

# “He Is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity”

## A Sermon on Article Eleven of the Belgic Confession.

*Texts: Acts 5:1-11; Psalm 139:1-12*

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### Article 11 - The Holy Spirit is True and Eternal God

We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both.<sup>1</sup> In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jn 14:15-26, 15:26; Rom 8:9 <sup>2</sup> Gen 1:2; Mt 28:19; Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor 2:10, 3:16, 6:11; 1 Jn 5:7

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Far too often we hear people speak of the Holy Spirit as an “it,” not a “who.” One reason this is the case is that it is the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work to bring glory to Jesus Christ and not to bring glory to himself. This is why one theologian calls the Holy Spirit, the “shy member of the Trinity.”<sup>1</sup> But this self-effacing role the Holy Spirit plays should not cause us to de-emphasize the fact that the Holy Spirit is God and that he possesses all of the divine attributes as do the other members of the Trinity. Therefore, even as we speak of the Father as God, the Son as God, so too we must speak of the Holy Spirit as God, for he is the third person of the Holy Trinity.

We are in that section of our confession (articles eight through eleven) which deals with the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. As we have emphasized when going through these articles, many people erroneously believe that since Christians, Jews and Muslims are monotheists, we all worship the same God. But this is not the case. Christians worship the Triune God, who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we have seen, the Koran (the holy book of Islam) directly attacks the doctrine of the Trinity. Jews emphatically deny that God reveals himself as three persons and many regard the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ as one of the leading factors in the rise of Anti-Semitism, since Jews are often blamed for the crucifixion of the Son of God.

Given this vast difference of opinion, the real point of contention comes down to the biblical evidence for the deity of the Son (Jesus Christ) and the deity of the Holy Spirit, the second and third persons of the Holy Trinity. As we saw when we covered article ten of our confession, the biblical evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ is quite extensive in both the Old and New Testaments. While there is not as much biblical evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit, it would be a mistake to take this to mean that the evidence is not clear nor decisive. The Bible explicitly calls the Holy Spirit “God.” The Bible assigns to him all of the divine attributes ascribed to the other persons of the Godhead. The Bible exhorts us to give

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<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, Course Lecture notes, “The Holy Spirit,” delivered at Westminster Seminary California, 1988.

the Holy Spirit the same praise, honor and glory we are to direct to the Father and the Son. Although the Holy Spirit's work is in many ways to glorify the other members of the Godhead, this does not mean that he is not fully God or that he is somehow inferior to the Father and the Son.

Just as the doctrine of the deity of the Son was attacked by anti-Trinitarians such as Arius, so too, the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit was forged from the biblical data, largely in response to the many challenges raised regarding the doctrine of the Trinity.

Before we work our way through article eleven of our confession, a bit of historical background is in order. As far as our own Reformed tradition goes, John Calvin has often been described as the theologian of the Holy Spirit because of his repeated references to the Holy Spirit in books three and four of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It has been argued by church historians (correctly so) that Calvin was the first theologian in church history to extensively define the work of the Holy Spirit specifically as it relates to the doctrine of salvation (soteriology).<sup>2</sup> It was Calvin's doctrine of the witness of the Spirit to the truth of God's word which framed much of his view on how we come to a saving knowledge of God and the Reformed tradition has largely followed him in this regard.<sup>3</sup> The Reformed have often emphasized that God alone is fit to bear witness to the truth of his word and that human reason and philosophy (while useful) cannot, by themselves, enable people to come faith in Jesus Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do this. Given this stress upon the work of the Spirit, this is why a number of Reformed theologians have written extensive volumes on the Holy Spirit, including John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, James Buchanan, George Smeaton, and Abraham Kuyper.

But if you follow Reformed theological discussion today, very little is said about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Surely this is a negative over-reaction to the theology of Pentecostalism and the excesses of the Charismatic movement. And this over-reaction is most unfortunate. Of all Christian traditions, historically speaking, the Reformed have had the most to say about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So it is not an accident that the Belgic Confession, following the lead of Calvin, devotes a separate article to the deity of the Holy Spirit, as does the *Heidelberg Catechism* which asks in Question 53; "What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit? A. First, he, as well as the Father and the Son, is eternal God. Second, he has been given to me personally, so that, by true faith, he makes me share in Christ and all his blessings, comforts me, and remains with me forever."

That being said, we also need to note that our confession's discussion of the deity of the Holy Spirit is framed against the backdrop of a major theological controversy, which we must not overlook if we are to fully understand the main point our confession is making. Most Protestants are familiar with the facts surrounding the Protestant Reformation which led to the division of Western Christendom into Protestant and Roman Catholic factions in the 1520's. But an earlier schism was finalized in 1054 AD which divided what had been a united Christendom into an Eastern church (the so-called "Orthodox churches," Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches being the largest) and the Western church, which later split into Roman and Protestant churches in the sixteenth century. Historically, Protestants have always identified with the Western Church in this dispute, although a significant number of evangelicals are increasingly interested in Eastern Orthodoxy, attracted by contemplative piety of the Orthodox churches.

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<sup>2</sup> See Warfield's "Introductory Note" to Abraham Kuyper's book, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, and reprinted in John E. Meeter, ed., *The Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pp. 203-219.

<sup>3</sup> As summarized in Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 11-19.

The division between the Eastern church and the Western was brought about by a debate over the so called “procession of the Holy Spirit,” which is mentioned in John 15:26. In this verse, John writes: “*When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.*” The critical phrase here is “goes out from” (or as the KJV translates the term “proceedeth”). Does the Holy Spirit proceed (“go out from”) from the Father only (the view of the Eastern churches) or does the Holy Spirit proceed (“go out from”) from the Father and the Son. This has been known as the so-called *filioque* clause, based on the Latin words, “and the Son.”

While the division of Christendom over what appears to be an obscure point of doctrine is difficult for us to understand, we need to be aware of the fact that like most debates of this kind, this dispute festered for some time before the final rupture occurred—in this case, it was the series of Anti-Trinitarian heresies which had troubled the church for centuries. If the Arians had struggled to explain the biblical evidence for the deity of the son, they likewise did not know what to do with the biblical teaching regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit. In the fourth century, Macedonius, bishop of Constantinople, tried to make peace between the Arians and the orthodox, by formulating a moderating view between the two positions, called Semi-Arianism (which was really Arianism in disguise). Macedonius taught that the Holy Spirit was a creature and subordinate (inferior) to the Son.<sup>4</sup>

In response to this denial of the full deity of the Holy Spirit, Macedonius’ view was roundly condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 381, during which the following statements were added to the Nicene Creed: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the father, and with the father and son is worshiped and glorified.” Notice that the clause “proceeds from the father,” does not yet include the phrase “and the son” (the *filioque* clause). This will be added later.

As the identity of the Holy Spirit and his relationship to the other persons of the Trinity continued to be debated, more and more the Western church took John 15:26 to mean that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (since all three persons of the Godhead possess the divine essence).<sup>5</sup> The logic is simply that if the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, he must proceed from the Son as well since all three persons possess and participate in the fulness of the Godhead. Following the arguments first raised by Augustine in his book *The Trinity*, at the Council of Toledo (589 AD) the phrase “and the Son” was added to the Nicene Creed so that it read—“the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father **and the Son**” (the version we still use today).

To those in the Eastern church this addition to the Creed not only sounded like the heresy of the semi-Arian Macedonius all over again—that the Holy Spirit is somehow subordinate to the Son—but that the addition to the Creed was made without the full approval of the Eastern churches. Despite the concerns of the Greek-speaking bishops in the east, those in the Western church (who were now conducting all theological discussion in Latin) never taught that the Holy Spirit is inferior to the Father or the Son, but that according to his unique property he eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son, as taught by John in his gospel (15:26).<sup>6</sup> This feud simmered until the final rift in 1054.

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<sup>4</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>6</sup> P. Y. De Jong, *The Church’s Witness to the World*, pp. 211-214.

While on the surface this debate may not seem all that important, it most definitely is. There are profound ramifications from this decision to discuss the person and work of the Spirit, apart from his procession from the Son. The critical question is as follows: “Can we properly understand the work of the Holy Spirit apart from the person of the Son as the Eastern church tends to do?”<sup>7</sup> “Or should we see the work of the Spirit as tied to the Son as the mediator of God’s saving work as both Protestants and Catholics have done?” The latter is not only the more biblical approach, it keeps us from discussing the Holy Spirit in the abstract, apart from his work in redemption as the Orthodox churches tend to do.

Given the Orthodox view of the Spirit’s relationship to the Son, it has been argued that this has led to the tendency of Orthodox churches toward mysticism and toward an emphasis upon the Spirit working immediately upon the human heart, apart from means. The opposite can be seen in the work of Calvin, who discusses the Holy Spirit almost exclusively in terms of his work in redemption, since it is the Holy Spirit who ensures that Christ’s saving work is of benefit to us. But Orthodox theologians are quite reluctant to do this, and often emphasize a mystical Christianity centering upon contemplation of what they speak of as “divine mysteries,” (God in himself). They do not focus upon redemptive history. In the words of one writer, the piety of Orthodoxy centers “in the mysteries operated by the Spirit, [in which] the Christian comes, in some sense, into direct touch with God. The historical revelation in the person of Christ is of less moment to him than the divine power present in the mysteries.”<sup>8</sup>

As the Orthodox churches see things, Christianity centers not in the proclamation of God’s mighty acts in redemptive history, but in contemplating the so called “Holy Mysteries,” associated with the Spirit who proceeds only from the father. These are two radically different approaches to the Christian faith. As you may know, a number of famous Evangelicals (such as Francis Schaeffer’s son Franky) have recently converted to Orthodoxy largely for this very reason. But then, much of evangelicalism teaches an immediate work of the Spirit apart from means and evangelicals who despise doctrine are often attracted to mysticism coupled with the beauty of the Orthodox liturgy. This is fine and good, if clarity about the gospel is not all that important.

The biblical evidence for the view of the Western church is compelling. Not only is the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son taught in John 15:26, but in Galatians 4:6 Paul calls the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of the Son,” and the “Spirit of Christ” in Romans 8:9. The two latter texts clearly teach us that the work of the Spirit is inextricably linked to the work of the Father and to the Son on our behalf. You cannot speak of the work of the Spirit apart from Christ’s redemptive work in history (which the Spirit applies to all those who are Christ’s), nor apart from the ordinary use of means in the church (Word and Sacrament). This is why the mystical and contemplative piety of the Eastern Churches is so different in practice from those of the West.

With the debate between the Eastern and Western church in mind, we turn to article eleven of the Belgic Confession in which we find the following topics addressed, in addition to the question regarding the so-called procession of the Spirit; the deity of the Holy Spirit, the unique property of the Holy Spirit, and the honor due the Holy Spirit, who is the third person of the Trinity.

Article 11 reads as follows. “We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds

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<sup>7</sup> See the discussion in Wilhelm Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), pp. 140 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Niesel, *Reformed Symbolics*, p. 141.

from the Father and the Son. He is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both.<sup>1</sup> In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.”

Following the consensus of the Western church, our confession begins by affirming the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son, before affirming his deity. This emphasis is surprising to some, but makes perfect sense in light of the differences between Eastern and Western churches. As I mentioned earlier, the biblical evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit, who is one and the same essence as the Father and the Son, while not as extensive as the biblical evidence for the deity of Christ, nonetheless, is very clear and basically follows the same lines as the evidence of the deity of the Son.

We start with the Bible’s assertion that the Holy Spirit is God. Perhaps the clearest statement regarding the deity of the Holy Spirit is found in Acts 5 (part of our New Testament lesson this morning), in connection with the story of Ananias and Saphirra. In Acts 5:3-4, Luke explicitly tells us that the Holy Spirit is God.

*Then Peter said, `Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.*

According to Luke’s account, to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. Then in 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul tells us that the Spirit who indwells us is God’s Spirit. The apostle goes on to reiterate this same point in 1 Corinthians 6:19. These latter two comments from Paul are indirect assertions of the deity of the Holy Spirit. Based on these texts alone, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is God.

There is also the evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit from the Old Testament. In Isaiah 63:10, the prophet speaks of the Spirit of God as does the Psalmist in Psalm 95:9. We know this, because in Hebrews 3:7 and following, the author of the book of Hebrews attributes the words spoken in Psalm 95 to the Holy Spirit. “*So, as the Holy Spirit says: `Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.*” This means that what the Old Testament prophets attributed to God, the author to the Hebrews attributes to the Holy Spirit.

Then there is the fact that throughout the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is said to possess divine attributes. In Genesis 1:1-2, we read “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*” Even as John and Paul attribute the work of creation to the Son (who is true and eternal God), so too, Moses assigns the work of creation to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God who hovered over the face of the deep. We should also take this assertion to mean that the Holy Spirit is eternal since he was present when all things were created. This is but another way of saying that he is not a creature himself. In this, we can clearly see the errors of the Arians, who taught that like the Son, the Holy Spirit was created. But the whole point of Genesis 1:1 is that God (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) was before all things. This means that even as the Son is eternal, so too, is the Holy Spirit, who was with God before all things were created.

In Psalm 33:6, the Psalmist explicitly states that the Holy Spirit (the *Ruach*, the breath of God) creates all

things—“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.” Then, in Job 33:4, we read, “the Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” Thus as the Father and the Son are said to give us life, so too does the Holy Spirit. But not only does the Holy Spirit grant us life and breath, he also gives the new birth, something only God can do. We read in John 3:5 that “Jesus answered [Nicodemus], ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’” In other words, we cannot enter God’s kingdom until God’s Spirit gives us spiritual life even as he gives us natural life.

Then we have a whole catalogue of divine attributes. First, the Holy Spirit is also said to be omniscient. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson (Psalm 139:7-10), the Psalmist says of the Holy Spirit, who is everywhere present,

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

From this assertion, it is clear that God’s Spirit is omnipresent. The same point is made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:11:

*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

God is omnipresent, the Holy Spirit is omnipresent, therefore, the Holy Spirit is God.

Second, the Scriptures also teach that the Holy Spirit is omnipotent. In Isaiah 11:2, when the prophet speaks of the coming Messiah as the root of Jesse, he states, “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” Thus the Holy Spirit is described as possessing the power which God alone possesses. He is, in fact, all-powerful, because God is all-powerful.

The Scriptures mention other divine attributes in connection with the Holy Spirit as well. The apostle Peter states that the Holy Spirit is the author of our sanctification—“who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” The Holy Spirit transforms us from sinners into people who are sanctified. The blessed Holy Spirit also seals us unto the day of redemption, ensuring that the work God has begun in us, will reach completion. In Ephesians 4:30, Paul writes: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Notice, too, that grieving the Spirit is a sin which is singled out for special attention, and we are warned to not resist the process of sanctification. In fact, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30), which is to attribute the miracles of Jesus to Satan as the Pharisees were doing, is a sin which cannot be forgiven.

Then we have that line of evidence of the deity of the Holy Spirit which comes from the Spirit’s relationship to the Son. The same Holy Spirit who indwells us also anointed Jesus before he began his public messianic ministry, specifically to equip him for what he must do to usher in the kingdom of God.

But unlike the prophets who receive the Holy Spirit only for a time, the Spirit permanently indwells Jesus, enabling him to fulfill all righteousness.<sup>9</sup> In the prophecy found in Isaiah 61:1, the prophet foretells of a time when the Messiah will proclaim to his people that *“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”* This messianic prophecy is fulfilled in Luke 4:18, when Jesus enters the synagogue and reads this text from the Isaiah scroll, and then after sitting down declared to the audience: *“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* It is the anointing of the Messiah by the Spirit of the sovereign Lord which is the characteristic that the messianic age has dawned.

Then we have the Spirit’s work in revealing the purposes of God. It is through the Holy Spirit that the prophets and apostles spoke. In 1 Peter 1:11, the apostle writes;

*Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*

In a passage we have already read in connection with the article three of our confession which dealt with the inspiration of scripture: 2 Peter 1:21, Peter proclaims “[that] *prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*”

Then there are those verses which speak of the work of the Spirit in connection to the spread of the gospel. In John 16:8-11, we read of the Comforter:

*When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*

It is good for Jesus to go away so that the Spirit might convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Jesus himself states in verse 7 that it was good that he go away so that the Holy Spirit could come to bear witness to Jesus’ person and work. But this does not mean that the Holy Spirit is an “it.” In verse 12 of this same passage Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as a person, a “he” whom Jesus calls the Spirit of Truth.

Finally, there are a series of verses which speak of the work of the Spirit in uniting believers to Jesus Christ, enabling them to approach God without fear. The Holy Spirit is described by Paul as the “Spirit of prayer.” In Romans 8:15-16 Paul writes: *“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”* Thus it is the Spirit who unites us to Christ and enables us to cry out to God. Why? Because it is the Spirit’s work to ensure that the saving benefits of Christ become ours. God ensures that our redemption is accomplished.

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<sup>9</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “Paul’s Eschatological Conception of the Holy Spirit,” in Gaffin, ed., Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), p. 96.

Given this vast amount of biblical data and the great confusion of our age regarding the God of the Bible, it is vital that “We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son” so that we do not divorce the work of the Spirit from the person of Jesus Christ—as do the Orthodox churches. It is also vital that we believe and confess that the Holy Spirit “is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both. In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.” He is God, therefore since the Father and the Son are also God, we worship God in unity and the Godhead in Tri-unity. For God is one, yet revealed in three distinct persons who are each God.

The application from all of this is very straight-forward. Since the Spirit is the third person of the Holy Trinity and is true and eternal God, then we must do with the Holy Spirit exactly as we are exhorted to do in article ten when it comes to the Son, “whom we invoke, worship, and serve.”<sup>10</sup> We must invoke, worship, and serve the blessed Holy Spirit, even as we do the Father and the Son. After all, we are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:9). The apostolic benediction is given in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus we must ascribe all glory, majesty and honor to the Holy Spirit, even as we do so to the other members of the Godhead. We pray to the Holy Spirit, we worship the Holy Spirit, we invoke the blessed Holy Spirit.

In the words of the ancient hymn *Come, O Creator Spirit Blest . . .*

Show us the Father, Holy One  
help us to know the eternal Son  
Spirit divine forever more  
you will we trust and you adore.

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<sup>10</sup> Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p. 96.