

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Contemporary Thought

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Ficek, Jerome L.
Publisher	Evangelical Theological Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-02 23:30:30
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/164127

THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

JEROME L. FICEK

Trinity Theological Seminary

The doctrine once described by David Friedrich Strauss as the "Achilles heel" of Protestant theological systems is increasingly attracting the attention of leading theologians today. As early as 1940 in a *Journal of Religion* article, Edwin A. Aubrey raised the question of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the religious community, concluding his analysis with the provocative question, "Is it conceivable that here we have a doctrine which is the hub of the whole contribution of Christian thought to the cultural problem of our time?" This doctrine referred to as the "step child and by G. J. Sirks as the "Cinderella" doctrine of theology was the subject of Paul Tillich's Auburn Alumni Lectures of 1958, to be published as the first part of Volume Three of his *Systematic Theology*. President Henry P. Van Dusen after a vacation in the Caribbean reminded us that those whose special interest is the Holy Spirit today constitute "the Third Force" in Christendom—a force of tremendous vitality, responsible for the great missionary outreach of the past one hundred and fifty years, and one for which the ecumenical movement must find a place. Not for a long time has the focus of contemporary thinking centered so sharply on the theological significance of the Holy Spirit. Occupying a crucial position in ecumenical discussions has been the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and in the revival of Reformation studies the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Word has assumed a new significance. In this paper we shall attempt to point to the major emphases of a number of contemporary works on the Holy Spirit, using as they do the method of correlation; that is, the relating of human problems, experiences, quests, aspirations to their divine answer or solution, a practice reminiscent of the "accommodation" of the grace of God, on which Calvin loved to dilate and which in our day Paul Tillich has popularized.

I. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MAN'S SPIRIT

One of the chief characteristics of the modern period has been the emergence of the personality sciences which understand man in terms of selfhood, the unconscious, freedom, spirit. Following the lead of Augustine who attempted to understand the trinity in terms of human personality, which, because it is in God's image mirrors the richness of His nature, numerous modern theologians link our understanding of man as spirit to the doctrine of God as Spirit.

1. *Hendry*. In chapter five of *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*, entitled "The Holy Spirit and the Human Spirit," George S. Hendry rejects Barth's refusal to relate God and man lest the sovereign sufficiency of the divine act of grace be impugned. Hendry feels that this happens only if you interpret God as immanent in sinful man through spirit. But because spirit is the distinctive mark of man without which he would not be man, man is endowed with "created spirit." But this spirit becomes in sinful man the principle of his lost relation to God; for man's relation to God is always a relation in freedom, and spirit is the spirit of freedom.

In the order of creation man is a being destined for fellowship with God, and since this is a relation to be realized in freedom, man, as God's creature is endowed with freedom in the form of created spirit. p. 115).

Rejecting the idea that the image of God indicates a kind of affinity with God inherent in man's creaturely structure, Hendry sees it as a relation freely willed by God, to be

received by men in freedom. This is what makes communion possible without man's spirit losing its distinctness, for the Holy Spirit does not annihilate our spirits but bears witness with them—"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16).

2. *Come*. Arnold B. Come in *Human Spirit and Holy Spirit* further elaborates this point of view, believing that it is necessary for theology to take account of man's quest for knowledge of himself and to listen to those who articulate it. He finds in the quest for authentic selfhood as it is manifested in the Platonic tradition, existentialism, and psychology, "nothing less than the struggle of the broken image of God in man towards self-realization." (p. 16). He is of the opinion that an approach to the Holy Spirit through human spirit has never been attempted except by Soren Kierkegaard. Some such as Jaroslav Pelikan would disagree, saying that this was the main thrust of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. Come's argument that man is a spirit in a sense analogous to that which God is Spirit seems to have stronger Biblical supports than the position of Barth and Eduard Schweitzer in Kittel's *Worterbuch* which says that the spirit in man has no reality apart from his relation to God. The latter view, Come says, reduces man from the status of a personal subject in relation to God to that of a "mode of a mode of God's being." According to Come, the stress in Biblical anthropology on man as spirit, instead of leading to human self-sufficiency as these writers fear, points precisely to the insufficiency of human selfhood. It is precisely because man is spirit that he has to become what he is, and this is not an isolated possibility, yet one which man is incapable of realizing on his own.

Come is opposed to any interpretation of the Holy Spirit in non-personal terms. On the contrary, he feels that we must understand the Holy Spirit through studying the spirit or person of man. The drive of the human spirit arises from creaturely need while that of the divine from the fulness of gracious love. When God approaches man He does not absorb him into an ontological or mystical unity but He enters into a true fellowship or communion with him. He prefers the term "commonwealth" as a less misleading translation of *koinonia* than "participation" as employed by Thornton and Tillich, which he sees as too impersonal. Man achieves his own individual, unique personality only in personal community with God and his fellow man. In his treatment of the Holy Spirit in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, Come favors the Athanasian-Augustinian-Barthian approach in terms of psychological rather than social analogies, that is, in terms of the intrapersonal being rather than the interpersonal relationship.

3. *Van Dusen*. Another attempt to see a relationship between man's spirit and the Holy Spirit is Van Dusen's *Spirit, Son, and Father*. The author argues that the account in Genesis of man's creation *imago dei* requires us to think of the relation between God and man as "kinship of essential nature" (p. 99). He quotes with approval H. Wheeler Robinson in *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, which he regards as a basic seminal work to which all modern studies of the Holy Spirit are indebted.

The careful study of the Old Testament in its true chronological order will reveal that as "wind" became "Spirit" in relation to God, so "Spirit" (i.e., Divine Spirit) became "spirit" in man. (*The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, p. 13).

After discussing Brunner's view of the *imago dei* as man's awareness of God as one demanding the complete surrender of one's life, Van Dusen defines it as "that bestowal of Divine Spirit which, because it is God's gift of His own Spirit, has the capacity to recognize Him Who has made him and Whose he is." (p. 99). Therefore, he sees

the proper destiny of man, dictated by his given nature in creation, to be the unity of spirit, i.e., the union of human spirit with the Divine Spirit.

Believing on Biblical and historical grounds that it is by the *experience* of the Holy Spirit that all other religious phenomena and practice are clarified and validated, Van Dusen sees the doctrine as the great way of acknowledging a God who is "always at hand" and "always at work." When we affirm the doctrine of the Holy Spirit we attest to the "intimacy" and "potency" of God; for this reason it has dynamic significance for thinking and living. This doctrine is not a minor afterthought by the primary datum in our conception of God. Early Christians lived in the full recognition of this truth. Van Dusen feels that it would have enriched Christianity immeasurably if the *logos* had been recognized as the philosophic term for the Holy Spirit rather than for the Son. (pp. 49, 73). The doctrine of the Holy Spirit protects the church from becoming "congealed in ancient forms" and settling down in "spiritual sterility." With such phrases as "omnipresence of the Divine influence," "immediately present and supernormally powerful," "the moral consciousness," "the very principle of personal religion," "the Transcendent God in action," "the Immanent God in residence," and by references to the "inner light" of the Quakers, Buchman's "guidance of the Spirit," and Kant's "categorical imperative of duty," Van Dusen conveys something of the general connotation which he would have us attach to the notion of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he finds in self-transcendence, moral consciousness, mystical experience keys to the understanding of the Holy Spirit. Would it be too great a leap to equate or at least liken the Unconscious to the Holy Spirit as Van Dusen conceives of Him? O. Hobart Mowrer of the University of Illinois Department of Psychology in a paper read at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Chicago on April 10, 1959, did not think so. He sees a force in human personality whose manifestation and functioning can be scientifically studied and which at the same time is the heart and essence of religious experience. Thus, in the Unconscious where Freud with the aid of "diabolical" strategies and release expected to find evil, we now believe the Holy Spirit resides.

An interesting analysis of the Holy Spirit working on the natural level, assisting the psychiatrist and his patient, is found in the last chapter of Lindsay Dewar's book *The Holy Spirit and Modern Thought*, entitled, "The Psychological Interpretation." Here he also treats what the operation of the Unconscious, clairvoyance and telepathy owe to the Spirit. Ernest White in *Christian Life and the Unconscious* and J. Stafford Wright in *Man in the Process of Time* suggest that the depths in the Unconscious that go beyond the limits of the individual self are what we mean by spirit. Both have been influenced by Jung's theory of the racial unconscious and the archetypes.

II. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE REALM OF SPIRIT IN RELIGION

Van Dusen is convinced that a bond of unity among many religions exists by reason of their common interest in the "Spirit."

Here, then, is the elemental meeting-point of all religion and the proper starting-point for a comparative study of the faiths of mankind. (p. 99)

The notion of Spirit is to be discovered near the heart of almost every living religion. He sees no sharp point of transition or line of demarcation between the earliest identifications of spirit with crudely natural forces and Paul's lofty insight that "The Lord is the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:17). The term Spirit is a connecting link between

nature-wonder and God-worship (p. 21). Van Dusen wishes to avoid the fallacy of accounting for high religion in terms of its earliest origins but desires to be among those who "cleave to the Scriptural conviction that God has not left Himself without witness, at any time or among any people," and that one "may find abundant confirmation of that belief in the awareness of His Spirit—however dim and however crude—in the consciousness of humanity everywhere and always."

One of the major obstacles in the acceptance of Christianity for many contemporary men and women is the scandal of particularity, that is, the insistence upon the uniqueness and once-for-allness of Christ and of the Divine Revelation in Him. For the scientifically trained mind, regularity and uniformity pervade the universe and a suspension of natural law is unthinkable. What the scientist looks for in the realm of religion, if he looks for anything, is a set of concepts and principles which are universally operative and applicable. This Van Dusen would supply in the universally recognized phenomenon of "spirit." Thus for Van Dusen what before has been seen at least promising in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, becomes the most promising as the basis of a reconciliation between science and religion.

F. W. Dillistone in *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Today* points in the same general direction when he suggests that the term "spirit" stands for the realm of ideals hopes, dreams which is the antithesis of the world of matter, science, work.

"Spirit" is still perhaps the best word which our language possesses for suggesting that there is a Beyond, an unseen world which is continually related to our own familiar experience but can never be finally contained within it. "Spirit" is intangible and imperceptible but interpenetrating and powerful. To speak of "Spirit" is at least to open the door to another world. (p. 17).

Dillistone employs as an analogy for the Holy Spirit the inspiration and creativity of the artist. He sees in the experience of the latter parallels to the results of the activity of the Holy Spirit: life, power, order, and glory. His emphasis is on God's activity rather than His Nature, or Being, interpreting dynamically all things God does in the world. In this manner he attempts to achieve a rapprochement between the disciplines of history, psychology, sociology, and religion. God can be seen at work in the creation of a community of which He is the center and dynamic force. The Christian experience of Pentecost can thus serve as the key to understanding God as Spirit—"Convictor and Comforter, Destroyer and Upbuilder, Purifier and Sanctifier, Ruler and Lover." (p. 122).

III. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SCRIPTURE

It is the conclusion of recent Reformation scholarship that in the Churches of the Reformation the Holy Spirit is associated pre-eminently with the means of grace, of which the first and foremost is the Word. Both Luther and Calvin stressed the role of the Spirit with reference to the Scriptures. Luther affirmed:

I believe that it is not of my own reason or by my own strength that I believe in Jesus Christ my Lord; it is the Holy Ghost that by the Gospel has called me, with His gifts has enlightened me, through genuine faith has sanctified and sustained me, just as He calls, gathers together, enlightens, sanctifies, and sustains by Jesus Christ, in true faith, all Christendom. (*Cat. Min.*, Art. III).

Calvin spoke of the Holy Spirit as the "bond by which Christ efficaciously binds us to Himself," creating faith "by which the believer receives Christ; where the Spirit illumines to faith, Christ inserts us within His body and we become partakers of all goods." (*Institutes*, Bk. III; Chapt. 1, #1, 4, Chapt. 2, #35). The internal testimony

of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium spiritus sancti interna*) confines His persuasion to the truth of Scripture.

Thus, being illumined by His power, we believe, not on the strength of our own judgment or that of others, that Scripture is from God; we establish it with a certainty superior to human judgment (just as if we actually beheld the presence of God Himself in it) that Scripture came to us, by the ministry of men, from the very mouth of God. (*Institutes*, Bk. I, Chapt. 7, #4).

Traditionally this was taken to mean that the Reformers were saying that the Holy Spirit confirms to the reader that the words of Scripture are the very words of God, at least this is what Protestant orthodoxy of the seventeenth century understood Luther and Calvin to mean. Numerous modern theologians are saying that all the Reformers were doing was insisting that the official interpretation the church had placed on Scripture could be wrong and that the same Spirit who inspired the writings was free to interpret them afresh in their day. Thus Hendry writes:

For the Reformers . . . the testimony of the Holy Spirit was related primarily to the efficacy of the Word, i.e., to the power of its content to communicate itself as living reality to the hearer or reader. They were not interested in the form in which this content was to be found in Scripture because its power to communicate itself proved it to be essentially incommensurable with form. (pp. 90-91).

The Scriptures, he goes on to say, were not written to draw attention to themselves but their appeal is the testimony to Jesus Christ and the Gospel of God, which is the finished work of His Incarnate Life, which is also the appeal of the Holy Spirit. He objects to the view that the Scripture is the only means through which the Gospel is conveyed, as if it existed in a vacuum.

The testimony of the Spirit in the Word is registered, not in any properties of the Scriptural record, but where the Church receives the testimony of the Word and repeats it in the testimony of its own faith. . . . This point is the presence of the living Lord in the power of His finished work. The testimony of Scripture and the testimony of the Church are instrumental to it; but they cannot effect it—least of all by the advancement of exalted claims on behalf of either of them. The doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit makes all such claims redundant; for it means that, despite the frailty and fallibility of the Church, despite the errancy of Scripture, nevertheless the living Lord makes Himself known to us through their testimony. They are *means* of grace but the grace is that of the Lord Jesus Christ, which proceeds from the love of God and is imparted to us in the communion of the Holy Spirit. p. 95).

Recognizing the centrality of the testimony of the Spirit, but seeing it as a witness to the divinity of the Scripture, thus following the precedent set by the Reformers, Bernard Ramm speaks of a pattern of authority—a blend of objective (Scripture) and subjective (Holy Spirit) factors.

Christ is the supreme object of the witness of the *Spirit*, and Christ is the supreme content of the Scriptures. The Spirit who bears His chief witness to Christ also inspired the Scriptures. The Scriptures are inspired of the Spirit and they witness supremely to Christ, the personal Word of God. Such is the pattern of authority, and the three elements of it must be held in proper relationship. (*The Pattern of Authority*, p 37, italics mine.)

In his latest book, *The Witness of the Holy Spirit*, Prof. Ramm, after discussing Luther and Calvin on this point, demonstrates that the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be discussed in isolation from the total area of Christian theology but must be related to the doctrine of the Trinity, revelation, redemption, Scripture, Christian fellowship and the spiritual life.

CONCLUSION

In these modern approaches to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit we have seen attempts to correlate human questions and experiences with theological or religious

answers. While this is certainly a commendable and significant endeavor, not without considerable Biblical precedent and example, bringing meaning and understanding through analogy, metaphor, parable, etc., it has the weakness of truncating and limiting the scope and breadth of that to which it points while perhaps increasing the depth of one facet of it. In other words, there is always more richness, complexity, and dimension to the Holy Spirit than is suggested by any particular avenue, significant as it may be, which leads us to consider Him. Another way of putting this might be to say that Revelation not only answers the questions man's existential situation poses but it also carries with it some questions of its own, questions man needs to raise but cannot, and to these as well it supplies theological or religious answers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

- Come, Arnold B., *Human Spirit and Holy Spirit*. Westminster, 1959. 208 pp.
Dewar, Lindsay, *The Holy Spirit and Modern Thought: An Enquiry into the Historical, Theological, and Psychological Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Mowbrays, 1959.
Dillistone, F. W., *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Today*. Westminster, 1947. 126 pp.
Hendry, George S., *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology*. Westminster, 1956. 128 pp.
Ramm, Bernard, *The Pattern of Authority*. Eerdmans, 1957. 117 pp.
The Witness of the Holy Spirit. Eerdmans, 1960.
Robinson, H. Wheeler, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*. Harper, 1928.
Van Dusen, Henry P., *Spirit, Son, and Father: Christian Faith in the Light of the Holy Spirit*. Scribner's, 1958. 180 pp.
Wright, Ernest. *Christian Life and the Unconscious*. Harpers, 1955. 190 pp.
Wright, J. Stafford, *Man in the Process of Time*. Eerdmans, 1956. 192 pp.

ARTICLES

- Aubrey, Edwin A., "The Prospect of a Social Theology." *Journal of Religion*. XXI:4. et., 1941. pp. 354-363.
Sirks, G. J., "The Cinderella of Theology: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Harvard Theological Review*. L:2 pp. 77ff.
Van Dusen, H. P., "The Third Force in Christendom." *Life*. June 9, 1958. pp. 123 ff.
"Caribbean Holiday." *Christian Century*. LXXII. Aug. 17, 1955. pp. 964-948.