The Role of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual Growth: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Life

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There are serious controversies about major doctrines and practices today, but perhaps none is greater or has been the occasion for more harm for the body of Christ (physically, spiritually, and in testimony to others) than the 480 year old issues concerning salvation and the work of the Holy Spirit, between Catholics and Protestants.

It is good to remind ourselves that Luther did not wish to separate from the Roman Catholic Church; he wanted to reform the doctrine and practice of the church. Only when it became clear that biblical renewal was not going to happen did he leave the Roman church. Then he appealed to the Russian patriarch for affiliation with the Orthodox Church. In Luther's consideration, there was sufficient ground within both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions that he could have been faithful to God in doctrine and practice. But again he was rejected. Finally he formed a separate church.

It is good to remind ourselves of this because the fundamental issues separating people have been blurred today by 480 years of separation. We see the centuries of separation; not, as Luther wished, the hope of reconciliation. At the heart of these controversies is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, especially in the manner of application of salvation and the means of sanctification. Martin Luther and Pope Leo X are not alive today. We, the church militant, must answer to God for the accuracy of our faith and the faithfulness of our practice.

The divisions between Protestants often involve the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and related practices. In many countries (I taught this year in Singapore, Kenya, and El Salvador) the separation between charismatics and non-charismatics is even more pointed than in the United Sates, and the churches in these countries are struggling for survival. In the U. S. we simply ignore each other most of the time. We have separate denominations, seminaries, theological societies, etc.

Because of these various tensions in the doctrine and practice concerning the presence and work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, it is important to clarify our common ground and to examine the scripture for the more definitive passages which help set parameters on our understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual life and growth. Either side, or both sides, may be wrong.

There are some biblical facts which all orthodox groups hold. First, God gives spiritual life. It is the recognition of this presence of God, acting in the life of Cornelius (Acts 11) which led the church to "quiet down and glorify God" because He had granted to the Gentiles the "repentance which leads to life." The reality of spiritual life, created by the Holy Spirit, is the true test of unity in Christ, and thus should be the test of fellowship.

We have substituted for spiritual life the test of correct doctrine, usually based on one of the three great reformation traditions: Lutheran, Calvinist, or Free Church. Separations of brother from brother within protestant traditions run almost

as deep as the Protestant vs. Roman Catholic split. Many preachers attack other preachers, churches, or believers because of differences in doctrines or practices which seem major to them, but in reality are not about salvation issues, that is, about matters of spiritual life in Christ (cf. Scholes and Clinton, *Levels of Belief*, 1991, Philosophia Christi).

For all dialogue it is important to discern major issues on which we cannot compromise, from important but secondary issues on which Jesus would have us be tolerant of one another (Romans 15). The failure of evangelical protestants to be able to affirm a simple four page doctrinal statement (Evangelical Affirmations, 1988) is tragic, and symbolic of the inability to discern, as Paul did, the difference between "do not judge your brother" (Rom. 14) and the necessity of confronting Peter at Galatia (Galatians 1).

Second, there is one Spirit, and He is the author of the body of Christ. We can only speculate about what would have happened if reconciliation had taken place at Regensburg, or any of the other attempts at dialogue (e.g.. Wesley in 1749). Would Luther, and others, have been able to re-enter the Roman church and find a continuing home there as they continued to grow in grace and knowledge of the Word? Would the reformation have happened or would the church have been renewed; at least sufficiently for believers who look primarily to the Bible for their doctrine and practice to have found a home?

1. The Holy Spirit's Role in Dialogue and Reconciliation

We do not live in the sixteenth century. Those attempts at reconciliation failed, and with all the changes since then we cannot simply begin at those points and renew those attempts. 500 years of exiles and murders have left their terrible marks on the church which Jesus founded.

But part of Christian discipleship is to restore erring brothers and sisters in the Spirit of Christ when true spiritual renewal has taken place. Of course the renewal is first of all renewal spiritually in one's walk with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this spiritual life which is the test of one's "correctness," that is, one's identity in Christ and in the body of Christ (Richards, 1987). At a second level we are encouraged by scripture to use a test of doctrine.

For Protestants, how would we respond if a Roman Catholic today said, as a personal statement,

> I trust in Jesus Christ alone and the grace of God alone for my salvation. I look to the Bible as the final authority in doctrine and practice. I can affirm these things and have seen the witness of the Spirit working in my life to confirm to me a calling to remain in the Catholic church and re-evangelize my own tradition.

Could we accept such a person as a believer in Christ and examine the reality of spiritual life: Christlikeness, holiness, love for God and humanity, commitment to the authority of the Bible? These are very real questions which some of our brothers have begun to address. Keith Fournier, in *Evangelical Catholics* (1991) just quoted, presents such a situation. He affirms the classic evangelical doctrines (authority of the Bible, salvation by grace through faith), testifies to faith in Jesus Christ, and identifies himself as a evangelical, Catholic Christian.

We Protestants need to re-examine our own stance. Is it important to recognize a true spiritual life in others? Or may we discriminate as to the reality of spiritual life on the basis of church doctrine alone? Do we wish to see others as God

sees them and serve one another in love, as we have been called in scripture? Or shall we ignore what God is doing and build our own walls to keep out people who affirm faith in Christ, whether Catholic or Protestant, because they do not have identical faith and practice to ours?

I do not intend to compromise my own biblical doctrine one bit. I hold to an evangelical, biblical position; as do we all who belong to the Evangelical Theological Society. On the basis of our doctrinal statement (Inerrancy & Trinitarian Christology) many Catholics and Orthodox I know could join ETS if they wished. Not all Catholics believe all the official pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church. Not all Protestants in a denomination believe exactly like the other members of the denomination or agree in detail with the interpretations of the founding documents.

In modern theological dialogues each participant is encouraged to maintain his own position and not to reduce it to an unacceptable common denominator. Such reduction would evidence lack of integrity. But we should seek to:

> 1) find out which doctrines we do agree on,
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> 2) discern which doctrines it is not necessary to agree upon (tolerance of diversity must exist at some level, so the church decided at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15), and
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> 3) clarify the issues which are most important (convictions) and those which are of secondary importance (persuasions) concerning which we do not agree.

Then an agenda could be constructed which might lead to fruitful discussion.

2. The Holy Spirit's Role as the Creator and Guarantor of Spiritual Life

The Spirit of God is free to move and act as the Lord wishes (John 3); and often surprises the leaders of the church. Spiritual life is God's to give, having been earned by His creation of life and by the redemption of Christ. Since these things are true, we need to see if the Bible offers a means or test by which the church can tell where the Spirit is working.

Orthodoxy of doctrine is one test and is a reliable one. But focusing on doctrine apart from the reality of spiritual life only tells us that the words are correct, not that a change of life has been effected. Even the test of truth in scripture is placed in the context of spiritual life in I John. Such a test would need to be carefully applied and would have to be open to the reality of the Spirit.

We have the genesis of such a test in Acts 11 and 15. The Holy Spirit's leading of Peter to preach the gospel to Cornelius is clear, and the resultant presence of the Holy Spirit was sufficient to quiet down the more "hard line" Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The Spirit leads and teaches Peter, and he leads and teaches the church. This took place about AD 34-40.

Later, approximately AD 49, at the Jerusalem council after searching the scripture, praying together and listening to each other, James summarizes, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials . . ." (Acts 15:28). Again the Spirit is present to lead and teach the people, by leading and teaching the elders.

The Holy Spirit creates spiritual life and shows His presence. He leads the elders in decision making and bears character and spiritual fruit in the believers.

3. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Growth and Maturity

A. Origin of Spiritual Life

All people have an orientation toward relating to God which is worked out in their lives in their value commitments and religious practices (Rahner, 1978). The fact of this subjective reflective experience and personal and social objective experience is common to all men, although the specific content is different for each person. The analysis of this spiritual experience usually focuses on the biblical data or on objective religious experience (Gounds, 1984; Helminiak, 1987). I would like to shift to a philosophical analysis of the spiritual area.

There are three interrelated aspects to the spiritual area of a person's life: Each person has a spirit; each person can receive spiritual impressions from other spirits; each person can be indwelt by another spirit.

The reality of one's own spirit includes, functionally, the ability to receive and comprehend (recognize intuitively) spiritual reality. This comprehension has the possibility of being brought to the level of conscious reflection. But such reflection is not necessary, since spiritual reality is comprehensible through the innate categories of the mind (there is a `fit' with our rational apparatus) and can be responded to at the levels of values apart from conscious reflective experience. Of course the integration of spiritual values and realities into a person's life will be much quicker and more efficient if there is help with the process via preaching, teaching and discipleship.

We also have the ability to make decisions regarding all of life in dynamic harmony between the spiritual, innate and reflective areas. However, there must be more to the spiritual area than a functional ability and internal interactive capability. Ontologically, the spiritual area consists of an immaterial element of a person's being which is the source of his or her ability to make spiritual decisions and to interact with spiritual realities such as God, other people's spirits, etc.

B. Leading of the Spirit

A second aspect of the spiritual area includes the possibility of receiving spiritual input from other spirits and people. This is not the same as being internally responsive or reflective concerning my own spirit, as described above. We are in touch with motivations and values held by other spirits with whom we are interacting. I have called this area spiritual impressions. When functioning in this area, we often say that a person is distinguishing another person's spirit or is responding to another's spirit (Anderson, 1993). While this includes a rational element, it is not essentially a reflective function.

C. The Control of the Spirit

The third area of spiritual reality is the capacity to have my personal spirit directed (i.e., led or strongly influenced initially, only later can there be absolute control) by another spirit. In common literature this is known as being possessed by another spirit. It is the reality that another spirit can so influence my spirit that I can be led to obey the other spirit as though it were my own. In this case, I am not the source of the spiritual direction. Nor am I merely responding to an

external influence over which I have significant control. This is a middle ground where influence is exerted on my spirit to lead me to act a certain way or to believe a certain way, which, if I do not resist it, will eventuate in my acting in keeping with the direction of the indwelling spirit.

If the indwelling (or, prior to a spiritual or reflective commitment on my part to allow the indwelling, influencing) spirit is God's, then we have arrived at the biblical case of being led by the Spirit of God, such as in inspiration of scripture, coming to faith in Christ, and being led in some similarly strong way. If the indwelling spirit is an evil spirit, then we have a case of demonic influence or possession.

Once a situation of full indwelling (surrender of voluntary control) has occurred, the source of spiritual direction and decision will be the secondary spirit, until this direction is actively resisted. Thus, the person who is filled with the Spirit is one who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and continues to be influenced by the Spirit at the valuational level, the reflective level and the emotional level. In a case of demonic possession, the person is indwelt by and receives direction in value and reflection from an evil spirit.

In the case of God's Spirit, we are told that while the filling --that is the active influence-- can be resisted, the indwelling itself is permanent. In the case of an evil spirit, the influence can be resisted but the indwelling/possession is not reversible by the person. It is reversible by the Holy Spirit.

These considerations lead us to the questions of how the human spirit originates, how it is influenced and how it can be indwelt by another spirit.

D. Creation of the Human Spirit

The origin of the human spirit is described two ways in scripture. First, the spirit of a person is said to return at death to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7). In Zechariah 12:1 we are told that God creates the spirit of man within him (cf. Job 34:14; Luke 23:46; Num. 16:22 and 27:16; Isa 57:16). But there is also indication in scripture that the spirit is part of the man which is given in a Traducian way, that is, by generation from the parents (cf. Romans 5 and others). Numbers 16:22 says that the Lord is "the God of the spirits of all flesh." This universal statement is in keeping with other scripture, although no other passage asserts it this clearly.

Theologically, the human spirit is described as fallen since the historic fall of Adam and Eve. Ontologically, I understand this to mean that a person's spirit is rebellious toward God and will lead him to choose to reject God or to pervert the knowledge of God, unless the Spirit precedes the revelation with a sovereign drawing of his spirit. The fallen spirit will result in a perversion of the innate values as well as of the consequent behavior, at least in the religious behavior and probably in moral and general behavior as well.

E. Re-creation in Christ

With this foundational philosophical discussion and relevant biblical study I would like to draw a synthesis in the form of a chart.

Chart I - Categories of the Experience of the Spirit

My Spirit

Subjective Experience - Objective Experience

Spiritual
Innate
Reflective
Personal
Social

Experience Exper.
Exper. Exper. Exper.

Impressions Voices Dreams Visions Miracles People Circumstances Community Bible

The Holy Spirit

Using the terms of Chart I, we can see that most of the past conceptual work has been done in the area of reflective experience, sometimes in combination with social objective experience. I have not found any philosophical material focusing on metaphysics of the spiritual area from a Christian perspective. (however, see one of my initial attempts: Clinton, Realistic Theism and the Foundation of Spiritual Life, 1987, ETS paper).

The Holy Spirit is able to work directly upon our spirits; upon our minds through visions, voices, dreams, etc.; and by leading us in subjective (spiritual, innate, reflective) and objective (personal and social experience) ways.

Our re-creation in Christ includes a variety of these actions of the Spirit. I will attempt to indicate only a few of these actions. First, He works in our spirit and our mind to free us from the bounds of sin so that the Word we hear in the Gospel

falls upon receptive ears. As we hear the Word, the Spirit also leads us to respond by believing the Word and trusting in Christ by faith. These actions of the Spirit enrich both our subjective and objective experiences.

All these actions are lead by the Spirit; he is sovereign. He works directly and, as He wishes, through people, circumstances, community and the Word. If we do come in faith to Jesus Christ, we can gladly say, "God led me to His son and eternal salvation." We know that no good lies within us and that the active work is the Spirit's based on the choice of the Father and the previous work of the Son. If we do not come to Christ at this time, we know that the cause is that we resisted the work of the Spirit; which He was pleased to let us do.

As faith is present in the heart, the Spirit takes up residence (indwelling) and begins the work of sanctification. Again, our part in this is "not to resist the Spirit," "not to quench the Spirit. "The type of action on the part of the human is different in each case.

4. Conclusion regarding the Work of the Spirit

First, these actions of the Spirit in *salvation* roughly parallel His work in *inspiration* of scripture, as He works in and with the human authors, and His work in *maturing* the believer to become like Jesus Christ.

An example of the leading and work of the Spirit is found in the case of Cornelius. Peter says, "I see that God is not a respecter of persons, but in all nations the one who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to Him." (Acts 10:34-35). Since Cornelius' spirit was open to seeking God, we know that the Sprit of God had already been at work based on general revelation and on the exposure to Jewish religion. Peter does show the necessity of such an *acceptable* person moving deeper by sharing the gospel with Cornelius and those present.

Second, the Spirit re-creates our spirit to bring it into being as God intends; that is, He regenerates us, as discussed above.

Third, He begins to renew our minds through the ministry of the Word (according to Romans 12:1-2). This begins a re-structuring of our values (the affective domain) and leads to a new way of living - holiness. Again, these works of the Spirit affect us both subjectively and objectively. We also have the ability to make decisions regarding all of life in dynamic harmony between the spiritual, innate and reflective areas (heart, soul, and mind). However, there must be more to the spiritual area than a functional ability and and internal interactive capability.

When we continue to walk in the Spirit, we are led into the truth and a deeper walk of faith with Christ. This takes place for most people in the context of the mediation of the church in some local form and assembly. Of course the integration of spiritual values and realities into a person's life will be much quicker and more efficient if there is help with the process via preaching, teaching and discipleship.

The key to the early church was that where the presence of the Spirit is clear, God is at work. The test of spirituality is not the same as the test of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is tested by the content of doctrine. The early church was interested first in the presence of the Spirit to work in the hearts and lives of people in their world, and second in the doctrine.

The presence of the Holy Spirit means that God is present. If God accepts these people as heirs of His Son, then the

church needs to take its lead from the Spirit and acknowledge the reality of spiritual life. This does not void the tests of orthodox doctrine or biblically based practice. But the ground of examination is moved to spirituality.

This is not easy. The test of orthodoxy of doctrine is somewhat public and fixed; we know the contours of orthodoxy faith, even if we cannot agree on the details. But placing the test of spirituality on doctrinal grounds makes the ability to rationalize in keeping with the traditions of the church in Europe the test of true faith, and it was never designed or designated by God to be such. Do we decide who has faith or does the Holy Spirit show us who has life by testimony to living faith and the reality of fruitfulness?

Apologetics has usually tended to give weight to the reflective and social areas of experience. Much of this has been developed in the past two hundred years, since Kant's response to Descartes' and others' quest for certainty. In our time (since the late 1960s), the move to post-modernism has opened the doors for secular people to examine experience more on the personal and spiritual aspects (cf. Williams, Philosophia Christi, 19:1). While we need not surrender or devalue the gains of the past two hundred years, we now have an opportunity to see how to present the claims of Jesus Christ and the law and promises of God to the world in some new and relevant ways.

Such development would be in keeping with a renewed emphasis on the ontology of spiritual life and the importance of recognition of the work and leading of the Holy Spirit. Modern work on these areas of apologetics has long since begun in evangelical circles (Carnell, 1957; Lewis, 1970; Clinton, 1984; Clark, 1989; Scholes, 1991) and gives promise of continuing as we seek to give reasons for the hope which lies within us.

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