

UNIT 6: GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

In Christian history, pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit) has often been eclipsed by other, apparently more pressing theological concerns. As a result, Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, could refer to the Spirit as 'the God about whom no one writes (*theos agraptos*)'.¹ While Christology has been dominated by discussion about the humanity and the divinity of Christ, the Spirit's divinity has, doubtless, been the cause of less debate than that of the Son, though 'Father' and 'Son' more 'readily function as personal symbols', a consideration which can cause concern over how best to answer the question, 'What (or who) is the Holy Spirit?'²

It seems that, in the years before the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Spirit's 'divinity' and place in the Godhead was taken for granted, or possibly not considered at all, as the focus of theological interest and controversy was squarely placed on defining the person of Christ. The 'Creed' which emerged from that Council simply acknowledged belief in the Holy Spirit, though we know that, prior to Nicaea, baptism, communion, exorcism, hymn-singing, preaching, confession, benediction and prayer all took place with an appeal to the threefold name of God as 'Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. While Christological controversy continued, Nicaea was certainly a watershed and when the Nicene Creed was amended and developed at the Council of Constantinople (381), a much fuller statement was made regarding the Holy Spirit:

We believe ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son*], who is worshipped and glorified together with the Father and Son. Who spoke through the prophets.

The Creed confirms a number of points about the Holy Spirit which were based, it seems, on the practice of the Early Church. The church's worship had glorified the one God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is to be worshipped and adored. While the term itself appears impersonal, setting the Holy Spirit alongside the Father and the Son appears to give to the Spirit too a sense of 'personhood'.

While the Holy Spirit is seen to be of the same essence (substance, or nature – *ousia*) as the Father (and therefore also the Son), there is a degree of

¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 16.

² Joseph Haroutunian, 'Spirit, Holy Spirit, Spiritism', in Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 318-19.

differentiation in the Creed. While the Son is seen to have been 'begotten' of the Father (and one of the revisions at the Council of Constantinople was to make the Son the 'only begotten' of the Father), the Spirit was seen to 'proceed' from the Father. It seems that this was not intended to make any differentiation of value, or any subordination of the Spirit to the Son, but that it was intended to make a differentiation between the *hypostases* to demonstrate that within the Godhead the eternal unity and one-ness of God is also eternally three in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The matter was confused by the introduction of the so-called *filioque* (literally 'and the son') clause (in square brackets above*) which was certainly in use in the Latin churches by the sixth century, though it was only formally accepted by the Popes in 1014. This added that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son. The addition of the clause was one of the causes of the Great Schism between the Greek-speaking churches of the East and the Latin-speaking churches of the West in 1054.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is experienced more as God's action or God's presence, particularly (though not exclusively) in the church through the equipping of believers with gifts and fruits and ministries. The list of gifts, contrasted with 'works of the flesh' are to be found in Galatians 5: 22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law.

In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is seen as active in the world, bringing people to faith and then equipping them for lives of witness and service. In this way, those who believe are 'born again of the Spirit'. The indwelling Spirit leads believers on a path from justification (where they are declared no longer to suffer the penalty of sin because of Christ, the cross and resurrection) to sanctification. Some Christian denominations believe that sanctification can be achieved in this life, though most see it as an eschatological concept. Nevertheless, the indwelling Spirit is seen as enabling believers to act justly and righteously and to live faithfully, *so far as that might be possible*.

A further role for the Holy Spirit concerns communication between God and human beings. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is the *Paraclete*, or comforter, whose role is to intercede as an advocate on behalf of believers, who supports in times of trial but who also convinces people of their sinfulness before God. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit is the one who inspired the writing of the Scriptures (there are many ways in which this has been interpreted) and who inspired understanding of the Scriptures within human beings (sometimes, as in the Reformed tradition, being seen as the *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti* (the internal witness of the Holy Spirit)).

Gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit are different from the fruits and are understood in different ways in different churches, and drawing variously on 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches often emphasise 1 Corinthians 12 as demonstrating the supernatural gifts of the Spirit which were absent in the church for centuries due to neglect of the Spirit. Their reappearance was connected with the 'baptism (or infilling) of the Spirit' (see Acts 1:5) which is seen as an event separate from both conversion and from water-baptism.

Traditionally, the mainstream churches have maintained that seven 'gifts' of the Spirit are poured out at baptism, initially derived from Isaiah 11.1-2. These are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord.

The presence of God which is made real by the Spirit is also the continuation Christ's work, or of the Spirit of the Son, in and through his body, the church. As a consequence, the Spirit's presence is personal, because it is seen to be the presence of the Spirit of Christ, who was and is personal.

According to Colin E. Gunton (1941-2003), one of the most prominent and prolific English theologians of the twentieth century, there are three 'places' which offer 'highly varying accounts of the person and work of the Spirit'. The first he characterized as 'the mainstream dogmatic tradition', where the emphasis is on 'the work of the Spirit as applying to believer and Church the benefits of Christ'. The second is what he termed 'that amorphous group of phenomena known as the charismatic movement', in which the Spirit is seen as 'the *cause* of particular religious phenomena', but where he considered that the Spirit's work is often viewed as separate from that of the Son. The third 'focus' sees the Spirit as identified 'with or in particular cultural and historical developments'. This so-called 'Hegelian' approach emphasizes the essential immanence of the Spirit, and Gunton rejected this as a misunderstanding. In his reappropriation of the 'mainstream dogmatic tradition', he attempted to maintain the *transcendence* of the Spirit: 'The Spirit may be active *within* the world, but he does not become identical with any part of the world. That is the function of the Son, who becomes flesh ...'³ For Gunton, both the 'charismatic' and 'Hegelian' approaches result in a weak pneumatology, where, in the former, the Spirit's person and work is indistinguishable from that of the Son and, in the latter, the Spirit is inseparable from historical events and cultural phenomena.

³ Ibid., pp. 105-8.

CASE STUDY: THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE PURITANS

According to Geoffrey Nuttall, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit ‘received a more detailed consideration from the Puritans of seventeenth-century England than it has received at any other time in Christian history’.⁴ As will be seen, this treatment was not merely intellectual but *experimental*; the Spirit was only understood as he was perceived to be at work within the Christian’s heart.

For most Puritans, it was the work of the Spirit which makes someone a Christian. In other words, it is the Spirit who effects both regeneration and sanctification. Protestants, in general, asserted that the Spirit was responsible for conversion and faith as ‘initial acts of salvation’, which contrasted with the prevailing Roman Catholic view of the ‘efficacy of works and sacraments’, where baptism itself had been seen to effect regeneration. In so doing, the Reformers allowed the closer and more direct ‘association of the Spirit with the person and work of Christ’. In this way the Spirit both ‘completes’ and ‘fulfils’ ‘the work of God in Christ, supplying the faith to accept the Gospel and the will to embrace the benefits of the Redeemer’.⁵

John Owen (1616-83), one of the most prolific and significant of Puritan authors and one who entered into an extended discussion of the Holy Spirit, maintained the theological importance of the Holy Spirit as a *hypostasis* of the divine Trinity while also asserting the Spirit’s significance by delineating a specific task for ‘him’ within the redemptive scheme. For Owen (as for Augustine, and others, before him), it was the Holy Spirit who makes effective the gracious acts of God in salvation. Owen wrote: ‘in every divine act, the authority of the Father, the love and wisdom of the Son, with the immediate efficacy and power of the Holy Ghost are to be considered’. Thus ‘the Father designs salvation, the Son purchases it, and the Holy Spirit applies and accomplishes it, makes it effectual in us’.⁶ Similarly Thomas Goodwin (1600-80), ‘the Elder’, one of the Independents in attendance at the Westminster Assembly, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, President of Magdalen College, Oxford, and subsequently minister of the Congregational church in Fetter Lane, London, wrote in *Of the Work of the Holy Ghost and our Salvation*, that ‘election is appropriated to the Father, redemption to the Son, application to the Holy Ghost’.⁷ For these Puritans it is the presence of the Spirit which makes redemption a lived and living reality. Without the Spirit, redemption might remain a historical event and even a theological datum, but it would remain unknown, and thus ineffective, in the human heart because, in their utter depravity, human beings are unable to achieve salvation by their own efforts. For the Puritans, sanctification followed regeneration. For Calvinists such as John Owen, sanctification, like salvation itself, could not be conceived in any sense as

⁴ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Thought and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), p. viii.

⁵ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), pp. 24-25.

⁶ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1862), II, pp. 180-81.

⁷ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols (Edinburgh, London, Dublin and Montreal: James Nichol, James Nisbet, W. Robertson and B. Dawson & Sons, 1863), VI, p. 47.

reliant on human effort. It was not the sum of moral endeavour. Instead it was the gracious act of God by the Spirit. In this way it is the Spirit who brings regeneration, or new birth, to people and sets them apart for godly living. Their sanctification does not make them morally perfect, but places God's seal upon them which will be perfected in eternity. The Spirit accomplishes this by his immediate presence within believers. According to John Owen:

Sanctification ... is the immediate work of God by his Spirit upon our whole nature, proceeding from the peace made for us by Jesus Christ, whereby being changed unto his likeness, we are kept entirely at peace with God, and are preserved unblameable, or in a state of gracious acceptance with him to the end.⁸

There are a number of points of significance here. Owen links the work of the Spirit to the work of Christ. Furthermore, sanctification is an 'immediate' work of God in the human heart, but holiness is eschatological. In other words, Owen did not believe that sanctification was accomplished suddenly, but that it could only be achieved by God working directly in the human heart by the Holy Spirit. As such, it is achieved fully only at the final resurrection. He described it thus:

The work of holiness in its beginning is but like the seed cast into the earth; namely the *seed of God* whereby we are born again. And it is known how seed that is cast into the earth doth grow and increase: being variously cherished and nourished, it is in its nature to take root and to spring up, bringing forth fruit. So it is with the principle of grace and holiness. It is small at first, but being received in good and honest hearts, made so by the Spirit of God, and there nourished and cherished, it takes root and brings forth fruit. And both these, even the first planting and the increase of it, are both equally from God by His Spirit.⁹

Most Puritans – whatever their ecclesiological preference – inherited and developed this sense that the Spirit and the scriptures worked together. Thus the Holy Spirit's activity both transformed the written words into God's word and also worked in the listeners enabling them to hear God's word in scripture. In this way, Nuttall explains, 'The work of the Holy Spirit in connexion with Scripture is thus twofold: the Spirit both inspired its writers and enlightens its hearers or readers'.¹⁰ Richard Sibbes (1577-1635), whose Puritanism demanded neither separatism nor the rejection of set liturgies, put the case in this way:

God, joining with the soul and spirit of a man whom he intends to convert, besides that inbred light that is in the soul, causeth him to see a divine majesty shining forth in the Scriptures, so that there must be an infused establishing by the Spirit to settle the heart in this first principle ... that the Scriptures are the

⁸ John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, abridged by George Burder (Philadelphia, PA: Wiolliam W. Woodward, 1810), p. 151.

⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, II, p. 455.

¹⁰ Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 22.

word of God. There must be a double light. So there must be a Spirit in me, as there is a Spirit in the Scripture, before I can see any thing ...¹¹

As a result, the Spirit was also responsible for human responses to the word of God. The Spirit's work in regeneration has already been discussed. But the Calvinistic Puritans confirmed that the Spirit prompted *all* human responses. The root of this objection was the firm belief that God made provision for all human need and that God alone was responsible for the election of human beings to salvation. Thus the Spirit was at work in human hearts drawing them closer to God and enabling them to perform all religious acts. For John Owen, this meant that prayer itself was a work of the Spirit which inspired in men and women the knowledge that they were recipients of God's grace. Thus the Spirit, rather than human ability or reading from a book, gave rise to true prayer.¹²

In this way, then, the Spirit's role in effecting regeneration both in justification and sanctification alongside the authority of the scriptures, read and understood under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, were prominent aspects of Puritan pneumatology.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, IV, p. 171.