

I Believe That I Cannot Believe

Apostles' Creed, Part 4: The Holy Spirit

October 25, 2026

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a rather startling sentence in Luther's Small Catechism. It begins with two familiar words: "I believe." They begin the Apostles' Creed. I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son. And now, I believe in the Holy Spirit. But when Luther explains this Third Article, he says something that sounds almost like a contradiction: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him." I believe that I cannot believe. What does that mean?

We Americans like to think of ourselves as people who make up our own minds. We weigh evidence and reach conclusions. God gave us minds to use. But Luther is talking about something more profound than deciding which car to buy. He is talking about saving faith. How does a sinner come to trust in Christ? And what keeps that faith alive when life becomes terribly difficult?

Our earlier sermons on the Creed told us what God has done. The Father created and preserves us. Jesus humbled Himself, suffered, died, rose, and was exalted to the Father's right hand. Christ redeemed us. But that raises a question: How does what Christ accomplished two thousand years ago become ours today? The answer is the work of the Holy Spirit, and that is what the Third Article explains.

A ROOM BEFORE SUNRISE

Everything in this Article has one subject. Calling, enlightening, gathering, keeping, forgiving, raising: the Holy Spirit does every one of them. We contribute nothing. Hold on to that, because it is the whole comfort of the Article.

Consider why it must be so. Picture a room in the hour before sunrise. The furniture is there. The windows are there. The door is there. But in the darkness we cannot see what is right in front of us, and we stumble and bruise ourselves on things we cannot name. That is our condition by nature. Scripture does not say we are merely dim or a little unclear. Saint Paul says we were “dead in the trespasses and sins.” We cannot find Christ in the dark, because we do not want Him and cannot see Him. We cannot argue ourselves into the light, because the light is not in us. No one standing in a dark room can produce the sunrise. If faith depended on us, we would remain in the dark forever.

THE SUN COMES UP

But the Holy Spirit is God, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, one God with the Father and the Son. He is not an impersonal power or a feeling during a moving hymn. And His great work is to bring us to Jesus Christ. Jesus said of the Spirit, “He will glorify me.” The Spirit does not draw attention to Himself. He turns our faces toward Christ, in whom we find forgiveness and life.

Luther says the Holy Spirit “has called me by the Gospel.” Notice the words: He called me. The initiative belongs to God. He comes to us with good news: Jesus Christ has died for your sins. He has risen from the

dead. His mercy is for you. Saint Paul writes, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” The Gospel is more than information. It is the very means by which the Holy Spirit creates faith. The light does not wait for the room to be ready. It comes up over the horizon and fills the windows.

Then Luther says the Spirit has “enlightened me with His gifts.” The sunrise does not rearrange the room. It gives you light. In a far greater way, the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to recognize who Jesus is and what His promises mean. Saint Paul says that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit. We study the Scriptures, but the Spirit brings us to trust the Savior they proclaim. What was a place of stumbling becomes a place where you can see the face of your Lord.

LIGHT ON THE FURNITURE

And He does not bring you to faith only to leave you on your own. Luther continues: the Spirit has “sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” Sanctified means made holy, set apart as belonging to God. It does not mean that Christians become flawless. Anyone who has belonged to a congregation for fifteen minutes knows better. We still struggle with pride, anger, selfishness, and doubt. But in the light of Christ we see those things for what they are, and we can name them and confess them. The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ, whose holiness is ours, and the fruit of faith that grows in us is His work and not our achievement. A garden does not take credit for the sun.

Notice that little word kept. Yet think about what faith must endure: disappointments, grief, unanswered questions, our own repeated sins, perhaps even the fear that we have disappointed God beyond repair.

There are nights when the room goes dark again, when you cannot feel a thing. If saving faith depended on our ability to keep ourselves spiritually strong, what confidence could we possibly have? But the sun does not depend on whether you are watching it. Even in the longest night, the dawn has not been cancelled. The God who called you sustains you through His Word and promises.

WINDOWS TOWARD THE LIGHT

Nor does the Spirit do this by making us isolated religious individuals. The next words of the Creed are “the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” Luther explains that the Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.” The Church is more than a building, a denomination, or an institution. It is the people whom the Holy Spirit gathers into the light around Jesus Christ. We belong to one body, sustained by one Gospel.

Why, then, do we call the Church holy? Look around on Sunday morning. You will see ordinary people, not all behaving in especially holy ways. The Church is holy not because its members have achieved perfection, but because Christ has redeemed them and the Holy Spirit has set them apart as God’s own. The communion of saints is a communion of people who live by grace. No one enters because he has earned a place. We belong because Christ has welcomed us.

That brings us to one of the most comforting phrases in Luther’s entire explanation: “In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.” Daily and richly. Not grudgingly. Not occasionally. Not merely for the smaller sins we find easy to admit. Daily and richly. The Spirit brings you the forgiveness that Jesus won on the

cross. He speaks that forgiveness through the Gospel. He washes you in Holy Baptism. He assures you of it in Absolution. He feeds you with Christ's true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. When you wonder whether God still loves you, you are not told to search your feelings until you discover enough religious confidence. You are directed to what God has said and done. Remember your Baptism. Hear the words of forgiveness. Receive the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you. Each one is a window through which the light of Christ falls on a sinner who needs a Savior.

THE LONG NIGHT ENDS

Now we approach the last words of the Creed: "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Here the Spirit's work reaches beyond every limit of our human strength. We cannot reason ourselves into faith. We cannot keep ourselves alive forever. And when the day of death comes, we certainly cannot raise ourselves from the grave. Yet Luther says, "On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ." Christianity promises not escape from the body, but resurrection. God will raise the dead, just as Christ Himself was raised.

Saint Paul makes the connection explicit in Romans chapter eight: the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies. The Spirit who first awakened faith in your heart will not abandon you at the cemetery. The grave is not more powerful than the Spirit of God. Your last breath is not the end of His work. Think of the first Easter, when the women came to the tomb while it was still dark. The darkness was real, and so was their grief. But the stone had already been

rolled away, and the sun was coming up on a Savior who was alive. Because Christ lives, you shall live also.

So let us return to Luther's strange opening sentence: "I believe that I cannot believe." That apparent problem is the beginning of our comfort. If salvation depended on the strength of your mind, the constancy of your emotions, or the firmness of your grip on God, you would always have reason to wonder whether you had done enough. Your faith began with God's gracious action. The Holy Spirit called you through the Gospel, brought you to Christ, gathered you into His Church, and day after day brings you the forgiveness of sins.

And now we can answer the question with which we began. What will keep your faith alive when you cannot? Who will hold you when your own strength gives way? Who will carry you through death itself? The Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. You did not create your faith. You cannot sustain it by your own strength. You cannot raise yourself from the dead. But the Holy Spirit has called you, He keeps you with Jesus Christ, and on the Last Day, when the long night is over and the sun of righteousness rises on a new creation, He will raise you. As Luther closes his explanation: "This is most certainly true." Amen.

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 4:7

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