

Exercises in the Creed: Where does faith come from?

Last time we looked at what it meant to say, “I believe,” that is, what faith is. Today we look a bit at where faith comes from and what it lives on.

The Creed gives us the facts about who God is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the words to confess that we believe in him. Where does the faith, the trust, come from, which makes these words more than just words spoken by us—which makes them words overflowing from a heart that trusts in God? (Matt 12:33–37)

Jesus tells Nicodemus early in John’s Gospel that unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot see or enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:1–15) Later, Jesus speaks of the Spirit, who would come to bring to the disciples’ remembrance everything Jesus has said, to lead them into all truth, to give them the peace of heart that comes from faith in God (John 14:25–27). We are brought to faith by the Holy Spirit, working through baptism, as Jesus tells Nicodemus, and through Christ’s Word, as John says, “These things are written that you may believe...and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31).

This is a great miracle, that water and words create faith. Natural man, Paul says, does not receive the things of God. What is the preaching of the cross to him, compared to all the world’s wisdom? (1 Cor 2:1–16) As Jesus said with Nicodemus, “If I’ve told you earthly things, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:12) The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. But if the Spirit dwells in us, who raised Christ from the dead, so he will give life to our moral bodies—both to live by faith now and to live by resurrection in the life that is to come (Rom 8:1–17).

Where is this Spirit to be found? Some locate him by a feeling, or by finding signs like people speaking in tongues or working miracles, or simply being “spiritual-looking” people. But the Holy Scriptures and Jesus do not lead us to find the Spirit this way. Instead, he gives promises about where the Spirit is to be found, to work for us, to give us faith and to sustain it. Where does St. Paul say faith comes from (Rom 10:5–17)? What has Jesus said about it? (John 3:5) How has he himself given the Spirit, and for what? (John 19:30; 20:22–23) When the Spirit comes upon the Apostles on Pentecost, what do they do? (Acts 2:14, 22–36, 37–39) What results? (Acts 2:40–42)

There’s always a danger for Christians about being misled about what faith is, or where it comes from, or where the Spirit is really working. Paul has to tell the Galatians, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ... Having begun with the Spirit are you now ending with the flesh?” (Gal 3:1–5) Natural man is always trying to step in and make a new faith himself, but it is not the faith that God gives, the faith that saves!

Thus, Martin Luther firmly warns us in the Smalcald Articles (III, VIII), “[W]e must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure... All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words... Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”

Where do you and your neighbors look for the Spirit to work on you? Where has he put himself to be found? How does Luther put it in explaining the 3rd Article of the Creed?