

Diverse Views of the Spirit In the New Testament

A discussion of the Holy Spirit deals with a very challenging and, in a way, a very perplexing topic.¹ There are some people in this world who do not believe in the God whom we call Father. There are many people who do not believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ. But it is very hard to determine how many there are who do not believe in the Holy Spirit. For some, perhaps, the Holy Spirit is not important enough to make a decision about; for other people, simpler and more primitive, the presence of the Spirit of God is so tangible or so self-evident that they would not dare to question it. And yet, that very silence about the Holy Spirit reflects our problem. Although the Holy Spirit is attested by the Scriptures, Old and New, it remains mysterious and vague. Even when we turn to the creeds for enlightenment, the Apostles' Creed, which expatiates about the Father and the Son, says simply "I believe in the Holy Spirit," without explaining what the Spirit does. In the longer Creed of Nicaea, enlarged by Constantinople (the Creed of 381 of which we recently celebrated the 1500th anniversary), there is this information about the Holy Spirit: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who spoke by the prophets." Startlingly, most of that is Old Testament information: the Holy Spirit has come forth from God; he is to be glorified; and he spoke through the prophets. But what did the Spirit do in relation to Jesus Christ in Christian history? The Creed does not tell us.

As a result of the silence one may argue with permissible exag-

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¹ In composing this, I found extremely helpful G. S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster 1965). The article stems from a talk I gave in a series of lectures on the Spirit hosted by Union Theological Seminary (New York City) and later at St Patrick's Seminary (Menlo Park, California).

generation that this one Spirit whom we praise ("one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism") has been the most divisive feature in the history of Christianity. In the first millennium of Christianity at the great Councils the churches could agree on God and, for the most part on Jesus Christ; but East and West ultimately split apart over the Spirit. The West adhered to the notion that the Spirit comes forth from the Son (*filioque*) as well as from the Father, a view rejected by the East as an intrusion in the Christian creedal faith. For the East the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

And if in the first millennium the relation of the Spirit to Christ divided Eastern Christianity from Western, in the mid-second millennium the relation of the Spirit to the church subdivided the West. The Reformation was a battle among Western Christians who were united in the belief that the Spirit had come forth from the Son (as well as from the Father) but who were very divided over how the Spirit functioned in the church. Did he function in such a way that the official spokesmen of the church, the hierarchy or bishops, were the interpreters of the Christian faith? Or could the Spirit speak through the Scriptures in such a way that readers of the Scripture could challenge the teachings of the church hierarchy? If the answer to those questions divided Western Christianity into Protestant and Roman Catholic, Protestant Christianity can be said to have divided further on whether that Spirit speaks through the Scriptures *in the church* (as both Calvin and Luther would insist) or so *individually* in the heart of every Christian that the Bible read in a personal way, without church tradition or church setting, is an adequate guide. The latter principle produced the charismatics and enthusiasts of "the Left Wing" of the Reformation.

Moving on from the mid-second millennium, one may say that the twentieth century is further divided on the problem of the Spirit of God and the human spirit. A real issue that faces Christianity today is whether we are thinking simply of a vitalization of a human spirit that is already in every man and woman by the fact of existence on this earth, or we still believe in a Spirit given by God that goes beyond our own potentialities, the Spirit of a revealing and endowing God.

For this discussion I cannot offer a good bibliography, because, frankly, I do not think there is an adequate book on the Spirit in the New Testament that explores the topic in a critical, modern sense.

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There is a new book on Christ in the New Testament almost every year, but there is an almost total absence of *comprehensive* books on the Spirit in the New Testament.

In part, the absence of adequate bibliography may reflect the difficulty of the discussion. Even the term "spirit" is ambiguous. The Greek word *pneuma* occurs about 380 times in the New Testament. Many times it refers to evil spirits, angelic spirits, or simply and vaguely "spirits." Rather seldom does *pneuma* clearly refer to what we know as the Holy Spirit. When one presses back to the Master, the term "Holy Spirit" or "the Spirit" in this proper sense occurs relatively seldom on Jesus' lips. (Yet for him the Spirit is not insignificant: blasphemy against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit — a harsh warning.) *Pneuma* occurs some seventy times in the Book of Acts, almost one-fifth of the New Testament instances. The Book of Acts is the story of the church, and so we may deduce that, drawing from the relatively few instances in Jesus' own discourse, the church gave *pneuma* a major role. Also in the Pauline Letters, the elevation of the Spirit is startling. Already in the opening five verses of 1 Thessalonians, the first extant Christian writing composed about A.D. 50 when Christianity was not twenty years old, we hear of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and *the Spirit*. The famous blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians (13:13) involves the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In the divided Corinthian church there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit; varieties of service, but the same Lord; and varieties of workings but the same God (1 Cor 12:4–6). It is very clear that God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit are already on a level within the first twenty years of the Christian message. But on that level, how do they function?

The Father, God, is *Kyrios*, "Lord," a name used in Greek to render the YAHWEH of the Israelite Scriptures. Jesus also is *Kyrios*, "Lord," for he is given the name that is above every other name (Phil 2:9). Finally there is that solemn statement in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "The Lord is the Spirit; where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Thus the same divine name is used of all three; yet the same things are not affirmed of all three. Jesus says "The Father is greater than I," and the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Granted this unity and disunity, let me now try to organize the New Testament material under the three divisions I discussed in my

opening remarks: the Spirit and Christ; the Spirit and the church; and the Spirit and humanity.

THE SPIRIT AND CHRIST

The New Testament reflection on the Spirit was part of the Christian attempt to understand Jesus. Despite the crucifixion, belief gained through an encounter with the risen Jesus forced Christians to say that he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, even though many of those promises had not been visibly fulfilled. Christians sought to detect such fulfillment in the various moments of Jesus' life. Very clearly the resurrection early served this purpose: Jesus had been among them as a servant, but then God had elevated him and exalted him through the resurrection. Connected with that was the gift of the Spirit.

In part, this connection may have been made because "spirit" was the life-giving power. In early Hebrew understanding, "spirit" and "breath" are one word, so that God gave to human beings the spirit of life. In Genesis 7:21-22 all flesh consists of "all in whose nostrils is the spirit of life." "The Lord stretches out the heavens," says Zechariah, "and forms the spirit of a human being within him" (12:1). When one is alive, then, one has the spirit. When one dies, one gives up the spirit, as Jesus did on the cross when he breathed out his Spirit. And what God did in the resurrection was to return the Spirit to Jesus; and in this returning of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is glorified. We hear of this glorification in old creedal formulas in the New Testament, some of them in the Pauline writings but antedating Paul, for example, "Jesus was vindicated *in the Spirit*" (1 Tim 3:16). Famous is the passage in Romans 1:3-4 about Jesus, God's Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, but constituted Son of God in power *through the Holy Spirit* (literally, Spirit of Holiness) by resurrection from the dead. What an awesome conglomeration of ideas: God constituted Jesus as his Son through the Holy Spirit in power by resurrection. This connection of the Spirit with resurrection was so vivid in Christian minds because their encounter with the risen Jesus brought them the same kind of power that marked Jesus' ministry, as we shall see when we turn to the theme of Spirit and the church.

Still, the resurrection context is not adequate to understand the role of the Spirit. If one associates the Spirit with the resurrection, how was the Spirit in Jesus during his life and his ministry? There is

a very strange statement in the Fourth Gospel that may catch the beginning of Christian reflection on this problem. In John 7:39 Jesus speaks by way of promise: from within him (presumably from himself) there shall flow rivers of living water. The evangelist attempts to enlighten us: by the "living water" Jesus was referring to the Spirit which those who came to believe in him were to receive, "For as yet there was no Spirit." Usually this peculiar statement is translated, "For as yet the Spirit had not been given"; but that is not what the author writes. He writes, "As yet there was no Spirit," almost as if the Spirit as a reality for Christians would not come into effect until after the ministry of Jesus. Yet other New Testament passages insist very strongly that the Spirit was present in the ministry of Jesus, whether it could be recognized by his followers or not. In the Lucan reference (11:20) to the healings and, especially, to the driving out of demons, Jesus says "If it is by the *finger of God* that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." But Matthew (12:28) writes, "If it is by *the Holy Spirit* that I cast out demons then the kingdom of God has come upon you." This changed wording means that as Christians reflected on Jesus' language during his ministry when he characterized divine assistance as the finger of God, they saw that assistance embodied in the Holy Spirit. All the gospels, at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, connect what he was with the Holy Spirit coming down upon him at his baptism. In the Pauline formulas we heard that Jesus was constituted Son of God through the Holy Spirit by resurrection from the dead. But in the gospels, as declared by God himself, Jesus is God's Son through the Holy Spirit by baptism. And Luke 4:14 says, "He returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit," still using language similar to Romans. In the Spirit the power of God came upon him; and, indeed, in Luke 4:16-18, when Jesus opens the Scriptures in his first sermon, he begins: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

Yet the Christian understanding of Jesus as possessing the Holy Spirit is not satisfied by resorting to the beginning of the ministry. It is not sufficient to say that through the resurrection Jesus is Son of God through the Holy Spirit; it is not sufficient to say that through the baptism Jesus is Son of God through the Holy Spirit. Reaching back earlier, Matthew and Luke start their gospels with *the conception* of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:35 virtually recites for Mary what Paul recites as a Christian creed. If Paul writes "constituted Son of God in power through the

Holy Spirit by resurrection," Gabriel changes resurrection to conception and says to Mary, "The *Holy Spirit* will come upon you; the *power* of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child will be called holy, the *Son of God*." The sense that the Holy Spirit was an integral part of Jesus' identity has been moved back to his conception. But even this answer is not adequate in the Christian struggle to understand Christ and the Spirit, for others will implicitly identify the Spirit that comes on Jesus Christ with the Spirit of God that moved across the waters at the creative moment (Gen 1:2). The creator Spirit is seen to be part of the mystery of Christ. And so John does not begin his story of Jesus Christ with either the baptism or the conception of Jesus. He moves the Jesus story back to the creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The Word was God and through Him all things were created" (John 1:1-2). John echoes the beginning of Genesis when the Spirit moved over the waters while God spoke the creative word. One psalm (104:30) says "You *send forth* your Spirit and they are created"; another psalm (148:5) says God "*commanded* and they were created." The Word of God and his Spirit were both involved in the creation, and they were together from the beginning.

THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

In all these stages (creation, conception, baptism, resurrection) the Spirit plays a role in what God has done in Jesus Christ, so intimate a role that one cannot separate the two. Jesus acts by the Spirit: if the Spirit creates, the Word creates; if the Spirit sanctifies, Jesus sanctifies. That same understanding is carried over as the church reflects on itself, but now the Spirit succeeds to Jesus. He is the last actor in the divine plan that began with creation and has continued with the cross and resurrection. In various works of the New Testament, however, there are different views of how the Spirit works in the Christian community, in the church.

In the 50s at Corinth, Paul sees many roles and activities in the church: there are apostles and prophets and teachers and healers — such a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit. Or even, there are Spirits, for Paul uses the plural: "Being zealous for the Spirits, seek for the edification of the Church" (1 Cor 14:12). The Spirit is a many-splendored thing, so that it breaks up into manifestations. A special gift of the Spirit is required in order to discern the Spirits. This view would have the Spirit endow Christians with abilities. Yet there are

ambiguities in this concept. Clearly, Paul would say that he was not an apostle because of any ability of his own: his apostleship was a gift directly from God. One might speak similarly of the prophet and the healer. But would Paul say the same for the teacher and administrator? Do those functions involve the gift of the Holy Spirit working *with the human spirit*? To what extent is such a gift or such a spirit both from above and below at the same time? We never get information on that. The very fact that people want a specific gift of the Spirit not already possessed means that in some way the Spirit corresponds to the human personality. Paul's description of the gifts of the spirits or charisms at Corinth is a favorable description and, indeed, he himself has the gift of apostleship, speaks in tongues, and can prophesy. Yet he is also aware of the divisive nature of such gifts or spirits in the Christian community. Paul insists that it is just as foolish for someone who has one gift to want another as for the hand to want to be a foot. His whole imagery of the one body of Christ is sketched because the gifts of the Spirit are also a dividing factor.

We see in the later derivatives of Pauline theology how that factor ultimately became too divisive, so that another understanding of the Spirit developed. In the Letters to Timothy and Titus, the Pastoral Letters, where Paul is disappearing from the scene, the question arises: How is the church of the future to be provided for when there are no more apostles? The answer is to choose the presbyter/bishops (and deacons), that is, church administrators, and get them in place in every church. They can preserve the tradition; church office will hold the church together. And it is understood that when a church officer is selected, the Holy Spirit is involved in empowering that office. (This correlation of office and Spirit becomes even more rigid in subsequent church writings.) Instead of the Spirit spontaneously endowing various members within the community, the Spirit is seen to function much more in the organized church, particularly in the ability of the presbyter/bishops to teach. In the language of sociology, there is a routinization of the Spirit. Such a Spirit-endowed structure has a great advantage: it will continue. Charismatic groups are always imperiled if the charism does not reappear in the second generation. The great charismatic leaders of Israel, the Judges, were finally left by the wayside because in moments of real need there might be no one who had a charism. The monarchy was established with the claim that the Spirit of wisdom

and understanding came on the king at the moment of his coronation, and so the Spirit was tied to the royal institution in the guidance of God's people. The same thing happened in the Christian community. In place of many diverse charisms, the Spirit functioned more surely through the office.

But such routinization is not a total picture. The Book of Acts, which is related to the Pauline tradition in some way, emphasizes another understanding of the Spirit. Acts thinks of the Spirit coming like a mighty wind at Pentecost when the disciples do not know what to do, even though they have seen the risen Lord. It is the Spirit that drives them to preach, indicating that their task is to proclaim Jesus Christ. Later on, the apostles stay on in Jerusalem and are not pictured as quickly moving out, but the Spirit drives other Christian missionaries from Jerusalem to approach outsiders — Samaritans and eventually even Gentiles. Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles, is totally astounded; but if the Spirit wills to be poured forth on even the Gentiles, why should Peter resist (Acts 10:46)? When the ultimate decision destined to shape the whole nature of Christianity comes up in the so-called Council of Jerusalem, namely, the question whether the church is to be open freely and totally to the Gentiles, it is settled thus: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). In other words, Acts does not emphasize a Spirit attached to office, but a Spirit that comes sweeping in at decisive moments to tell the apostolic figures what to do. If one may use stage language in a way that is not pejorative, we have a *Deus ex machina*, with the Spirit of God coming in to solve the issue.

Such a Spirit has remained a very strong anticipation in Christian thought. In great moments the Spirit acts in the church in some undefinable way and moves the church towards what it should do. At the opening of the Second Vatican Council there was a solemn prayer to the Spirit because this was looked on as a moment when the church uniquely needed guidance. As a matter of fact, at the Council the Spirit led the church in a different way from what many church officials wanted and expected, even though in Catholic theology those officers received the same Spirit when they received their office. In other words we had a modern example of the Spirit-endowed office of the Pastoral Epistles being corrected by the occasionally onrushing Spirit of the Book of Acts. Another problem is that Acts, with its thesis of the Spirit arriving at chosen moments,

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tends to give a blank check on the Spirit. We Christians can always claim that we have done what we have done because the Spirit led us. But it is not so easy to prove the Spirit's influence. There is a story told of an elderly Roman Catholic woman who was quite resistant to all the changes of Vatican II. She fought her pastor all the time. Finally he lost his patience with her and he said: "Can't you see that the Holy Spirit is leading the church to make all these changes?" And she answered him, "Well, that's funny; the Holy Spirit is leading us to make changes that the Holy Ghost never used to approve of!" In other words, when the church depends on the overall guidance of the Holy Spirit and then makes radical changes, do such changes imply that the Spirit was not with the church's practice previously?

There is still another powerful understanding of the relation between the Spirit and the church that is not covered by charisms (1 Corinthians), by Spirit-endowed office (Pastorals), or by the great moving Spirit (Acts). It is found in the Gospel of John. That Gospel developed another term for the Spirit, not the neuter term *pneuma* but *paraklētos*, a personal term. "Paraclete" defies definition: it is a legal term, "advocate," and certainly the Johannine Spirit has legal functions in defending Jesus Christ and proclaiming the world wrong. The ultimate proof that Jesus was victorious over death is that a personal Spirit who represents him testifies. In the Old Testament, Job ultimately realized he could not prove himself right in the trial before God; but he prayed that his vindicating angel would stand upon his grave and prove to the world that he was right (Job 19:25). Similarly, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, is the defending angel of Christ. He is also the teacher of the individual Christian: "If you love me and keep my commandments, then at my request the Father will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever" (14:15). "The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything" (14:26). Thus the Spirit is not confined to charismatics whether they be apostles or prophets or teachers or administrators but is the possession of every believing Christian. The ultimate teacher of the church is not the property of any office. The church was not crippled when the apostles died; for, indeed, it was the Paraclete/Spirit that enabled the first generation to bear witness. This same Paraclete/Spirit enables the ordinary believer to bear witness just as effectively as the first generation bore witness. This is not the sweeping Spirit of Acts, coming at an awesome moment;

rather the Paraclete is always there. Ultimately such an understanding of the Spirit means that there is no such thing as a second-class Christian either in position or in time because every Christian has the Spirit of God in his or her heart. And yet, this understanding too has its difficulties. If the Spirit is in the heart of every Christian, what happens when two Christians disagree? How does one know which is the voice of the Spirit? Later on in this same Johannine tradition that gave us the Paraclete, another writer has to warn complainingly, "Do not believe every Spirit; rather put these Spirits to the test . . . so we can know the Spirit of Truth from the Spirit of Deceit" (1 John 4:1,6).

THE SPIRIT AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT

We turn to the final question, after our discussions of the Spirit and Christ and of the Spirit and the church. What about the Spirit and the human spirit? If there is the Spirit of Truth that comes from God, and if according to the New Testament there is a Spirit of Deceit that comes from the devil, we can say further that there is the human spirit. It is neither precisely of God nor of the devil; but unfortunately it is capable of working not only with God but also with evil. There the Scriptures show ambiguity. God created us by breathing into us a living spirit, and so every living human being has the spirit. When God gives us life, he answers the prayer, "Send forth your spirit." Job (34:14-15) cries out, "When God takes back his spirit . . . human beings descend into the dust." Still the Old Testament insists that there is a special spirit. Every human being may have the life-giving spirit; but when the spirit comes on Elijah, he can act as a prophet. He passes on a twofold spirit to Elisha, and that person becomes different: a prophet more mighty in deeds than his master. Every human being may have the spirit, but the king at his coronation gets the spirit of wisdom and understanding and counsel and fortitude and knowledge and piety or fear of the Lord (Is 11:2). Every human being may have the life-giving spirit, but when Saul in an unforgettable moment is seized by the Spirit of God, that king of Israel rolls about naked in the dust and everyone says: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Sam 19:23-24). Evidently biblical writers could distinguish between the human spirit that comes from God and a special Spirit that comes from God. The same distinction is true in the New Testament. All human beings are created in God's image and likeness, and all have his

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spirit. Yet, according to Paul and to John, those who believe in Jesus Christ receive God's Holy Spirit. They are the children of God! As uncomfortable and exclusive as it may seem, one would be hard pressed to find either John or Paul saying that every human being is a child of God. Childhood or sonship is the particular privilege of those who are given the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

What difference does Jesus Christ make in the special Spirit given in his name? Eastern and Western Christianity are divided over that point. If we identify the Redeemer's Spirit with the creator Spirit, that creator Spirit proceeds from the Father. Yet does not Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, make a difference? God never changes, but in trinitarian life God the Son becomes human, and he was not human before. Classical theologians cannot admit change, and so they posit only a new relationship in God. Yet because the Son of God lived as we live, and died even more horribly than most of us die, is not God's experience different? Therefore, when the Spirit is given by Jesus Christ, is not that Spirit marked by the Son as well as by the Father? The Spirit that lives in the heart of those who are God's children, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ — is it not different in some way from the spirit that conforms all human beings to the creator God? In another way of asking the question, can we be satisfied with saying that all that is noble comes forth from the human spirit that exists within us? Ultimately, must we not turn to God's Spirit who comes into us and not simply out of us?

I have said that in the Bible "spirit" has many meanings; often diverse meanings receive the same treatment in modern thought. As part of demythologization, the devil as the evil spirit is lost to many Christians. Inevitably, then, the spirit as the Holy Spirit of God is going to be lost. The same mentality that claims that in the world can be no evil which is not of our creation will ultimately say that in the world there can be no good which is not of our creation. The mystery of evil, however we express it, is closely tied to the mystery of good. It is interesting to reflect on hell as an embodiment of the mystery of evil. Among some strands of modern thought one may find parallels to ideas expressed in such diverse writers as John Milton and Jean Paul Sartre. According to Milton's Satan, "Hell is myself"; and indeed many could say, "I myself constitute my own hell." According to one of Sartre's characters, "Hell is other people"; and, alas, in the complex issues of life, including those of the family, our

hell often is other people. But the classical definition of hell is the absence of God; and experiencing the absence of God may still be the most profound understanding of what it is for a human being to go through hell. The Holy Spirit is the refutation of that hell.

God was diffusive of his being in creating a good world that mirrored him, and especially in creating intelligent human beings that mirrored his intelligence. But God could not be satisfied until he became embroiled in human history with all its successes and failures by identifying himself with one people. (Israel as the special people of God is a concept with the faults of particularism, but we can never live by abstractions.) Still God was not satisfied, and so he further embroiled himself in one human life, that of Jesus Christ. But God's ultimate act of presence to the world that he created and redeemed involves his entrance into individual lives as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate revelation of God. If hell is the final absence of God, the Spirit is the supreme presence of God, a presence that the Book of Acts describes as a mighty wind and tongues of fire, a presence that the Christian hymns describe as a sweet cooling (*dulce refrigerium*). The Spirit brings burning power and cooling consolation and whatever gift is needed to assure us of the truth of the promise of the Johannine Jesus: "If you love me and keep my commandments the Father will give you another Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, to be with you forever. . . . He remains with you and is within you" (John 14:15-17).



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