

CHAPTER 3

THE HOLY WHO? THE SPIRIT AS PERSON

*As fulfillment of the renewed presence of God
with his people, the Spirit was understood
by Paul in personal terms.*

A student once told a colleague of mine: "God the Father makes perfectly good sense to me; and God the Son I can quite understand; but the Holy Spirit is a gray, oblong blur." How many of God's people can empathize! Most Christians have little trouble relating to the Father and the Son because of the personal images involved and the reality of the incarnation—even though they know that God is Spirit (John 4:24). But it is otherwise with the Spirit, where Christian understanding falls considerably short of personhood.

This point was illustrated vividly for me during the children's time on Pentecost Sunday a few years ago. A good friend was trying to portray the reality of "Spirit" by blowing on a piece of paper and letting it "fly" away. The Spirit is like that, she was saying to the children; it is like the "wind,"¹ very real in its visible effects, even though the wind itself is invisible. At which point a six-year-old boy blurted out, "But I want the wind to be un-invisible!"

"Exactly!" I whispered to my wife, Maudine. "What a profound moment!" How often we all feel this way about God as Spirit, as Holy Spirit. "I want the Holy Spirit to be un-invisible!" And because he is not, because we see the effects but have no personal

images, we tend to think of the Spirit in nonpersonal terms and refer to him as "it." Listen to our images: dove, wind, fire, water, oil. No wonder many regard the Spirit as a gray, oblong blur and find him so difficult to understand and to relate to. To paraphrase the creed, "We believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and we believe in Jesus Christ his Son; but we are not so sure about the Holy Spirit."

Our understanding of God is forever marked by the fact that in Christ he has been "fleshed out" at one point in our human history. Even if God seems distant, transcendent, "from eternity to eternity," we are not in the dark about God and his character. As Paul put it, the glory of God has been imaged for us in the one true human who bears the divine image, Christ himself; and by beholding his "face" we see the glory of the eternal God (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4, 6).

The concern of this chapter is that we must recognize the same to be true about the Spirit, not simply theoretically but really and experientially. The Spirit is not lightly called the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Christ has put a human face on the Spirit as well. Not only has the coming of Christ changed everything for Paul, so too has the coming of the Spirit. In dealing with the Spirit, we are dealing with none other than the *personal* presence of God.

Listen to our images:

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THE HOLY SPIRIT AS PERSON

Even though Paul does not speak directly to the question of the Spirit's person, several converging pieces of evidence assure us that he understood the Spirit in personal terms, intimately associated with both the Father and the Son, yet distinct from them.

First, we must acknowledge that the Spirit is most frequently spoken of in terms of *agency*—that is, the Spirit is the *agent* of God's activity. It is also true that such language does not necessarily presume personhood. Nonetheless, even a casual glance at the passages where Paul refers to the Spirit (or Holy Spirit) shows how often agency finds personal expression.² For instance, the Thessalonians' conversion is by the sanctifying work of the Spirit (2 Thess 2:13; cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 15:16), as is their accompanying joy (1 Thess 1:6; cf. Rom 15:13). Revelation comes through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:10; Eph 3:5); and Paul's preaching is accompanied by the power of the Spirit (1 Thess 1:5). Prophetic speech and speaking in tongues result directly from speaking by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3; 14:2, 16). By the Spirit the Romans are to put to death any sinful practices (Rom 8:13). Paul desires the Ephesians to be strengthened by means of God's Spirit (Eph 3:16). Believers serve by the Spirit (Phil 3:3), love by the Spirit (Col 1:8), are sealed by the Spirit (Eph 1:13), and walk and live by the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 25). Finally, believers are "saved through washing by the Spirit, whom God poured out upon them" (Titus 3:5).

On the one hand, a passage like the last one might suggest agency in quite impersonal terms. The concept of "pouring out" does not bring to mind the idea of personhood; neither does the imagery of "washing" by the Spirit. On the other hand, a careful look at most of these passages and others indicates that personhood is either implied or presupposed, and that the language of "pouring out" is imagery, pure and simple. This is especially evident in a passage like 1 Corinthians 6:11, where God "washes, justifies, and sanctifies" by the double agency of "the name [authority] of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "by the Spirit of our God."

The point to make is that what Paul says of the Spirit in terms of agency parallels what he says in scores of places about Christ, whose agency can only be personal. By implication, the Spirit's agency can hardly be less personal than that of Christ. Moreover, one is struck by the scarcity of impersonal images in Paul's letters. In contrast to Luke, he seldom speaks of being filled with the Spirit; his primary language has to do with God's "giving his Spirit into you,"³ or of our "receiving" or "having" the Spirit.⁴ None of

these images implies personhood, but neither do they imply what is impersonal, as so many other Spirit images do (wind, fire, etc.).

That Paul understands the Spirit as *person* is confirmed, secondly, by the fact that the Spirit is the subject of a large number of verbs that demand a personal agent: The Spirit *searches* all things (1 Cor 2:10), *knows* the mind of God (1 Cor 2:11), *teaches* the content of the gospel to believers (1 Cor 2:13), *dwells* among or within believers (1 Cor 3:16; Rom 8:11; 2 Tim 1:14), *accomplishes* all things (1 Cor 12:11), *gives life* to those who believe (2 Cor 3:6), *cries out* from within our hearts (Gal 4:6), *leads* us in the ways of God (Gal 5:18; Rom 8:14), *bears witness* with our own spirits (Rom 8:16), *has desires* that are in opposition to the flesh (Gal 5:17), *helps* us in our weakness (Rom 8:26), *intercedes* in our behalf (Rom 8:26–27), *works* all things *together* for our ultimate good (Rom 8:28),⁵ *strengthens* believers (Eph 3:16), and is *grieved* by our sinfulness (Eph 4:30). Furthermore, the fruit of the Spirit's indwelling are the personal attributes of God (Gal 5:22–23).

Some of these texts seem to clinch the question of Spirit as person, as for example Romans 8:16. The Spirit who gives us "adoption as sons," attested by his prompting within us the "Abba-cry," in turn, and for this reason, becomes the second (necessary) witness⁶ along with our own spirits to the reality of our being God's children. Likewise in Romans 8:26–27, not only does the Spirit intercede in our behalf, thus "knowing us" being implied, but we can be assured of the effectiveness of his intercession because "God knows the *mind* of the Spirit," who in turn thus prays "according to God's will." Whatever else, this is the language of personhood, not that of an impersonal influence or power. The term *pneuma* may have the imagery of "wind" inherent in it, but Paul never uses it in this manner.

Finally, the Spirit is sometimes the subject of a verb or implied activity that elsewhere is attributed either to the Father or to the Son. For example, in successive passages in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says of God (the Father is implied) that he "produces" all these activities in all people (*panta en pasin*, v. 6), while in a similar sentence in v. 11 the Spirit is the subject of the identical verb with a similar object (*panta tauta*, "all these things," now referring to the

many Spirit manifestations enumerated in vv. 8–10). Likewise, in Romans 8:11 the Father “gives life,” while in 2 Corinthians 3:6 it is the Spirit; and in Romans 8:34 Christ “intercedes” for us, while a few verses earlier (8:26) this was said of the Spirit. Similarly, but now with the Spirit as the object of the verb, in consecutive sentences in Galatians 4:5–6 Paul asserts that “God sent forth his Son” and that “God sent forth the Spirit of his Son” (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). Both the parallel and the fact that the activities of the Son and of the Spirit (redemption and crying out from within the heart of the believer) are personal activities presuppose the Spirit as person.

This evidence indicates clearly that for Paul the Spirit is not thought of as “it,” but as “person.” But what does this mean in terms of the nature of God? What is the relationship between the Spirit and God and Christ? Is the language of the later church, “one with, but distinct from” the other two persons of the Trinity, a proper way of expressing Paul’s understanding? This last issue, and its implications for the contemporary church, will be taken up in the next chapter. We conclude this chapter by noting the relationship between the Spirit and God and Christ, which not only further indicates that the Spirit is personal, but also leads us into the next chapter by pointing us in the direction of historical orthodoxy (that is, unity of substance along with distinction of persons in the Trinity).

THE SPIRIT AND THE GODHEAD

Of over 140 occurrences of *pneuma* (“S/spirit”) in his letters, Paul uses the full name, Holy Spirit, in seventeen instances. He designates the Spirit as “the Spirit of God”/“his Spirit” sixteen times, and as “the Spirit of Christ,” or its equivalent, three times. Some observations about this usage are in order.

The Holy Spirit

This full designation occurs only twice in the Old Testament (Ps 51:11; Isa 63:10); nonetheless, it was picked up by Christians as

the full proper name for the Spirit of God. For all practical purposes, it came to be understood as the Spirit’s “Christian” name. Paul uses the full name at about the same ratio as he uses of his full name for Christ, “the Lord Jesus Christ,” where name and title also blend as one reality. This usage in itself, and especially in a passage like 2 Corinthians 13:14 (see ch. 4 below), further indicates that “distinct from” and “one with” is the Pauline presupposition about the Spirit.

The Spirit as the Spirit of God

Despite the fact that his understanding of the Spirit has been forever stamped by the coming of Christ, Paul nonetheless thinks of the Spirit primarily in terms of the Spirit’s relationship to God (the Father).⁷ Not only does he speak more often of the “Spirit of God” than of the “Spirit of Christ,” but God is invariably the subject of the verb when Paul speaks of a person’s receiving the Spirit. For example, God “sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” (Gal 4:6), and God “gives” us his Spirit (1 Thess 4:8; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Gal 3:5; Rom 5:5; Eph 1:17). This understanding is surely determined by Paul’s Old Testament roots, where God “fills with” (Exod 31:3) or “pours out” his Spirit (Joel 2:28), and the Spirit of God comes on people for all sorts of extraordinary (charismatic) activities (e.g., Num 24:2; Judg 3:10).

Two passages in particular give insight into Paul’s understanding of this primary, foundational relationship between God (the Father) and the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 2:10–12 he uses the analogy of human interior consciousness (only one’s “spirit” knows one’s mind) to insist that the Spirit alone knows the mind of God. Paul’s concern in this analogy is with the Spirit whom the Corinthians have received as the source of our Christian understanding of the cross as God’s wisdom; nonetheless, the analogy itself draws the closest kind of relationship between God and the Spirit. The Spirit alone “searches all things,” even “the depths of God”; and because of this unique relationship with God, the Spirit alone knows and reveals God’s otherwise hidden wisdom (1 Cor 2:7).

In Romans 8:26–27 this same idea is expressed in reverse: God knows the mind of the Spirit. Among other matters, Paul is here

concerned to show how the Spirit, in the presence of our weaknesses and inability to speak for ourselves, is able to intercede adequately on our behalf. The effectiveness of the Spirit's intercession lies precisely in the fact that God, who searches our hearts, likewise "knows the mind of the Spirit," who is interceding for us.

Some mystery is involved here, because finally we are dealing with divine mysteries. There can be little question that Paul sees the Spirit as distinct from God; yet at the same time the Spirit is both the interior expression of the unseen God's personality and the visible manifestation of God's activity in the world. The Spirit is truly God in action; yet he is neither simply an outworking of God's personality nor all there is to say about God.

The Spirit "of God/of Christ"

Given the preceding texts, the cause for wonder is that Paul should *also* refer to the Spirit as "the Spirit of Christ." That he does so at all says something far more significant about his view of Christ than about his view of the Spirit—although the latter is significant as well. Here is evidence for Paul's high Christology (his understanding of Christ as fully God): that Paul, steeped in the Old Testament understanding of the Spirit of God, should so easily, on the basis of his Christian experience, speak of him as the Spirit of Christ as well.

A careful analysis of all the texts in which Paul identifies the Spirit either as "the Spirit of God" or as "the Spirit of Christ" suggests that he customarily chose to use the qualifier "of God/Christ" when he wanted to emphasize the activity of either God or Christ that is being conveyed to the believer by the Spirit. Thus the church is God's temple because the Spirit "of God" dwells in its

midst (1 Cor 3:16); or God gives his Holy Spirit to those he calls to be holy (1 Thess 4:8).

So also in the three texts in which the Spirit is called the Spirit of Christ, the emphasis lies on the work of Christ. In Galatians 4:6 the emphasis is on the believers' "sonship," evidenced by their having received "the Spirit of God's Son," through whom they use the Son's language to address God. In Romans 8:9 Paul seems to be deliberately tying together the work of Christ in chapter 6 with that of the Spirit in chapter 8, hence the evidence that they are truly God's people is that they are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. And in Philippians 1:19 Paul desires a fresh supply of the Spirit of Christ Jesus so that when he is on trial, Christ will be magnified, whether by life or by death.

All this suggests that Paul uses these "of God/Christ" qualifiers to indicate relationship or identification. That is, the Spirit to whom Paul is referring is the Spirit who is to be understood in terms of his relationship either with God or with Christ. "God" and "Christ" in each case give identity to the Spirit, in terms of what relationship Paul is referring to.

Finally, in Romans 8:9–11 Paul distinctly and absolutely identifies "the Spirit of God" with "the Spirit of Christ." He is referring to the one Holy Spirit, who elsewhere is the Spirit of God. In this text especially the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit is made certain. It remains only to explore briefly the relationship between Christ and the Spirit.

The Spirit as the Spirit of Christ

As noted earlier, in Christian theology in general and Paul's theology in particular, the coming of Christ has forever marked our understanding of God. The transcendent God of the universe is henceforth known as "the father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3), who "sent his Son" into the world to redeem us (Gal 4:4–5). Likewise the coming of Christ has forever marked our understanding of the Spirit. The Spirit of God is also the Spirit of Christ (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19), who carries on the work of Christ following his resurrection and subsequent assumption of the place of authority at God's right hand. To have

received the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:12) is to have the mind of Christ (v. 16).

For Paul, therefore, Christ gives a fuller definition to the Spirit: Spirit people are God's children, fellow heirs with God's Son (Rom 8:14–17); they simultaneously know the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil 3:10); at the same time Christ is the absolute criterion for what is truly Spirit activity (e.g., 1 Cor 12:3). Thus it is fair to say with some that Paul's doctrine of the Spirit is Christ-centered, in the sense that Christ and his work help define the Spirit and his work in the Christian life.

But some have pressed this relationship further, and in so doing have seemed to miss Paul's own perspective. Based chiefly on three texts (1 Cor 6:17; 15:45; 2 Cor 3:17–18),⁸ Paul is understood to speak of the risen Lord in such a way as to identify him with the Spirit. The main text is 2 Corinthians 3:17–18, where Paul's language, "the Lord is the Spirit," seems to imply some sort of identification. In context, however, Paul is using a well-known form of Jewish interpretation, in which the interpreter picks out one word from a biblical citation and gives its "true meaning" for a new context. Thus "the Lord is the Spirit" interprets "the Lord" just mentioned in v. 16, which is an allusion to Exodus 34:34. The "Lord" to whom we turn, Paul says, has to do with the Spirit. That is, "the Lord" is now to be understood in terms of the Spirit's activity among us—the Spirit of the new covenant, who brings freedom and transforms God's people into "the glory of the Lord." Similarly, in the case of both 1 Corinthians 6:17 and 15:45 the language has been dictated by their contexts, where contrasts set up by the argument call forth the usage. Neither of these passages identifies the Spirit with the risen Lord.

That the risen Christ and the Spirit are clearly distinct from one another in Paul's thinking is demonstrated from all kinds of evidence. Besides the passages discussed in the next chapter that imply the Trinity, other texts indicate that the activities of the risen Christ and the Spirit are kept separate in his understanding. This is true of passages as diverse as Romans 9:1, where the formula "in Christ" and "by the Spirit" function quite differently—but characteristically—in one sentence,⁹ and Romans

15:30 ("through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit"), where the repeated Greek preposition *dia* ("through") indicates the twofold basis of Paul's appeal. First, it is "through our Lord Jesus Christ," meaning "on the basis of what Christ has done for us all as outlined in the argument of this letter"; second, it is "through the love of the Spirit," meaning "on the basis of the love for all the saints, including myself, that the Spirit engenders."

Perhaps the most significant text in this regard, thinking only of passages where Christ and the Spirit appear in close proximity, is the combination of Romans 8:26–27 (the Spirit intercedes for us) and 8:34 (Christ intercedes for us). On the surface one could argue for identification in function; but what we really get is the clearest expression of distinction. The role of the Spirit is on earth, indwelling believers in order to help them in the weakness of their present "already/not yet" existence and thereby to intercede in their behalf. The risen Christ is "located" in heaven, "at the right hand of God, making intercession for us."¹⁰ This text in particular, where Paul is not arguing for something but asserting it on the basis of a presupposed reality, negates altogether the idea that the Spirit in Paul's mind is to be identified with the risen Christ, either in essence or in function.

Nonetheless, although Paul does not identify the Spirit and Christ, he does assume the same kind of close relationship between the two as exists between the Spirit and God. Thus at times he moves easily from the mention of the one to the other, especially when using the language of indwelling (e.g., Rom 8:9–10, from "have the Spirit of Christ" to "Christ is in you"; cf. Eph 3:16–17). Accordingly, when Paul in Galatians 2:20 speaks of Christ as living in him, he almost certainly means "Christ lives in me by his Spirit," referring to the ongoing work of Christ in his life that is being carried out by the indwelling Spirit.

This fluid use of language most likely results from the fact that Paul's concern with both Christ and the Spirit is not with the nature of their being God, but with their role in salvation and Christian experience. It is in examining this concern of Paul's that we meet the Trinity in his writings; and to this matter we turn in chapter 4.

In sum: Whatever else, in Paul's thinking and experience, the Holy Spirit is not some kind of "it," an impersonal force that comes from God. The Spirit is fully personal, indeed, in the language of a later time, "God very God."

The implications of this for the contemporary church are enormous. Whereas we pay lip service to this reality in our trinitarian

confessions, in practice the majority of Christians tend toward believing in the "oblong blur" of my young student friend of many years ago. The result is that the implications of the renewed presence of God by his Spirit, noted in the preceding chapter, scarcely inspire believers in one direction or the other. Surely the reality that God is personally present in and among us should encourage us through the exigencies and weaknesses of our present life, not to mention revitalize us when our shoulders droop and our hands grow weary.

The coming of the Holy Spirit in and among us means that the living God, in the person of the Spirit, is indeed with us. And he is present, as we will point out in later chapters, as an *empowering* presence. Here, then, is one of the shifts that must take place in our thinking and experience if we are to be biblical, and thus more effective, in our postmodern world. We must not merely cite the creed, but believe and experience the presence of God in the person of the Spirit.

NOTES

1. Both Greek *pneuma* and Hebrew *rûah* can mean either "spirit" or "wind," depending on context (cf. the play on this usage in John 3:5).
2. For a list of these passages in their various formulations, see ch. 2 in GEP.
3. See GEP on 1 Thess 4:8; cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Rom 5:5; Eph 1:17; 2 Tim 1:7; cf. "the supply of the Spirit" in Gal 3:5 and Phil 1:19.

4. For "receive" see GEP on 1 Cor 2:12; 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 3:2, 14; Rom 8:15; for "have" see 1 Cor 2:16; 7:40; Rom 8:9.
5. For this understanding of Rom 8:28, see GEP, 587–90.
6. That is, Paul is reflecting his biblical heritage that everything shall be established by two or three witnesses (Deut 19:15); cf. 2 Cor 13:1.
7. It should be noted that, unless otherwise specified, the word "God" in Paul always refers to God the Father.
8. For a full exegesis of these three texts, see the appropriate places in GEP. Some also appeal to Rom 1:3–4 and 8:9–10 (see, e.g., N. Q. Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit and Eschatology in Paul* [STOP 6; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957] 10–15); however, these texts do not suggest any identification; indeed, they demonstrate the opposite. See the discussions in GEP, ch. 7.
9. See GEP, 833 n. 19.
10. Cf. Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962) 260.