

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Holy Spirit and the Corporate Life of the Church

BY CANON J. E. FISON, M.A.

THERE seems to be an approximate parallelism between the progressive revelation of the Spirit in the Old Testament and the New. In both Testaments, in the most primitive narratives of the Pentateuch, Judges and 1 Samuel, as well as in the birth stories of our Lord and of the Pentecostal Church, the Spirit is to begin with the explanation of the abnormal and the otherwise inexplicable. On the whole, at this stage of revelation the phenomena associated with the Spirit in the Old Testament are essentially individualistic: *e.g.*, Samson's strength, Gideon's leadership and Saul's ecstatic behaviour. But the story of the seventy elders of Israel in Numbers xi and the bands of ecstatic "dervish" prophets in 1 Samuel should be remarked as evidence of a group intoxication capable in some ways of standing alongside the intoxication of Pentecost.

The sequel to this primitive conception of the Spirit as the cause of strange psychological phenomena is the unexpected, but not inexplicable, silence as to the Spirit and His working, which is the most marked feature both of the pre-exilic prophets of the Old Testament and of the Synoptic evidence in the New. When we reflect on the fact that, as the story of Balaam shows, and as much contemporary evidence from the ancient world proves, the ecstatic and queer abnormalities of behaviour, which are hall-marks of the primitive biblical notion of the Spirit, are closely paralleled outside the Bible in their outward and visible forms of conduct and, as far as our evidence goes, in their psychological attitudes and conditions, then it is not surprising to find the great prophets markedly reticent about the inspiration of the Spirit and emphasising as much their distinction from as their identity with the prophetic succession of the ancient nebiim. Amos' sharp retort to the Erastian Amaziah in the Chapel Royal at Bethel marks the contrast with the absoluteness of prophetic insight rather than the refinement of theological systematisation. But it is none the less true for that: "I was no prophet: neither was I prophet's son." And in the New Testament the strange silence of Jesus about the Spirit is just as necessary a corrective to misinterpretations of His character and conduct. And that His is an almost total silence the detailed survey of the Synoptic evidence by Dr. C. K. Barrett has made abundantly clear.

Not only had the Holy Spirit to be differentiated from the behaviour of any queer eccentric, but His ethical character had to be abundantly demonstrated in life before it could be assumed that reference to the Spirit could be more or less understood by those whose habitual conception of His work was so different from our Lord's. Just as in the case of His Messianic secret, there was need of reticence as to the Spirit's work until His real character had been demonstrated by the life and conduct and works of Jesus Himself. And it is exceedingly important in this respect not to exalt the interpretation of the Synoptic

Christ which we find in the Pauline Epistles and the Fourth Gospel above the Synoptic Jesus Christ Himself.

In the Old Testament, in Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, and in the New Testament in St. Paul and St. John, the Spirit comes back explicitly into the centre of the theological panorama. After the relative silence of the pre-exilic prophets and of Deuteronomy, the great prophets of the Exile speak constantly of the Spirit and the whole of Pauline theology is dominated by this conception. In the Old Testament the overflow of His work into the whole creation is the contribution of the post-exilic Wisdom Literature—an overflow, be it noted, of the prophetic mysticism of the exile, utterly different from the pale academic and intellectualised concept of Liberal theology to-day. In the New Testament St. Paul leads on to St. John and the full glory of the personal Paraclete breaks upon our astonished eyes, not in a theological Epistle, written as a tract for the times, but in a Gospel, which is such a daring re-interpretation of the other Gospels as to be itself the clearest evidence of the unfettered operation of the Holy Spirit : unfettered in the sense of being a free re-shaping of the Gospel evidence, but in another sense fettered, for the Spirit, if He is truly Holy, is a self-effacing and not an ostentatious or self-advertising agent. He effaces Himself and points more clearly perhaps in the Fourth Gospel than in any of the others to Jesus Himself.

I

This, as I see it, is the progressive biblical revelation of the Holy Spirit : *mutatis mutandis*, the sequence in both Old and New Testaments is strikingly similar, and it suggests a jumping off ground for a discussion of the Holy Spirit in our contemporary situation. There are amongst us those who hold the naive and undeveloped view of the Spirit as the abnormal and inexplicable. This is the primitive and permanent basis of what we might for want of a better word describe as natural religion. But in the Western world this tradition of natural religion with an elementary belief in the supernatural has faded, and despite desperate attempts to put the clock back and so force up an artificial religious hothouse plant in a narrow department of life, there seems little chance of its immediate or ultimate revival proving truly beneficial.

Emerging from this naive supernaturalism is the ethical and intellectual emphasis of much contemporary Protestantism. It is noteworthy that this conforms exactly with that "mirror of magistrates" which the mediaevalists found in the intellectual character in the Spirit of Isaiah xi. 2. And it is, of course, the great merit of this Protestant tradition of the past 100 years that it has revealed the message of the writing Prophets of the Old Testament and of the Synoptic Gospels of the New in a way unparalleled in the 2,000 years of Christendom. In these days of the fashionable 'debunking' of political and theological Liberalism it is important to give honour where honour is due. But at the same time it is idle to deny that Liberal Protestantism seems now to be arrested in its development in this second ethical and intellectual stage of the biblical revelation of the Spirit, or else it is retreating in full cry for the shelter of a naive super-

naturalism unwilling or unable to face the facts of the twentieth century and to bring its religion into vital contact with contemporary realities.

It is the third stage of mystical communion which is the climax of the biblical revelation. Second Isaiah is quite different from all the other prophets. Here is no "Thus saith the Lord". The prophet and the Lord are indistinguishable, and the mystical communion of a prophetic personal relationship is shown as the climax of the biblical revelation. Similarly in the New Testament no one can say where the Lord is speaking in John iii and where the Evangelist is commenting. It is quite different from the Synoptic tradition, but it presupposes it. It is only *via* the pre-exilic writing prophets and Ezekiel that we reach Second Isaiah, and it is only *via* the Synoptic Gospels and St. Paul that we reach St. John. There can be no short cut. Now the tragedy of the contemporary situation is that over against the arrested development of an intellectual and ethical Liberal Protestantism there stands a naive supernaturalism (and in some cases sacramentalism) which in so much Evangelical pietism and Catholic mysticism has attempted to reach the third stage of the biblical revelation by by-passing the second. To correct, therefore, the arrested development of Liberal Protestantism and also the artificial short cut of much Evangelical pietism and Catholic sacramental mysticism, we need a re-examination of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and more particularly of His work not so much in the individual as in the corporate life of the Church. And it is to that re-examination that I now address myself.

II

The birthday of the Pentecostal Church characterises the Holy Spirit as being both corporate and eschatological. The distinctive Christian "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" began at Pentecost, and the experimental communism of Acts ii. 45 is its immediate sequel. Whatever the individual gifts of the Spirit may be, there can henceforth be no excuse for their individualistic exercise. Only in co-operation with all other members of the Body of Christ can each individual member play his rightful part and exercise his own peculiar gift. Exaggerated exercise of particular gifts is the spiritual counterpart of that futile over-excited movement of parts of the physical body which is known to the medical profession as locomotor ataxy.

Over against the ecclesiastical tyranny of a conception of the Holy Spirit's work and action as solely corporate and mediated through the Church to the individual, the Reformation assertion of the right of private judgment was a necessary and vital protest. But this principle of the Holy Spirit's operation through the conscience, intellect and intuition of the individual is as much one sided as the ecclesiastical monopoly which it overthrew. Nothing is more needful in the world to-day than for the Church to demonstrate the secret of that true synthesis of individual liberty and corporate authority which is the hall-mark of "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit."

Secondly, the birthday of the Pentecostal Church marks the latest possible *terminus a quo* for the beginning of the operation of the "powers of the age to come." Whatever we may hold of the disputed meaning of the famous watchword of both John the Baptist and our Lord, "the

kingdom of God is at hand", there can be no question that the whole New Testament rings with the eschatological note of the Holy Spirit. It was this eschatological note that made St. Peter assert that the Pentecostal experience was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. Other similar demonstrations of apparent mass hysteria and intoxication at 9 a.m. could no doubt have been produced in the ancient world, as indeed they can be produced to-day, but this was something quite different. "This is that which hath been spoken by the prophet Joel: And it shall be in the last days, saith God, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."

The later Old Testament prophetic expectation was of an effusion of the Holy Spirit in the last days. It was because in Jesus Christ the early church was sure that the last days had arrived that St. Peter was able with such confidence to attribute the phenomena of Pentecost to the Holy Spirit and so differentiate those phenomena, associated with the confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, from all other psychologically parallel phenomena. And so when all the din of argument about the relation of the Church of Jesus Christ to the Kingdom of God has died away, we may discern in the eschatological and corporate notes of the Pentecostal Spirit that link between the two which on the one hand prevents their equation and on the other safeguards their close and indissoluble relation.

These two notes of the corporate and eschatological character of the Pentecostal Spirit are developed in all their implications by St. Paul. As the Barthians are always reminding us, we are now, in the Church, living "between the ages," in a sort of overlap, with an eschatology realised in the first coming of our Lord and yet still awaiting final fulfilment in His second coming. During this overlap we enjoy the privilege of the first instalment, the pledge, the firstfruits, of the Spirit. This is no fictional reality, but a present anticipation of the full realisation of the final eschatological order. As St. John develops it with his doctrine of eternal life as a present possession, it is alike removed both from the imagined theoretical forensic justification of a sterile theology and also from the artificially engendered and worked-up mystical absorption of an ascetic technique. It is the deepest reality of Christian experience, and yet it eludes all attempts at precise location and definition.

Indeed, the very characteristic of holiness, which is a distinctive New Testament advance upon the Old Testament doctrine of the Spirit, marks out the Spirit as essentially unostentatious and self-effacing. This Johannine emphasis is all important, and coupled with the full personality of the Paraclete powerfully corrects all notions of the Spirit's character and work which see His hall-mark in ecstatic phenomena of mass hysteria or individual eccentricity. Pentecost is not the final term of the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but its A.B.C. And it is vital to proceed from the first lesson on His eschatological and ostentatious manifestation through the middle classes of His ethical fruits in the Pauline Epistles to the climax of His revelation in the doctrine of His personality and self-effacement in the Fourth Gospel.

And indeed, here we come to grips with perhaps the most challenging

of all the implications of a real Trinitarian faith. The naive supernaturalism of the ostentatious Spirit is corrected by the silence of Jesus about the Spirit. And the silence of Jesus about the Spirit opens the way to the unostentatious and self-effacing silence of the Spirit about Himself, which is the crown and climax of biblical revelation, pointing as it does to the secret of all real life as not to be found in the assertion of individual personality or in the loss of that individual personality in the wider unit of a political or ecclesiastical corporation. Neither individualism nor communism has the answer to the secret of human life to which the final New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit points. This is to be found, as Martin Buber has so powerfully emphasised in our day, neither in the individual nor in the community, but in the indefinable meeting of "I" and "Thou."

To the secret of this indefinable meeting in which alone the dimension of the Holy Spirit is made manifest in our experience there is no more significant pointer than the focus of Christian worship in the Eucharist. Thanks to Dom Gregory Dix the futile controversy about the Epiklesis can be quietly put aside. For no one can now maintain that an explicit Epiklesis is necessary to an Eucharistic consecration. On the other hand, thanks to Martin Buber, it should be possible for the most convinced Evangelical to recognise that wider operation of the Holy Spirit in the realm of things as well as of persons, to which the Old Testament Wisdom literature bears its own impressive witness. Certainly this is only legitimate as the sequel to and overflow of the personal sphere of His operation in the writing Prophets. But granted that personal sphere is fundamental, then there is no reason whatever to grudge that overflow into realms commonly considered impersonal. The 'atmosphere' of a Church may be ultimately conditioned by the personal relationship of the gathered congregation therein. But it seems to me just blind folly to deny that the overflow of this relationship becomes attached to its scene and setting in a way that gives it at least a quasi-independent status of its own.

This is, of course, what Buber so clearly sees and so pointedly emphasises. A very clear illustration of his fundamental principle is provided by the story of the Burning Bush. Buber attacks any metaphysical doctrine of "I am that I am" and asserts that the meaning of the Divine Name may more nearly be rendered by "I shall be there as He who I there shall be." In other words, the presence of God is promised and is quite independent of the faith or faithlessness of Moses, to whom it is promised. On the other hand the form and manner of that presence may not be defined in advance. There is no possibility, as Buber says, of conjuring the presence of God, nor is there any need whatever to attempt to do so. Of course, secondhand interpretations of this central meeting of man with God (however mediated) tend to all sorts of theological theories, of which Animism on the one hand and Transubstantiation on the other may be considered extreme and perhaps typical examples. But if revelation is in personal meeting and not in propositional interpretations of that meeting, whether the latter be biblical or ecclesiastical, then the limitations of all such theories are clearly seen. They have their

place, for we have to give a reason for the faith that is in us. But they must keep their place, for they are not that faith and by themselves they cannot transmit it.

III

This leads us to consider the twin errors that perpetually dog the steps of all who try to speak of the Holy Spirit. It is so easy either to identify Him with the mode or manner of His revelation, or on the other hand to separate Him by clear-cut definitions from all such modes and manners of His revelation. Either way is a fatal short-cut. He stands within the Godhead precisely to say 'No' to all human and ecclesiastical idolatries. And it is extremely important to come to grips with the issues involved in a real Trinitarian faith. The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity may not be replaced by another. Catholicism so often seeks to replace Him by the Church, the Blessed Sacrament, or the Blessed Virgin Mary. Protestantism also seeks to replace Him by the Bible, intuitional guidance, or human reason. Even the more eccentric of His gifts like the gift of tongues can be used to replace Him. Some of these heresies are far less significant than others. But all are dangerous and some disastrous.

On the other hand there is an equal danger in a clear cut separation of the Holy Spirit from the means of grace. It is quite as easy to separate Him from the Church as to identify Him with it. It is quite as easy to do the same with the Bible or with the human conscience, intelligence, understanding and reason. But the unostentatious and self-effacing Holy Spirit may never be safely so delimited and defined. He may neither be identified with the means He uses to bring us to Jesus Christ nor separated from them.

And if this be so, then the glib bandying of theological brick-bats against allegedly subjective or objective grounds of assurance is entirely misplaced. Neither in a fool-proof guaranteed objectivity, however carefully defined, nor in an immediacy of subjective experience may we discover the secret of the ground of true Christian assurance. How far removed from the Tractarian timidity of which Dale with justice criticises Pusey is the ringing and confident assurance of the New Testament Church! And how equally far removed from the cock-sureness of some Evangelical pietists is the dereliction of the Crucified, and the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross and Luther and all the saints! The true ground of Christian assurance is the Holy Spirit, who alone (whatever means He uses) can make Jesus Christ our contemporary.

And to this true ground of our assurance and to the dimension of the reality of the Holy Spirit wherein it may be found, the central Christian act of eucharistic worship quite unmistakably points. This rite has three essential moments: offering, consecration, communion. The temptation of the controversialist is to convert the two-way reciprocity of all true love into the more clearly defined one-way traffic of a theological system. But the Agape of God will not be so confined, not even by Dr. Nygren! The dimension of the Holy Spirit opens up to us in all its eschatological and corporate significance neither in the

giving of the offertory nor in the taking of the communion, but in the indefinable meeting of consecration.

But of course the temptation to define this meeting has proved irresistible to ecclesiastical theologians, and so, in protest against their idolatry, there has inevitably risen up that "mere memorialism" which P. T. Forsyth holds "to be a more fatal error than the Mass and a far less lovely." The truth of reciprocal meeting (which is the secret of "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit") is neither in a mere memorialism nor in the Mass. It is neither in the giving of Catholicism nor in the taking of Evangelicalism. It is between the two, in the giving of thanks which at the Feeding of the Five Thousand intervenes with such eternal symbolism between the taking and the giving and which is characterised in an almost irresistibly anti-idolatrous fashion by the fraction, which breaks to atoms any attempt to define the indefinable mystery and to locate that which can never be localised.

IV

If all this be true of the centre and heart of Christian life and worship, then its implications will be of the most far-reaching character. Holy Baptism as well as Holy Communion will be re-discerned in its truly sacramental character: the sacrament of the Spirit, which is the gateway to the sacrament of the Lord. We shall fall into error if we seek to replace the mystery of Christian initiation by a more clear cut doctrine of either a quasi-magical *opus operatum* of God in Infant Baptism or insistence upon decision or surrender as an *opus operatum* of man in adolescent Confirmation. We shall seek the Spirit, but we shall know that all we can do to seek Him is to enter the water, which is the sphere of His operation. And in the presence of the mystery of the waters of Genesis i. 2 and of their symbolism as discovered by modern psychology in the depths of the human soul, we shall recognise that the unconscious is inaccessible to direct attack or influence, and our evangelistic technique in consequence will approach with more reverence that holy ground of intercourse without which no new life can ever be born, either in the physical or the spiritual world.

And then in the wider context of our missionary endeavour and longings for reunion, a new perspective will open up before us as we become aware of the essential reciprocity of all true love. No longer will a dominant and one-way traffic movement of giving be seen as adequate to reveal the divine Agape to the world. Reciprocal taking will be seen as equally involved. On the most elementary Christian principle, "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you," it is high time the question was seriously faced, Is it Christian to continue to export missionaries and to support their export with money unless we are prepared to import missionaries and to welcome them, not as exhibits at missionary meetings, but as resident and permanent parish priests? There may not be yet much practical possibility of extensive reciprocal interchange. But the principle is quite fundamental and it sometimes appears as if there is a truer internationalism among artists and politicians than among ministers of the Christian Church. Charity as a one-way traffic dole stinks in the nostrils of any

self-respecting recipients. It is a coinage that is debased : it needs to be redeemed, and not scrapped. And it is only by a fearless facing of the implications of its redemption at the price of a true and sincere reciprocity that any revival of genuine missionary enthusiasm can be generated. Otherwise the best that can be hoped for is our Lord's scathing condemnation of the most successful proselytism : " Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more a child of hell than yourselves."

From the vision of St. Peter at Joppa and from the story of St. Paul's conversion (*cf.* Acts ix. 15), it seems quite clear that the *punctum stentis aut cadentis ecclesiae* in the Acts of the Apostles was its attitude to ' the middle wall of partition '. It was the frightful peril of losing all that was best in their social, racial and religious tradition that prevented so many good Jews then (and now) from accepting the true Catholicity of the Christian Church. And the touchstone then (and now) was the table at home even more than the Table of the Lord (Gal. ii. 11 *ff*).

One hundred years ago a true identification with those foreigners, whom missionaries served and sought to save for Christ, involved wearing foreign clothes. C. T. Studd and the Cambridge Seven are demonstrations of the essentially sacrificial missionary spirit, and they are usually characteristically dressed in Chinese clothes. But the focus of identification never remains static and the reciprocal principle of real sacrificial love, which is the hall mark of the Holy Spirit's presence and work, seems to me to have moved from the fashions of clothes into the area of personal relations and marriage, wherever social and educational and cultural relations of reciprocity are possible between those who claim to be united " in Christ."

The great sequence of missionary conferences from Edinburgh 1910 to Tambaram 1938 is usually held to demonstrate the progress of the missionary cause. I do not so regard them. They have been attempts to justify, rationalise, explain and plan the missionary movement. All this is vital and necessary in its place. But self-sacrificing and self-giving love does not so justify itself : it does not so rationalise or explain itself. Such reflection is the afterthought upon what has gone before. Had the missionary cause faced the problems of racial attitudes and the mixed marriage question and all the reciprocal relationships incidental to the meeting of different peoples and cultures in love—and had it faced these questions not in the areas of primitive tribes, where they are theoretical, but in the areas of civilised and cultured peoples, where they are practical and existential—then the dereliction of being " made of no reputation," like the Samaritan half-caste, might have opened the door to the incoming Spirit of God, and Calvary would have made Pentecost real.

But the actual situation in the missionary world to-day seems to be somewhat as follows. The old evangelistic and missionary fervour has been retained with increasing difficulty by those societies working among primitive peoples, where the principle of reciprocal love is allowed free play, because the possibility of mixed marriage is purely theoretical. But the older societies working among the more cultured

and civilised peoples have lost the fervour of their initial enterprise, and in my opinion the reason is that they have lost the secret of reciprocal love. "You have given us so much, but you have not given us your heart"—this is the indictment not only of much British imperialism, but also of much missionary endeavour. And the continued refusal to face the issues involved seems to me to be invalidating the whole Protestant missionary cause throughout the world.

It is noteworthy that a fundamentalism, which can justify racial discrimination on Old Testament grounds, has at this moment its strongest supporters in the Southern States of the U.S.A. and in South Africa, where the colour question is most acute, and in those circles of English Christianity whose missionary activity and acknowledged zeal are directed towards largely primitive and undeveloped peoples. If the Holy Spirit is the reciprocal love between the Father and the Son, as St. Augustine held, and if His work is self-effacing and embodied rather than disembodied, I suggest that the question of mixed marriage "in Christ" is the *punctum stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae* to-day: or at least the touchstone of any Church that makes any missionary pretension whatever.

V

And this leads to my last point. If the Holy Spirit alone can lead us into all truth and if, as Ephesians suggests, He can do this only in a fellowship that includes "all saints," then there can be no way forward in any reunion scheme unless a truly mutual reciprocity is involved. It is not the periphery of our Church or party tradition that we have to be willing to abandon: it is its very centre and core; its treasure and its glory. To be willing to lose this is to run the certain risk of being accused of treachery—and of course it can only too easily be nothing less than that—but only by running the risk of losing our life (spiritually as well as in every other way) can we save it. This goes for all Churches and for all parties within our own Church of England.

As I see it, the whole reunion question is only capable of solution along this reciprocal and hazardous line of advance. Neither in giving nor in taking, but between the two, in the depths of that true meeting which opens up between two individuals in deep heart-to-heart conversation—and when it does so, is a surprise to *both*—only in the extension of this principle, which for us is enshrined in the very Godhead Itself, can there be any advance either in evangelism or in missionary achievement or in the reunion of the Church. For only in such reciprocity does the dimension of the Holy Spirit open up to us in all the wonder of that indefinable meeting and relationship and intercourse of give and take without which we cannot even be born in the physical world, let alone be born again in the spiritual.