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Reading: John 3:1-15

Title: Living Theology: Do I Need The Holy Spirit?

Introduction: How did it all begin?

When you're getting to know people, it's always interesting to ask, 'How did it all begin?'

- For example, the newly married couple come round for dinner, and you ask them, 'So how did you meet?'
 - And then you listen as they trace things back to the first time they met,
 - and how the relationship started to gain momentum.
- And yet, it can be difficult to answer the question, 'How did it really all begin?'
 - It can be difficult to pinpoint what caused the initial spark and set things in motion.

The same is true when you ask a scientist how he ended up in this career.

- He might describe the study he took at University.
- He might describe the science teacher at high school who first ignited his passion for chemistry.
- He might talk about how he was always interested in how things worked, even as a toddler.
- But again, the question lingers, *how exactly did it all begin?*

Philosophers and scientists continue to ask this question about our universe, too.

- We know it exists, but how exactly did it come into existence?
- We may agree it came out of nothing, but how?

And so too, when a person becomes a Christian, it's interesting to ask, *How did it all begin?*

- We might struggle to pinpoint how it all began.
- For some of us, it might just be that we had Christian parents,
 - were raised in the church,
 - and one day realized we'd come to own the faith for ourselves.
- Or we might be able to identify a dramatic moment when everything came to a head and we gave our lives to Christ.
 - We might be able to remember that particular conversation or sermon that hit us right between the eyes.

And yet, all of this still leaves us asking the question, *How exactly did it all begin?*

- What was the catalyst for me (or that person in my life) becoming a Christian?
- What turned everything around?
- Surely it was the moment when I finally confessed my sin and asked Jesus to save me, right?
- When we talk about our conversions, we often use phrases like,
 - 'I've found the Lord.
 - I've decided to become a Christian.
 - I've given my life to Jesus.'
- But is this right? Did it all begin with our decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour?

That's what we want to think about this afternoon, and we particularly want to do this with the Holy Spirit in mind.

- When someone becomes a Christian, what is the role of the Holy Spirit?
- Is it that the Spirit knocks on the door, and then if we decide to open it, he moves in?
- Or does the Spirit just kick down the door like a home invasion, taking over against our will?

We're going to think about this in 2 parts this afternoon. We've got 2 points, and the first is this:

The Holy Spirit raises dead sinners

Let's go back to our question, how does it all begin? What happens to make someone become a Christian?

- Well, it happens when someone hears the gospel, hears the good news of Jesus Christ, and responds in repentance and faith.
- Right? Is anyone going to stand up and say that's *not* how someone becomes a Christian?
- Romans 10 says,
 - 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?'

Well then, where does the work of the Holy Spirit fit into this?

- Well it's the Holy Spirit who enables the gospel call to go out.
- The Spirit empowers us to share God's Word with others.
 - Think of Pentecost, when the apostle Peter was filled with the Spirit so that he could preach and evangelize effectively.
- So, when the gospel call goes out, the Spirit is the one making this possible.

But is that all?

- Does the Spirit only call people *externally*?
- Does he just stand at the door and knock?
- Does he just teach the truth and try to persuade sinners to repent?

Well, Scripture says no.

- In addition to calling people *externally*, the Spirit also calls people *internally*.
- You could say, he not only knocks at the door, but he also works in the person so that they want to open the door.
- He does both!

Paul explains this clearly in 1 Corinthians 2.

- He starts by saying, the message we preach is from God himself.
- Verse 12-13: *'What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.'*
- In other words, the gospel message, the external call, is not a message of human wisdom (like any other piece of news that you might share with someone).
- It's a message of spiritual, divine truth that comes from the Spirit.

But that's not all. Paul then he goes further.

- Verse 14: *'The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.'*
- In other words, someone can hear this Spirit-inspired gospel call and yet consider it foolishness.
 - Why? Because it can only be truly understood if the Spirit moves in them.
 - Like when Lydia was listening to Paul's sermon in Philippi, and we read in Acts 16 that, 'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.'

This explains why so many people hear the gospel, and even seem to understand it at some rational level, and yet are not truly converted.

- Why is this? Because there can be no saving belief, saving faith, unless the Spirit moves inside them.
- This internal work is what Paul is talking about in Titus 3:5-6, when he says,
 - '[God] saved us through the *washing of rebirth and renewal* by the Holy Spirit,⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.'
- This is the same thing that Jesus refers to in John 3, when he tells Nicodemus in verses 5-6,
 - 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are *born of water and the Spirit*.⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'

The Canons of Dort, one of the old theological documents that our Reformed churches hold to, gives an excellent explanation of this.

- 'When God carries out this good pleasure in His chosen ones, or works true conversion in them, He not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, He also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised.' (III-IV, Article 11, The Holy Spirit's Work in Conversion)

We might ask, why isn't the external call enough? Why do we also need the Spirit to do a work of internal renewal and regeneration?

- Well, the answer that Scripture gives us is decisive.
- Romans 3:10-11 – 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who *understands*; there is no one who *seeks God*.'
- Romans 5:6-10 – 'At just the right time, *when we were still powerless*, Christ died for the ungodly... while we were still sinners... while we were God's enemies...'
- Romans 8:7-8 – 'The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, *nor can it do so*.⁸ Those who are in the realm of the flesh *cannot please God*.'
- John 6:44 – 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.'

And perhaps the most graphic illustration of this comes in Ephesians 2, when Paul says, 'As for you, you were *dead* in your transgression and sins.'

- Dead. That is the state of you, and me, and every single person you see walking down the street, apart for the sovereign grace of God in their lives.
- Spiritually dead.
- It's not that we want to but we just can't.
- We're both *unable* to turn to God, and *unwilling* to turn to God!

And so when it comes to the question, how did it all begin, the answer cannot simply be, 'Because I heard the good news about Jesus and decided to give my life him.'

- The answer cannot just be, 'Because the Spirit knocked on the door and I decided to open it.'

Again, the Canons of Dort express this with great clarity.

- 'This is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done His work, it remains in man's power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture teaches.' (III-IV, Article 12, Regeneration a Supernatural Work)

Perhaps you respond, but aren't we saved through faith?

- Doesn't it say in John 1:12, 'Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God'?
- Doesn't this make it clear that we have a choice to make?
- Well, yes, it does.
- But that's not the whole story. We need to read v13, the second half of sentence:
 - 'Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.'

It is an intriguing tension, isn't it?

- To be sure, we must believe.
- And yet John says, our new birth isn't by human decision. We are born of God.
- Which means that although faith is an important *part* of the process, it's not the start of the process.
- Whatever love I have for God, whatever desire I have to live for him –
 - all of this flows out of the fact that *his Spirit first regenerated my heart*.
- Ephesians 2:8 make this very clear, telling us that even our faith is a gift from God.
 - 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.'
- The Belgic Confession says, 'We believe that for us to acquire the true knowledge of this great mystery [e.g. the gospel] the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith that embraces Jesus Christ...' (Article 22)

- That's a nice way to think of faith.
- It's a fire that burns in our hearts for Jesus.
- But it's a fire that must first be lit by the Holy Spirit.

So, back to our question: how did it all begin? Well, it all began with God.

- The very beginning (the big bang, if you like) of our salvation was entirely the work of God.
- We were *completely passive*.
- Does that insult your pride? It should!
- Only this understanding of salvation gives God the glory he deserves.
- Our salvation is his work, from start to finish.

Nicodemus found it hard to grasp, and so Jesus used the imagery of being born.

- Who of us here chose to be conceived, chose to be born?
- We were completely passive, weren't we?
- We've completely underestimated our spiritual situation if we think that all we needed was to hear the gospel, and then we would kind of sleepily rub our eyes and start responding to God.

And so this is our first point: *the Spirit does what we cannot. He raises dead sinners.*

There are many applications we could draw from this incredible work of the Spirit.

- It means that you can take the most gifted preacher, and your best arguments, and be as loving and kind as you can possibly manage... it won't be enough.
- If the Spirit does not move in a person's heart, they will not be saved.

This is also why we must *pray* for the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of our unbelieving friends.

- This is why we pray before every church service and every sermon, for the Spirit to move.
- This is why we should pray whenever we have the chance to speak to someone about Jesus.

This is also why the Bible never *commands* people to be born again, and neither should we.

- Notice that although Jesus tells Nicodemus that he *must* be born again, he doesn't actually command Nicodemus to go and make this happen.
- In fact, he says just the opposite, telling him it can only come from the Spirit, whose operations are as mysterious and invisible as the wind.
- And so our task as gospel messengers is to give the external call.
 - We say to people, Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.
 - And then we pray for the Spirit to do internally what only he can do.

And there is great encouragement here.

- Encouragement that no matter how unlikely the circumstances, no matter how hard and hostile and atheistic a person may be... the Spirit is powerful to save.

This truth also keeps us from having any sense of superiority towards others – because but for the grace of God, there go I.

- It kills any pride we might have in what we're achieving, in how we're growing as Christian – because even our faith is from him.

So there we go: *the Spirit does what we cannot. He raises dead sinners.*

- But we can't quite leave it there, because we've really only spoken about regeneration in a partial sense so far.
- Regeneration is about more than just the fact that the Spirit moves in dead hearts.
- It's not just that salvation begins with an active God and passive sinners.
- No, regeneration in the Bible is seen as something really enormous...
 - Something that changes our whole lives, our very existence.
 - Something that didn't just happen back then, but something that defines every moment of our lives forevermore.
- Regeneration is our sharing in the resurrection life of Jesus.

This is our second point.

The Holy Spirit raises dead sinners

You see, we need to clarify exactly what type of new birth the Spirit produces in the Christian.

- What is this new life?
- What is this regeneration that the Spirit produces inside us?

Well, the language that Scripture uses for this transformation is so dramatic that it can almost be hard to compute.

- It seems to jar with the mundane, normal kind of lives that Christians continue to live on this earth
 - Lives that in many ways look quite similar to those of any unbeliever.
 - I mean, we still eat and sleep, laugh and cry, do good things and bad things, and eventually get sick and die.
- And so it can be tempting to think the Spirit has just made us a little bit new
 - Just added some Jesus to our lives like you might add some extra salt to your chips.

But when we turn to Scripture, all these small, cutesie ideas are blown out of the water.

- In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says these startling words:
 - ‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *the new creation has come*: The old has gone, the new is here.’
- The new creation! What is the new creation?
- This is language that takes us back into the Old Testament.
 - Back to prophets like Isaiah who spoke about a time when God would make all things new.
 - Isaiah 65:17 – ‘See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.’
- But this language of ‘new creation’ doesn’t just take us back into the Old Testament.
 - It also points us forward to the end of the Bible, to Revelation 21, to the future when the old order of things has passed away –
 - things like death, like pain, like sin.
 - God declares, ‘I am making everything new.’

Now, here’s the remarkable thing. Paul says, Every time someone becomes a Christian, the new creation has come.

- How can that be, when we still live in a world of death and pain and sin?
- Somehow, Paul is saying, this future new creation has broken into the present, into the here and now.

How has this happened?

- It has happened because there is one man who brought the future in the present,
 - who brought the new into the old...
 - almost like some kind of spiritual time-travelling event.
- There is one man who began producing the fruits of the new creation right here in our fallen world...
 - healing the sick and raising the dead.
- There is one man who has already died and risen to new life.
- There is one man who has already received his new physical resurrection body.

The resurrection of Jesus has caused a cataclysmic collision of old and new!

- The resurrection of Jesus is the key to our own regeneration. It is the key to what exactly the Spirit is doing when he makes dead sinners alive.
- He doesn’t just make us alive and powerful in some general sense.
- No, he specifically makes us alive by uniting us to Christ so that we can share in his resurrection life!

The Bible makes this point again and again and again. For example:

- 1 Peter 1:3 – ‘new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’
- Ephesians 2:5-6, ‘made us alive with Christ’ – ‘raised us up with Christ and seated us (past tense) with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.’
- Col 3:1-4 – ‘You have been raised with Christ... you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.’

Physically, we remain here on earth, with broken-bodies and sin-struggles.

- We’re still waiting for our new bodies and a whole new world.
- But spiritually, the new creation has already come because the Spirit of the Risen Christ has moved into our hearts!
- And so Romans 8:23 says, ‘We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.’
 - Firstfruits. The start of the harvest. The new creation, already here in us.

Conclusion

Friends, if you trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, then this is what has happened in you.

- The Spirit has made you alive in Christ. You now share in his resurrection. You are already, spiritually, participating in the new creation.
 - Even now, we are beginning to experience the joy of being with God.
 - The freedom of sins forgiven.
 - The power of Christ’s victory over Satan.
 - The incredible comfort and confidence that comes from knowing that now, already, on this side of glory, in a world full of persecution and suffering, we are already more than conquerors, and nothing can separate us from the love of God!

If you’re a Christian, I only want you to do one simple thing this afternoon: praise God!

- Praise God that his Spirit has broken into your heart and made you a new creation.
- Praise God that you are united to Christ and that his resurrection is yours.
 - Already, spiritually.
 - And when he returns, physically and completely.

If you're not a Christian, I hope this helps you to understand what it means when we talk about someone being 'born again'.

- It's not just something for fanatical Christians.
- All Christians are born again.
- They've been given a radically new existence. They now share in the perfect life of Jesus, the life we're all longing for!

And God can do this for you too.

- All you need to do is believe that Jesus died and rose to save you from your sins.
- Turn to him and ask him to make you new, and he will, by the power of his Spirit.