

## ***The Identity of the Holy Spirit: A Problem in Trinitarian Theology***

**John Webster**

[p.4]

### **1. The problem**

Christian theology has been traditionally reticent in its talk of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letters to Serapion*, one of the classic texts of Christian pneumatology, Athanasius counselled restraint in view of the ineffability of the Spirit as one who entirely transcends the world of creatures.<sup>1</sup> Such restraint is, however, not simply the fruit of due modesty before the divine realities. It is also the result of the fact that Christian theologians have frequently experienced great difficulty in specifying exactly how the Spirit is to be differentiated from the other two divine persons. It has, moreover, often proved very difficult to mark out areas of the divine work which are the Spirit's special preserve. A very precise account of the identity of the Spirit has, in other words, not uncommonly eluded Christian thinkers. It has, furthermore, often been remarked that the development of the doctrine of the Spirit's divinity seems little more than a 'tidying-up' process which brought Christian beliefs about the Spirit into line with Christian beliefs about the Son or Word. If this judgment is true—and there are undoubtedly close structural parallels between the arguments used for the divinity of both Son and Spirit<sup>2</sup>—some would see it as underlining the difficulty (and even perhaps impropriety) of identifying the Spirit as a separate divine person.

In current theological debate, the need to identify the Spirit with some precision has become acute for two reasons. First, unease with trinitarian accounts of the being of God makes some suggest that 'Spirit' describes not so much the third Trinitarian person as the whole of God's being in its relation to man and the creation. Second, others more firmly rooted in the classical Christian tradition have so emphasized the Christological dimensions of the doctrine of the Spirit that the 'third person of the Trinity seems to be almost absorbed into the second. Neither trend offers a satisfactory account of the Spirit's identity. Yet the provision of such an account is a matter of some considerable significance,

[p.5]

precisely because the way in which the Spirit is understood can make a radical difference both to the over-all shape of the doctrine of the Trinity and to an account of the relationship between God and the world.

### **2. God as Spirit**

The work of the late Professor Geoffrey Lampe, culminating in his 1976 Bampton lectures *God as Spirit*,<sup>3</sup> is the most weighty post-war English contribution to the doctrine of the Holy

---

<sup>1</sup> Athanasius, *Ad Serapionem* 4.1ff. Cf. T. F. Torrance, 'Spiritus Creator' in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London, 1965), pp. 209-228; G. D. Dragas, 'Holy Spirit and Tradition: the Writings of St Anathasius' in *Athanasia* vol. 1 (London, 1980), pp. 75-98.

<sup>2</sup> As a comparison of Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* and his letters *Ad Serapionem* would show.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford, 1977. See further 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke' in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 159-200; 'Holy Spirit' in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* 2 (New York, 1962), pp. 626-39; 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ' in S. W. Sykes, J. P. Clayton (ed.), *Christ, Faith and*

Spirit. Lampe's fundamental contention is that 'Spirit' properly describes, not one of the three divine persons, but the whole activity of God in his relation to man: 'the Spirit of God', he writes, 'is to be understood, not as referring to a divine hypostasis distinct from God the Father and God the Son or Word, but as indicating God himself as active towards and in his human creation.'<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, Lampe's conception of the Spirit is that of a general presence of God within the creation, such that he can speak of 'an incarnation of God as Spirit within every man as human spirit'.<sup>5</sup> 'Spirit' is virtually co-terminous between God and man, and so the church may not regard itself as the exclusive location of God's Spirit; rather, it is the focal point of God's personal presence to all creation. Many of the same themes are taken up in the work of Maurice Wiles, who has suggested that 'Spirit' denotes the personal and relational nature of God as present to his creation: 'God as Spirit is God as present'.<sup>6</sup> Or again, 'to know God as Holy Spirit is to know him as... the absolutely other entering into the most intimate conceivable relationship with man'.<sup>7</sup>

Both Lampe and Wiles resist the isolation of the Spirit as an identifiable distinct divine person. One effect of this resistance is the attempt to reformulate the doctrine of God in non-trinitarian terms. Since 'spirit' is not a divine hypostasis, and since Jesus Christ is most effectively described as the supreme instance of God's indwelling of human Spirit,<sup>8</sup> Trinitarian formulae are less than adequate formulations of our apprehension of God.<sup>9</sup> But quite apart from these implications for the doctrine of the Trinity, the consequences for the doctrine of the Spirit are such that the Spirit is understood in a general and cosmic context as God's immanence within his creation.

If such a pneumatology is unsatisfying, it is primarily because its account of the identity of the Spirit is too generalized. Partly this follows from its rejection of 'personal' language about the Spirit: 'Spirit' becomes a description of the quality of God's activity in the world rather than of a distinct person within God's being. But there is also here a failure to state how the Spirit is Christologically identified in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup> The scope of language about the Spirit in the New Testament is distinctly limited and specialised; the broad use of 'Spirit' to denote divine immanence finds little New Testament warrant. 'So far from the Spirit's being cosmic in scope (as Christ, the *Logos* of God, is), the Spirit is scarcely mentioned except as among Christians and as the agent of the 'new creation'—the bringing of persons to new life in Christ.'<sup>11</sup> 'Spirit' in the New Testament is *Christologically identified*: it is located through Christ who is supremely endowed with the Spirit, who pours the Spirit upon the church after his exaltation, and to whom the Spirit testified. As G. S. Hendry suggests, 'the witness of the New Testament to the gift of the Spirit is soteriological and eschatological in character; when

---

*History* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 111-130; 'What Future for the Trinity?' in *Explorations in Theology* 8 (London, 1981), pp. 30-37.

<sup>4</sup> *God as Spirit*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> M. F. Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God* (London, 1982), p. 123; cf. pp. 117-29.

<sup>7</sup> M. F. Wiles, 'The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology' in *Explorations in Theology* 4 (London, 1979), p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> See *God as Spirit*, pp. 1-33, 61-175; 'The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ'.

<sup>9</sup> *God as Spirit*, pp. 206-28; M. F. Wiles, 'Some Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity' in *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London, 1976), pp. 1-17.

<sup>10</sup> On the close correlation between Christ and Spirit, see, e.g., H. Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London, 1965), pp. 13-29; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, 1975); G. S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (London, 1965), pp. 11-29; C. F. D. Moule, *The Holy Spirit* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 17-22, 38-42; E. Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* (ET, London, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

the attempt is made to fit it into the framework of a conception that is cosmological and anthropological in character, it almost certainly loses something of its distinctiveness'.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Spirit of Christ

This very close correlation of the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the person of Christ has been an especial characteristic of Protestant theologies of the Holy Spirit, though its roots are arguably deep in the patristic tradition.<sup>13</sup> Such a refusal to envisage the Spirit in general or cosmic terms is, of course, bound up with a large-scale rejection of natural theology. A natural knowledge of God on the basis of the immanence of the Spirit within nature and man is ruled out since it is illegitimate to speak of the Spirit as a naturally-available presence of God to the whole creation. Knowledge of God is available only in Christ, and so 'we cannot speak of the operation of the Spirit in the world as if the Incarnation had not taken place,... or as if he may now operate as it were behind the back of Jesus Christ'.<sup>14</sup>

But more is involved than this, for to stress the Christological context of the spirit is to introduce a very definite conception of his work and of his place in the Trinity. With regard to his work, the Spirit's identity is defined by his role as the one who effects union between the believer and Christ. The Spirit is the agent of the subjective realization of Christ's objective accomplishment of salvation. The Spirit of Christ 'discloses *His* words and deeds, *His* Cross and *His* resurrection to us, as the divine reality bearing upon us, embracing us, giving to us',<sup>15</sup> so that 'what is involved is the participation of man in the word and work of Christ'.<sup>16</sup> In a memorable passage, Calvin argued that without the applicatory work of the Spirit, Christ remains 'unemployed',<sup>17</sup> external to and not appropriated by the believer for whom he died. Thus the Spirit's work is defined in terms of his relation to Christ: he reproduces in the believer Christ's pattern of death and resurrection, in this way conforming him to Christ in baptism and sanctification<sup>18</sup>.

This understanding of the work of the Spirit as 'essentially subservient and instrumental to the work of the incarnate Christ'<sup>19</sup> leads to a specific understanding of his place within the Trinity. One theme in classical western Trinitarian doctrine has been that of the Spirit as the 'bond of love' (*vinculum caritatis*) between the Father and the Son. Through the Spirit, Father and Son are compacted into loving unity. Such a conception clearly ties the Spirit very closely to Father and Son, sometimes to such an extent that it is difficult to see how he is personally differentiated from the first two persons, or to identify a sphere of operation which is peculiarly appropriate to him.

Much the same conception of the place of the Spirit lies behind the notion of the double procession of the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. T. F. Torrance, *Art. cit.*, and especially A. Laminski, *Der Heilige Geist als Geist Christi and Geist der Gläubigen* (Leipzig, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> T. F. Torrance, 'The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit for Ecumenical Theology' in *op. cit.*, p. 230. For an argument the other way, see C. Raven's *The Creator Spirit* (London, 1927).

<sup>15</sup> K. Barth, *Credo* (ET, London, 1964), p. 134.

<sup>16</sup> K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (ET, London, 1949), p. 138. For a fuller statement, see *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (ET, Edinburgh, 1956), pp. 643-779.

<sup>17</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.1.3.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. here C. F. D. Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 33f.; D. B. Harried, *Creed and Personal Identity* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 85-97.

<sup>19</sup> G. S. Henry, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[p.6]

Holy Spirit 'from the Father and the Son'. The so-called 'Filioque' clause is infamous as a cause of schism between east and west, and is frequently dismissed as abstraction or pedantry.<sup>20</sup> But, however regrettable, the controversy at heart concerns the way in which the Trinity is to be understood, and in particular how the divine tri-unity relates to the oneness of God. Western theology insists that the Spirit's origin lies in both Father and Son, in order to underline the community of function between the first and the second persons. To say that the Spirit proceeds from one person only would be to disrupt the primacy of the divine unity for our conception of the nature of God. Indeed, it is this sense of the unity of God which western theology has often struggled to safeguard. Eastern theologians, by contrast, emphasize the procession from the Father alone in order to retain a stronger conception of the triunity of God. To say that the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son would be to compromise the fundamental plurality of God's being which is expressed in the proper distinction between Father and Son with regard to the origin of the Spirit.

The conception of the work of the Spirit and of his relationship to the other Trinitarian persons outlined in the western tradition attempts to state the Spirit's identity by conceiving of the Spirit in a Christological context. Yet it is precisely this attempt *Christologically* to identify the Spirit which in the end may make the argument less than satisfactory. The strength of this Christological definition of the Spirit is that it protects the identity of the Spirit from being generalized into a divine presence suffused throughout creation. The weakness of such an argument is that it may absorb the identity of the Spirit into that of the Son.

A first reason for this is that Christologically-orientated doctrines of the Spirit are not infrequently (though rarely intentionally) subordinationist, in that the Spirit is not possessed of the same fully divine status as Father and Son. If the Spirit's work is merely applicatory, then it is difficult to envisage him as having as full a place in the divine economy of salvation as the other persons. Or again, talk of the Spirit as the 'bond of love' between Father and Son is not fully personal language. As a result, the shape of the Trinity is not that of three co-equal persons but rather of 'two subjects and one "operation" or, perhaps, "quality"'.<sup>21</sup>

Second, a stress on the unity of the Trinity, which lies behind the Christological identity of the Spirit, often verges on the suggestion that the oneness of God is more fundamental than his threeness. In more technical language, Losky argues that western theologians emphasize the 'ontological primacy of the essence over the hypostases'.<sup>22</sup> Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, for example, needs to be considered with caution here. By tying the Spirit so closely to Christ, Barth often seems to suggest that the triunity of God is less primordial than his unity, and that

---

<sup>20</sup> Lampe speaks of the *Filioque* controversy as 'a controversy about nothing real' (*God as Spirit*, p. 226); Moule describes it as 'one of the most deplorable chapters in the history of hair-splitting theology' (*op. cit.*, p. 47). The standard survey in English is still H. B. Swete, *On the History of the Doctrine of the Procession of the Holy Spirit* (Cambridge, 1876). For more recent comment, see V. Lossky, 'The Procession of the Holy Spirit in Orthodox Trinitarian Doctrine' in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (ET, Oxford, 1975), pp. 71-96; A. I. C. Heron, "'Who Proceedeth from the Father and the Son": The Problem of the *Filioque*' (*Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), pp. 149-66); L. Vischer (ed.), *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ* (Geneva, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> R. D. Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God' in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth. Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford, 1979), p. 170.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.77.

'personality' is properly attributed to the one God rather than to each of the three trinitarian persons. Father, Son and Spirit are seen as 'moments' or 'modes' of the unfolding of a single divine subject, so that threeness threatens to be resolved into oneness.<sup>23</sup>

Thus what starts as the attempt to protect the identity of the Spirit from dissipation into a general presence of God easily becomes itself a threat to that identity. To tie the Spirit too closely to the person and work of Christ is to underestimate that differentiation within the one divine life and thus to encourage the slow drift into modalism which is so common in western Trinitarian theology.

How can the problems be eased?

#### **4. The identity of the Spirit**

In the first place, there is a need to ensure a properly *pluralist* doctrine of the Trinity, one, that is, in which threeness is understood as fundamental to God's unity. Unity is a *relational* term when applied to God: the divine unity is not monadic, relationless and undifferentiated. Rather, it is organic and dynamic, expressed in the personal histories of the sending of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit. 'The Divine unity is a dynamic unity actively unifying in the one Divine life the lives of the three Divine persons'.<sup>24</sup> Divine unity does not lie behind the threeness of God; rather, it is the event of the peace of the divine life between Father, Son and Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

This will also involve careful specification of the notion of 'person' as applied to God. 'Person' is again to be conceived relationally: the person is not an autonomous subject but rather is constituted as person in relationship and dialogue. Understood in this way, the divine 'personality' or 'subjectivity' does not preclude relationship and differentiation; indeed, it is relationship. God's personality is God's relatedness to himself.

If God's triunity is thus understood as a personal, related society, then the danger of absorption of the Spirit into the person of Christ will be considerably lessened, precisely because God's being will be seen as fully plural. A pluralist understanding of God's being, moreover, will furnish the basis for understanding the distinct role of the Spirit in the divine economy, related to but properly distinguished from those of Father and Son. This will, in turn, serve to reinforce a sense of the distinct identity of the Spirit. Three areas of God's action which are properly to be attributed to the Spirit can be marked out.

First, the Spirit is the one who is sent out into the world through the church and who thus demonstrates that God's life is a life open to the creation. Because the Spirit is sent, 'the triune God is the God who is open to man, open to the world, and open to time'.<sup>26</sup> The Spirit is a protest against monadic conceptions of God in which the divine life is seen as 'a closed

---

<sup>23</sup> Some see Hegel in the background to Barth here: see L. Oeing-Hanhoff, 'Hegels Trinitätslehre' (*Theologie and Philosophie* 52 (1977), p. 378-407, especially pp. 395-9) and W. Pannenberg's two seminal essays 'Person and Subjekt' and 'Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre' in *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie, Gesammelte Aufsätze 2* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 80-95, 96-111.

<sup>24</sup> L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1943), p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. here K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (ET, London, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (ET, London, 1977), p. 56.

triangle',<sup>27</sup> complete in the enjoyment of its own inner relationship and unconcerned to reach beyond itself into the history of the world.

Second, the Spirit is especially active in the mission of the church. In this, the Spirit's work is not merely that of ensuring the subjective appropriation of what was accomplished by the Son once for all in the past. Rather, we have here to do with 'a great new event in the series of

[p.7]

God's saving acts. He creates a world of his own'.<sup>28</sup> In this he does not supplant Christ, but rather his work continues the work which God began in Christ, and derives its validity and effectiveness from Christ's once-for-all accomplishment. Thus in the Lucan writings, Spirit and mission are inseparable: the giving of the Spirit by the exalted Christ enables the mission of the church as the agent through which Christ's kingdom is extended.<sup>29</sup> This link between Spirit and mission is significant for two reasons. First, it prevents an excessive weighting of the Spirit's work towards the past work of Christ, emphasizing that that Spirit does not merely 'remind' the church of Christ but also continues this work through its agency. In this way, second, it ensures a sphere of salvation history which is proper to the Spirit.

Third, in the worship of the church the Spirit is operative with an activity which differentiates him from Father and Son. The theology of prayer indicated in such passages as Romans 8:15f., 26f. and Ephesians 2:18 suggests that in the prayer which the Spirit enables God 'hears his own voice'. In prayer, 'the Spirit's voice turns out to be ... the voice of God addressing himself from within man'.<sup>30</sup> Such a conception of the Spirit's work in prayer and worship immediately introduces a note of differentiation in our understanding of God's being, and so safeguards both the divine plurality-in-unity and the identity of the Spirit. 'The way in which our prayers are caught up into God's own self-address reveals the reality of a further internal relation in the deity.'<sup>31</sup>

The Spirit is the one in whom God moves beyond himself in provoking mission and worship. If this is true, then we are able to see that the Spirit has an identity of his own, though one essentially bound to that of Father and Son. and we are, moreover, enabled to see a little more clearly that our understanding of the work and person of the Spirit can provide the crucible of an entire understanding of the triune life of God.

---

© 1983 John Webster. Reproduced by permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in October 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

<sup>27</sup> P. J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord, The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 135. Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (ET, London, 1981), pp. 129-222.

<sup>28</sup> Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> See F. F. Bruce, 'The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles' (*Interpretation* 27 (1973), pp. 166-83) and especially G. W. H. Lampe, 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St Luke'.

<sup>30</sup> Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 81. Cf. G. Wainwright, *Doxology* (London, 1980), pp. 90f. This, of course, is why the *epiclesis* or invocation of the Holy Spirit in worship is of very great significance: see G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, <sup>2</sup>1945), pp. 292-302.

<sup>31</sup> B. L. Hebblethwaite, 'Perichoresis - Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity' (*Theology* 80 (1975), p. 259).