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It's Christmas! So, Where is the Holy Spirit? Isaiah 11:1-2

Where is the Holy Spirit in the Christmas message? Is he missing? All of us would concede that when we think of Christmas we think of Christ. And rightly so. We think of the appearance of a multitude of angels to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks of sheep. We think of the conception of Jesus in the womb of a young virgin girl. We think of Herod's murderous attempt to kill the baby Jesus by ordering the slaughter of all male babies two years old and younger. We think of the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus into Egypt. We turn our thoughts to what I still consider the most amazing verse in the Bible, John 1:14, where the apostles declares, "The Word became flesh."

Of course, God the Father also figures prominently in the message of Christmas. One need only think of the most famous verse in the Bible to see this. In John 3:16 we are told that it was because of his great and incalculable love for a dark, broken, rebellious, and fallen world that he sent his only-begotten Son to die for us so that through simple faith in him we might not perish but have everlasting life.

But our God is Triune. That is to say, we believe in one God who exists eternally in three co-equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are God. But there are not three Gods. There is only one. Among these three persons in the Godhead, none is more divine than another. None is more holy than another. None is more important than another. They together share all the characteristics and attributes of deity. They are equal in glory and majesty and honor. All three are deserving equally of our praise and worship and adoration.

So, when it comes to Christmas, why do we say so little about the Holy Spirit? Why does he appear to figure less prominently in the story? After all, Christmas is all about God the Father sending God the Son in human flesh to live the life we should have lived and to die the death we should have died, and then to rise again from the dead, all so that we might have eternal life. What role, if any, does the Holy Spirit play in this? ***Is he merely an innocent bystander? Is the Spirit merely a passive, uninvolved spectator of the things that the Father and Son are doing?*** My answer is a resounding, No! By no means! So let's consider briefly today where the Holy Spirit is in the Christmas story and what role he plays. I hope it will forever transform how you think about the season of Advent.

The Holy Spirit's Role in the Prophetic Promise of Christmas

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the fact that it was the Holy Spirit who stirred up the hearts and minds of the ***OT prophets*** so that they might prophesy the coming of God the Son in human flesh to redeem us. Consider how the Apostle Peter said it in 1 Peter 1:10-11,

"Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories" (1 Peter 1:10-11).

How did the OT prophets come to understand God's purpose and plan to send God the Son as the Messiah who would bring us salvation? It was through the "Spirit of Christ" who was working "in them" indicating by revelation and illumination how, when, and why this would happen? Peter says it again in slightly different terms in his second epistle:

"knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

What these two texts tell us is that without the ministry of the Holy Spirit there would have been no prophecy of the coming of Christ into the world. We would have been left in ignorance of this momentous, life-changing, history-making event. The authors of the OT would have had nothing to tell us about the Christmas message had it not been for the work of the Holy Spirit in them, instructing them concerning God the Father's purposes. So, when you think

about a Christmas passage like that in Isaiah 9, be sure you give thanks to the Holy Spirit for having revealed to the prophet these stunning words:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this” (Isa. 9:6-7).

It was God the Holy Spirit who revealed this to the prophet, who in turn delivered this hope-filled message to us. Or consider Isaiah 53 which speaks so pointedly and graphically of the sufferings of the coming Messiah. Where did that come from? It came from the Holy Spirit!

We need to remember that *every prophecy in the OT*, both those that pertain to the coming of the Messiah and all the others, is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Consider this one text:

“Now these are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: ‘*The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me*; his word is on my tongue’” (2 Samuel 23:1-2).

Pause for a moment and consider what this text is saying. Whenever David would speak or write of the things of God he did so by means of the Holy Spirit. Every time you read one of the psalms written by David and you hear declarations that are obviously messianic and speak of the coming Christ, that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Or consider this passage in the book of Micah:

“But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Micah 3:8).

In numerous texts God the Holy Spirit is explicitly said to be responsible for the future salvation and renewal of God’s people. The presence and power of the Spirit will characterize the ministry of the Messiah and will be central in the fulfillment of the new and eternal covenant.

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:1-2).

How do you account for the wisdom and understanding that we see in the person of Jesus? How do you explain the might and power and knowledge that characterized Jesus? This was all the work of the Holy Spirit in and through God the Son. There are still more OT texts that say much the same thing:

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1).

“And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore” (Isaiah 59:21).

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound” (Isaiah 61:1).

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28-29; see also Ezek. 18:31; 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14).

The Holy Spirit's Role in the Earthly Ministry and Message of Jesus

One of the more important passages for us in something we find in John 3:34-35.

“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:34-35).

Who is it that “gives” the Spirit and who is it that receives? Some say it is Jesus, the Son, who gives the Spirit to those who receive his testimony (v. 32). It is far more likely that God the Father is “he” who gives the Spirit without measure to Jesus, the one “whom God has sent,” the one who “speaks the words of God.” There are two reasons for this.

First, this view alone makes sense of the first half of v. 34. The words of Jesus are to be identified with the words of God *because* Jesus receives the Spirit without measure. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires/enables Jesus to speak the very words of the Father. Second, this view connects v. 34 with v. 35. In other words, preeminent among the “things” given by the Father to the Son is the Holy Spirit.

What this passage and countless others tell us is that when God the Son became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ (that's the Christmas message!), he voluntarily and for a season suspended the use of his divine attributes so that he might live and experience this world and interact with others as a human being. But wait a minute. ***If Jesus was a human being like us, with all the limitations that being human entails, how is it that he did such remarkable and miraculous things like heal the sick and raise the dead and turn water into wine and feed 5,000 with a few loaves of bread and a handful of fish? How did Jesus confound the religious leaders with his teaching? Where did he find the authority and power to drive out demons?***

Those are excellent questions, and I have an equally excellent answer for you. Jesus was God in human flesh. Let's never lose sight of that. Jesus was God while he walked this earth and he is God now and forevermore. But while on this earth he chose not to make use of his power as God so that he might live a genuinely human life like you and me. So, if that is true, I ask again: How did he perform miraculous signs and wonders and how did he teach with such truthfulness and authority? The answer is that he did it all through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit! Are you now beginning to see the role of the Spirit in Christmas? I hope so!

The Holy Spirit's Role in the Conception and Birth of Jesus

With this we are moving into territory with which you are, I am sure, already quite familiar. But let's consider a few biblical statements. We begin with Matthew 1:18-20.

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit’” (Matthew 1:18-20).

We are being told here that the source or cause or origin of this miracle that we call the virginal conception is the Holy Spirit. Mary is pregnant “from” or “of” the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, not Joseph or any other man (thus putting to rest Joseph's natural fears), provided the generative force by which Mary's pregnancy came to pass and the humanity of Jesus was initiated. “No human male, then, is to be thought of as the agent by which Mary's child is begotten; rather the Holy Spirit is that which sets the whole process of this special conception and gestation into motion” (Hawthorne, p. 71).

I don't know how it could be said with greater clarity or force: ***without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit there would be no virgin conception, and without the virgin conception there would be no virgin birth, and without the virgin birth there would be no Christmas!***

We find an even stronger assertion of this truth in Luke's gospel.

“And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God’” (Luke 1:34-35).

The precise wording used here is important. When Gabriel said that the Holy Spirit would “*come upon*” Mary, he used language straight out of the OT that typically described the powerful presence of God the Holy Spirit at work in the midst of his people. Often the Spirit would “come upon” OT saints to equip them for a special task (cf. Num. 24:2; Judges 3:10; 2 Chron. 15:1). Luke is making the claim that “the conception and birth of Jesus was not to be part of the normal course of human events – marriage, intercourse, conception, gestation, birth – but a miracle, the direct intervention of God into the course of human events, so that Mary’s child to be born would be a gift of God in the fullest sense” (Hawthorne, 71).

Let’s also look at the word translated “*overshadow*.” This word was used in the OT of the revelation of God’s glory (cf. Ex. 40:35; Ps. 91:4; 140:7). It is simply another way of portraying God’s powerful presence (see also Matt. 17:5; Luke 9:34). “As the tabernacle was full, contained, the Shekinah glory (i.e., the presence of God, Exod. 40:35), so Mary was to carry within herself the Son of God, the glory of God’s people Israel (cf. Luke 2:28-32, esp. v. 32)” (Hawthorne, p. 72). In sum, the Holy Spirit was the divine creative element by which the fashioning of our Lord’s human nature was begun (cf. Heb. 10:5).

I should also say something about the implications of Luke 1:15. Notice that I said “implications” because nothing is explicitly said in this text about the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus. But in that passage we read this about John the Baptist:

“for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15).

If John the Baptist (the lesser) was filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb, how much more must it be true of Jesus (the greater). If this is true of the herald of Jesus (see John 3:30; Matt. 3:11), is it not reasonable to suppose it is true of Jesus himself? Since the Holy Spirit “came upon” Mary and “overshadowed” Mary and enabled her to conceive, it stands to reason that Jesus was “filled with the Holy Spirit” no less than he who was his forerunner.

The Holy Spirit’s Role in the Childhood and Youth of Jesus

Many times in the telling of the Christmas story people will tell of the early childhood development of Jesus. The most explicit passage where this is done is in Luke 2:40. There we read,

“And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).

If we were to translate this more literally it would read that Jesus was growing strong “by being filled with wisdom.” In other words, the phrase “by being filled with wisdom” tells how and with what Jesus was made strong. Several things are to be noted.

First, “being filled” is in the present tense, pointing to a steady, continuous experience (“by being ever more and more filled with wisdom”). Second, he was “being” filled (passive voice) by someone other than himself (no doubt, the Holy Spirit; cf. 1:35). Third, that with which Jesus was being filled was “wisdom.” May I remind you of the prophecy of the coming Messiah found in Isaiah 11:1-2, where we read,

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isa. 11:1-2).

Clearly, the “wisdom” that was progressively gained by Jesus all through his childhood, his teenage years, and even into his adulthood and public ministry, was imparted to him by the Holy Spirit!

Let me make one final point about this passage. We are told that “the favor [lit., grace] of God was upon him.” This is a reference not only to divine favor but also to exceptional and enabling gifts. Luke may have meant by these words that “God was even then in the process of graciously fitting Jesus out with those special powers requisite for the unique role he was to play in redemptive history, bestowing upon him the gifts he would need to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world” (Hawthorne, p. 101). In this regard, we should remember that texts such as Acts 4:33 indicate that “power” and “grace” are probably synonymous, together referring to the Holy Spirit.

But let’s not stop with Luke 2:40. We read in Luke 2:41-52 of the occasion when Jesus accompanied Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. He was at that time 12 years old. You may recall how Jesus engaged in a heated discussion with the most brilliant religious scribes and scholars in Israel. We are told in Luke 2:47 that “all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

What accounts for his precocious knowledge (*sunesis*, v. 47) of spiritual things? Luke is probably referring implicitly to the Holy Spirit. You will recall from what we saw in Isaiah 11:2 that the “Spirit of wisdom and understanding” would rest on the Messiah. Observe also that they were “amazed/astonished” (v. 47) at his understanding. This verb (*existasthai*) translated “amazed” is used frequently in Luke to describe the reaction of people to the operation of divine power, i.e., the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 8:56; 24:22; Acts 2:7,12; 8:13; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16).

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ Defeat of the Devil

The Apostle John tells us in his first epistle about one of the primary purposes for the incarnation and ministry of Jesus: it was to defeat the works of the Devil. That is as much a part of the Christmas story as anything else. ***So what role did the Holy Spirit play in enabling Jesus to resist the temptation of Satan in the wilderness?*** Let’s look at Luke’s gospel for the answer. But before I read the important passage, let’s not forget that immediately before Jesus traveled into the wilderness where he encountered Satan, he was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. You will recall what happened there:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21-22).

According to John 1:32, the Spirit not only came down upon Jesus, the Spirit “remained/abided” on him, an indication of his continuing, ongoing, abiding presence: unlike those of the OT on whom the Spirit came but for a time (1 Sam. 16:14; 2 Kings 3:15) to equip them for a task, then to depart. In the case of Jesus, the Holy Spirit remained permanently, perpetually equipping and enabling him for ministry.

We read in Mark 1:10 that the Holy Spirit did not simply come “upon” Jesus but came “into” (*eis*, not *epi*) him. Perhaps this is Mark’s way of indicating that the Holy Spirit ***entered into*** Jesus; i.e., the relationship is not one of mere external enablement but internal intimacy. Jesus was now the permanent bearer of the Spirit. Even if “filled” with the Spirit from Mary’s womb, he now sustains a relationship to the Spirit unlike anything that has preceded.

Most important of all is that this descent of the Spirit upon/into Jesus constituted his “anointing. We know this because of what Peter said in Acts 10:37-38.

“You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:37-38).

To be anointed with the Holy Spirit is to receive power. This power accounts for the “good” works of Jesus’ ministry, his healings, delivering those oppressed of Satan, etc. Thus, what he did, he did primarily because “God was with him,” i.e., in/through and by means of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now, let’s return briefly to what happened in the wilderness when Jesus was tempted by Satan. We read this in Luke 4:1-2,

“And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1-2).

It was not by accident or even his own initiative that Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Mark (1:12) says the Holy Spirit “drove” or “thrust forth” Jesus into the wilderness; i.e., whatever other plans Jesus might have had, the Holy Spirit overruled, pointed, and directed him to his encounter with the enemy. Matthew (4:1) and Luke (4:1) both use a milder term (*agein*; to lead or guide), reinforcing the point that Jesus willingly submitted to the Spirit’s guidance. Even here at the beginning of his ministry Jesus says, in effect, “not my will but thine be done.”

But note closely that Jesus was not only led *into* the wilderness by the Spirit (Mt. 4:1); he was also being led by the Spirit *in* the wilderness during the entire course of the forty days (Luke 4:1; it was, no doubt, the Spirit who led Jesus to fast). “If he was being tempted by Satan for forty days (Mark 1:13), he was being led by the Spirit for those same forty days (Luke 4:1). It is impossible to escape the conclusion that these Gospel writers want their readers to understand that Jesus met and conquered the usurping enemy of God not by his own power alone but was aided in his victory by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Hawthorne, p. 139). He was fortified and energized by the continual infusion of divine power from the Spirit of God.

So much more could be said about the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the conception, life, and ministry of Jesus, but I’ll close with this one final observation. The preeminent message of Christmas is that God the Father sent God the Son to die for us on the cross. But we must never lose sight of the fact that God the Father sent God the Son *in the power of God the Holy Spirit* to die for us on the cross. We see this in Hebrews 9:13-14.

“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13-14).

Thus, just as Jesus drew on the power and strength of the Spirit to teach, to perform miracles, to resist the temptation of Satan, so also he drew on the Spirit’s power to find courage and resolve to offer himself a sacrifice for sin.

Conclusion

I close with two observations. First, what role does the Holy Spirit play in the proclamation of the good news of the Christmas story, the news that in Jesus Christ God has become human and made possible our salvation? Where is the Holy Spirit in this? I’ll let the apostle Peter provide an answer.

“It was revealed to them [the OT prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those [the NT prophets and apostles] who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:12).

Second, what difference does this make to you and me? The impact on us is massive and life-changing, for the same Holy Spirit who inspired the OT prophets to predict the coming of the Messiah, the same Holy Spirit who miraculously brought about the incarnation of God the Son in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus throughout his earthly ministry and sustained him as he went to the cross, this is the Holy Spirit who now indwells and empowers you and me. We do not have a second-team Holy Spirit, a lesser-grade Holy Spirit. The Spirit in Jesus is the Spirit in you! As Hawthorne has said:

“The Spirit that helped Jesus overcome temptations, that strengthened him in weakness, that aided him in the hard job of taking on himself the hurts of the hurting, that infused him with a power to accomplish the impossible, that enabled him to stay with and complete the task God had given him to do, that brought him through death and into resurrection, is the Spirit that the resurrected Jesus has freely and lavishly . . . given to those who would be his disciples today!” (242).

So, in answer to the question: Where is the Holy Spirit in the Christmas story? The answer is a resounding: **Everywhere!**