see this in the notes whenever one of those words is used in English translation...
 - Creation – in both creation stories where the “spirit of God” moves over the waters as the agent of creation, and where the spirit literally breathes life into the man...
 - Life – it is God’s spirit which actually gives life – for example, Ezekiel 37 (the dry bones) & Psalm 104 (the Psalm read on Pentecost)...
 - Inspiration and Empowerment from God – kings, priests and prophets, for example, are empowered to act or “prophesy” because the spirit of God is “upon them” – for example, 1 Samuel 16 (the anointing of David as king); Isaiah 61 (“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, quoted by Jesus in Luke); Isaiah 11 as part of Messianic vision... (also Eldad and Medad from this coming Sunday’s reading from Numbers 11...!)
 - While God’s spirit is always considered “holy” (because “holy” means it belongs to God), the construction “holy spirit” is rare, but does exist in the Old Testament and Apocrypha (for example Psalm 51:11 and the Wisdom of Solomon 9:17)...

In the New Testament, the idea of “spirits” and “spiritual forces” was common throughout the Graeco-Roman world. So, the way various NT writings speak of God’s Spirit can be reflective of whether Jews or Gentiles are being written to. And, even within particular books, it’s sometimes hard to pin down a coherent “systematic theology” of the Spirit of God (which maybe is part of the point – no human being ever controls or contains God’s Spirit...!)

But, a couple of NT highlights:

- The conception of Jesus – in both Matthew and Luke, is ascribed to the power of the Holy Spirit (although Luke makes a much bigger deal of this, as he’s writing to a Gentile audience...)
- The Book of Acts has been described by several NT scholars as more properly “The acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles”... (the construction “Holy Spirit” appears 42 times in Acts and 13 times in Luke, vs 5 times in Matthew, 4 times in Mark, and 3 times in John)
- “The Advocate” is often how John describes the Holy Spirit, highlighting the empowerment/inspiration aspect of God’s Spirit from the OT themes above; also, in John’s Gospel, the disciples don’t “receive” the Holy Spirit until after the Resurrection, which differs from the Synoptic tradition ...

- “Speaking in tongues” – although this almost never happens, we remember it a lot! There are two things this can refer to, and they are very different. One is the type of ecstatic speech that Paul comments on (often critically) in places like 1 Corinthians 14; the other is what happens in Acts 2 (the Pentecost reading) when everyone hears “in their own language...”; in both cases, what’s being “inspired” is the ability to hear about and appreciate “the mighty works of God”...
- Paul ends up being the best “theologian” of the Holy Spirit, because he’s engaged in conversation with both Jews and Gentiles about what the Spirit of God is and how God’s Spirit is to be understood and appreciated. And while there are lots of things Paul says, I want to highlight two things from Paul about the Holy Spirit:
 - The Holy Spirit acts in the lives of believers for “the common good”, not to show off personal piety – 1 Corinthians 12:4-12...
 - The “fruits of the Spirit” are therefore also for the good of the neighbor and your relationship with your neighbor – Galatians 5:19-26

The idea is that the Holy Spirit guides us into a relationship with God, often by focusing us away from ourselves. And that’s why, finally, Luther says in the Small Catechism that the most important gift of the Holy Spirit is to inspire faith within us (the ability to love and trust God so that we can stop relying on ourselves and our own righteousness, and live in loving relationship with our neighbors.) So, Luther’s answer to what it means to believe in the Holy Spirit is:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.¹

¹Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis