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The Holy Spirit in the World

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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE WORLD:
IN NON-CHRISTIANS, CREATION AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Robert L. Gallagher

1. Introduction

Christians believe in the glorified Christ who poured out his Holy Spirit upon all who belong to him (Rom 8:9). They confess that the Spirit is working throughout the world in churches and on the mission field. However, they often restrict the Spirit's work to within the walls of the church and the fences of the mission compound. Hendrikus Berkhof states, "The impact of the Spirit as the active presence of Jesus Christ in the world is far wider than we are aware."¹

This paper will compare what selected Protestant theologians say about the work of the Holy Spirit in the world with what Luke says in Luke-Acts. First I will examine Luke's understanding of the Trinity and then discuss the Holy Spirit's work in non-Christians, creation and other religions through the writings of Reformed theologians such as Arnold A. van Ruler² and Paul R. Fries.³ Throughout this paper these findings will be contrasted with the Lukan perspective on the role of the Spirit in the world.

¹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1976), p. 100.

² Arnold A. van Ruler (1908-1970) was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church and a professor of Dogmatics at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands.

³ Paul R. Fries is a professor of Foundational and Constructive Theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (Reformed Church in America), New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA.

2. Luke's View of the Trinity

In my reading of Luke-Acts I understand Luke to believe that the person of the Holy Spirit is God, who has come to live in this world through the lives of his people. The Holy Spirit dwelling among and in humanity is the key to Christian living; it is his presence that gives the necessary power to serve Christ in this world. For Luke, the relationship between the Spirit and the work of mission comes from an understanding that the third person of the Trinity is God himself. However, this Gentile writer is not always concerned with precise Trinitarian functions that would satisfy systematic theologians. Instead, Luke intermingles the persons and works of the Trinity within his narrative sometimes without clear delineations (see Acts 20:28). Below are some examples of Luke's style that will illustrate this approach.

The coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at the river Jordan has an important position in the mission of the Messiah. Here the narrator depicts Jesus praying while the Spirit descends upon him, and the voice of the Father brings mission exhortation. All three persons of the Godhead are represented at this historic occasion. At the beginning of his messianic ministry, God sends the Spirit on Jesus. The Spirit then initiates and enables the start of Christ's mission (Luke 3:21-23). During the ministry of Jesus in Palestine, the Holy Spirit empowered him to fulfill God's messianic plan. The Lord Jesus went about doing miracles and teaching the kingdom of God until his death in Jerusalem and his subsequent ascension.

According to David Gooding, Luke structures his gospel narrative into three parts—Jesus' doing, teaching and resurrection (see Acts 1:1-2).⁴ The second part, the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:44), is full of Jesus' teaching about the way to follow God. It is here that I find the instruction of Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit. In particular, Luke 12:10 indicates that the emphasis is on the supremacy of the Spirit. Christ warns that people may speak against him and it will be forgiven, but that blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. In the other Gospels, this refers to the action of declaring that the works of the Holy Spirit are satanic. My point is that the Trinity again is represented: Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father who is the judge. As well as this, the seriousness of the offense against the Spirit

⁴ See David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1987).

as compared with Jesus underlines the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead.

As I understand Luke, the pivotal point in Jesus' journey from heaven to earth and back to heaven is in Acts 2:33. Here the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, is sent by Jesus and is seen as proof that God has made him both Lord and Messiah. Peter in his first recorded speech had already declared that every one calling on the name of the Lord would be saved (Acts 2:21). Quoting from Joel 2:32, Peter replaced the name of Yahweh with that of Jesus the Christ. In other words, for both Peter and Luke, Jesus is God.

Another demonstration of Luke's understanding of the Trinity and mission is found in Acts 4. On the return of Peter and John from the Sanhedrin Council, the church in Jerusalem prayed to God. Threatened by the Council to cease all their missionary activity, the church's prayer opens a window into the mindset of the early believers. First, they acclaimed their sovereign creator in control of all situations (Acts 4:24). They then acknowledged the Holy Spirit as the revealer of prophetic truth regarding the Messiah (4:25). And lastly, they spoke of Jesus the servant Messiah who continues to extend his hand to heal through the presence of his followers (4:26-27). All three persons of the Trinity are presented in this prayer, each playing a role in God's salvation history. The result was that the church was filled with the Spirit and began to speak God's word with boldness as they witnessed to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Here again is the inseparableness of the Godhead in the salvation purposes of God, and the Spirit outworking his mission by way of the apostolic church.

In the next chapter of Acts with the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, the husband is accused by Peter of lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3) and God (v. 4) and challenging the Spirit of the Lord Jesus (v. 9). The narrator intertwines the couple's hypocritical action with his Trinitarian understanding. In doing this he declares that both the Spirit and Jesus are God. Lying to one means lying to all three persons of the Trinity; and that the Spirit of God is the resurrected Messiah. They are one and the same.

This awareness by Luke that the Holy Spirit sent from God is Jesus himself is also found in Acts 16. During the second mission journey of Paul through Asia Minor, the party of Paul, Silas and Timothy are forbidden to speak the gospel in Asia by the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6). The next verse has the Spirit of Jesus not permitting the group to preach in Bithynia. In such close proximity, why does the author use different terms to describe the Spirit? Perhaps it indicates that in Luke's thinking

the Holy Spirit is the Lord Jesus who is orchestrating his mission through the people of the Way.

My belief is that Luke places the work of the Holy Spirit and mission in a Trinitarian framework and gives it a priority over the Spirit's work in the church. This movement of the missionary Spirit is evident in the work of Jesus and the early disciples as God used the word and miracles as mission instruments. From my point of view, Luke sees this to be true not only for the Messiah and his followers, but also beyond this to the world. This paper will now survey what selected Protestant theologians believe about the work of the Spirit in the world—in non-Christians, creation and other religions—in comparison with Luke-Acts.

3. The Holy Spirit Working in Non-Christians

3.1 Van Ruler and Fries

The pneumatology of van Ruler brings understanding of the relationship of the Spirit and God's mission among non-Christians. In his theology, there is a strong correlation between mission and the proclamation of the kingdom of God as the kingdom of Christ. This proclamation needs repeating among every nation and in every age.⁵ In discussing van Ruler's pneumatology, Fries states that the Dutch theologian describes the works of the Spirit as "the entrance of the God of revelation into all facets and moments of lost heathen existence so that His Kingdom might be established in a number of forms."⁶ The Spirit's activity is to bring into "the facets and moments" of fallen existence the message of freedom from guilt and eternal life.⁷

⁵ Arnold A. van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays Toward a Public Theology*, vol. 38, Toronto Studies in Theology, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), p. 204.

⁶ Paul R. Fries, *Religion and the Hope for a Truly Human Existence: An Inquiry into the Theology of F. D. E. Schleiermacher and A. A. van Ruler with Questions for America* (Utrecht, The Netherlands: Door Press, 1979), p. 100, quotes van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet* [The Fulfillment of the Law] (Nijkerk, The Netherlands: G. F. Callenbach N. V., 1947), pp. 129-30.

⁷ Van Ruler views the Spirit's activity as Messianic where the church does not confine his work. The Spirit reaches into the political arena and society. Michael Welker, "The Holy Spirit," *Theology Today* 46:1 (1989), pp. 5-20 (13), on the

Like Berkhof, van Ruler does not restrict mission to the church going out, witnessing and being present in the world. The church is, rather, an instrument used by God in his engagement with the world.⁸ God's interaction with the world is greater than the activity of the missionary church. Van Ruler elaborates:

He [God] engages in his own wrestling with every human heart and he participates with profound interest in the great drama, and the great struggle of the nations as they seek to give political, social, economic and cultural shape to life.⁹

God and his kingdom are much broader than that which the church undertakes with her mission. Van Ruler asks if Christians are the only channel between God and his world. To put it differently: Does the world encounter God only through the church's mission? He comes to the conclusion that the Spirit of God is active in this world outside the church, but he does not set boundaries for this action.

For van Ruler, God is busy in his concern for the unchurched.¹⁰ Non-Christians are already in contact with the living God and when the

other hand, emphasizes the separation of the Messiah, the bearer of the Spirit, from former strategies that obtain political power and public recognition. He says that these patterns of behavior that rejected human pathways to political success were directed toward the forgiveness of sins and the redemption from the power of sin. "Jesus acts to forgive sin by, in the first instance, healing the sick and driving out demons.... When Jesus cures the sick or drives out demons, he intercedes in situations in which we see ourselves condemned to helplessness and feel ourselves paralyzed."

⁸ James I. Packer, in Stuart Briscoe, et al., "The Holy Spirit: God at Work," *Christianity Today* 34:5 (1990), pp. 27-35 (27) agrees with van Ruler when he comments, "The New Testament teaches us to think of the Spirit and his ministry in terms of a personal sovereignty whereby he uses us, not we him. My frame of reference here is the Spirit's *personhood* and *mission*. He is a person sent to us to glorify Jesus: to exhibit Christ, to make him known to people and to bring them into fellowship with him. We can not talk about the power of the Spirit to any purpose outside this frame of reference."

⁹ Van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, pp. 207-208. See Fries, *Religion and the Hope for a Truly Human Existence*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual: A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1967), pp. 29-31 sees two works of the Spirit to the unsaved world. First, the ministry of the Spirit in restraining Satan's person and projects until the divinely appointed time (2

gospel comes there is a deeper intensity of their relationship to God and his relationship to them. Van Ruler suggests:

There are depths and mysteries in the nature of humanity and in the riddle of God's involvement with the world which we must carefully and wholeheartedly respect. In all of our mission work, they prompt us to use the evangelistic method of love.¹¹

The Holy Spirit is at work preparing people for the gospel. God's Spirit comes to human beings and can be in them. This action of the Spirit opens up human beings for himself, making them ready and capable to receive the good news.¹²

In the words of Fries, "the regenerating God of the Bible shakes the foundations of our lives, destroys our old complacencies and sets us on a new course.... Those whose eyes are attuned to the gospel will see here the incandescence of the Spirit."¹³ In regeneration, the proclaimed word

Thess 2:6-8) when the Spirit will be removed. This will happen when the church is complete. Second, is the ministry of the Spirit in reproofing the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11). This work is to individuals to reveal Christ the Savior whom they may receive or reject and to impute God's righteousness by believing in Christ. Also, the Spirit reveals the judgment of God on the world that Christ has already taken for humanity through the cross. "The Spirit ministers to the world, actualizing to them otherwise unknowable facts which, taken together, form the central truths of the Gospel of his grace." John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit: A Comprehensive Study of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1958), pp. 73-74 contends that the Spirit is engaged in the restraining of sin in the life of the saved and unsaved. In the Old Testament, in the time of Noah the Spirit undertook to restrain the power of Satan and human sin (Gen 6:3). In the New Testament, 2 Thessalonians 2:7 again suggests that the Spirit restrains from sin. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), p. 74 again mentions this restraint of sin.

¹¹ Van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, p. 215.

¹² See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 1, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), p. 5.

¹³ Paul R. Fries, "Incandescence: Three Meditations on the Holy Spirit," *Perspectives* 4:8 (1989), pp. 4-7 (5). Also, John Wimber quoted in Briscoe "The Holy Spirit: God at Work," p. 27 proclaimed, "The Holy Spirit calls, claims, empowers, energizes, directs, guides, unctions—the whole work of developing converts."

penetrates the human spirit through the work of the Holy Spirit and confronts human rebellion. It is the Spirit that plants the word in the human heart to break it. "The Spirit prepares the heart for the saving Word."¹⁴

3.2 Luke-Acts

Like the Dutch theologians Berkhof¹⁵ and van Ruler,¹⁶ Luke also does not see the Spirit's activity restricted to the church. In announcing and preparing people for the age of the Messiah, Luke-Acts also shows the work of the Spirit beyond the church. However, for Luke a relationship with God comes only after repentance and subsequent forgiveness of sins. In these steps is the recognition of the Lord Jesus as Messiah and God. The following are a number of instances where Luke sees the Spirit at work among non-Christians.

The first part of Luke's gospel has the Spirit active in announcing the mission of Jesus (Luke 1:1-9:50). All the people involved were part of the old covenant and were waiting for the new age to come. In one sense, they were outside the church. For example, John was filled with the Holy Spirit before birth. Even before he was in the world, he had experienced the Spirit (1:15, 41). Likewise, the Spirit of God came upon Mary (1:35), Elizabeth (1:41) and Simeon (2:25) when they were a part of Judaism. Here we see a foreshadowing of Luke's idea of the missionary Spirit working beyond the boundaries of the church.

In Acts 4:24 the narrator records the prayer of the people of the way after the healing of the disabled man at the Beautiful Gate. Quoting Psalm 146:6 they acclaim God as the maker of the universe and all living creatures. Throughout the history of Israel, God the Holy Spirit presented the truth of the coming Messiah (Acts 4:25). The Spirit used the prophets to speak his message, but Israel continually rejected and persecuted them. It is Stephen who confronts the Sanhedrin Council on this issue, saying that they still persist with this resistance against the Holy Spirit (7:51). In other words, the Spirit was at work within Israel's rebellious history. This role of the Spirit with backslidden Israel may be shown to be the same as the Spirit's role with any godless people.

¹⁴ Fries, "Incandescence," p. 6.

¹⁵ Berkhof, *Doctrine*, p. 100.

¹⁶ Van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, pp. 207-208.

4. The Holy Spirit Working in Creation

4.1 Van Ruler and Fries

Fries is not advocating a pneumatology¹⁷ where the Spirit is detached from the word, but a theology that recognizes God's presence and action alongside the word.¹⁸ This then enables God to speak through creation, science, philosophy and the arts. In particular, van Ruler sees the Holy Spirit forming a new creation out of the old depraved order. His pneumatology represents an attempt to recognize in all things—the church, the state, culture, history and humanity—the redeeming activity of God through the Spirit.¹⁹ For him, this activity of the Spirit takes place in the whole of creation.²⁰

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 58 discusses two ways the Holy Spirit can leave theology and so render humanity devoid of God. The first possibility is to refuse “to be led by him into all truth” because of the suspicion of fanaticism. It is only the Spirit that can illuminate the truth of theology. The second possibility is that theology may realize the necessity of the power of the Spirit which is essential to all Christians, but “fail to acknowledge the vitality and sovereignty of this power which defies all domestication.” In this situation theology forgets that the Spirit does whatever he wills. “The presence and action of the Spirit are the grace of God who is always free, always superior, always giving himself undeservedly and without reservation.” In concluding, Barth states that “the Holy Spirit is the vital power that bestows free mercy on theology and on theologians just as on the community and on every single Christian.” The Christian and the theologian are utterly dependent on the Spirit. Without the Spirit both theology and the Christian are unspiritual.

¹⁸ The Spirit often acts apart from the word of God in salvation. Examples in the scripture are: in the Spirit bringing blessing to the Gentiles (Isa 32:15); the gift of the Spirit equipping the mission of the servant (Isa 42:1); and the Spirit coming upon all peoples (Joel 2:28-29 quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-21).

¹⁹ I. John Hesselink, “Contemporary Protestant Dutch Theology,” *Reformed Review* 26:2 (1973), pp. 67-89 (88).

²⁰ Van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, pp. 6-7 proposes that the saving act of God through the Holy Spirit is not only seen in the individual, but also in the broad scope of humanity and human activity. Concerning the individual's salvation, he states, “It is the Holy Spirit who, no less than the Son, is God himself and whose outpouring and indwelling is a new

Van Ruler advocates that the redemptive activity of the Spirit intermingles with the sinful existence of the world during what he calls the Messianic “intermezzo.”²¹ Between the ascension and the parousia there are signs that what once occurred only in Israel is now at work in all existence. Some of these signs of the presence of the Spirit of God in the church are Scripture, preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the conversion of individuals and true experiences in the faith. What is true of the church also becomes true of society as a whole and even of nature, where there are signs of the presence of the kingdom of God.²² These signs are indicators of the redemptive activity of God, the first fruits of

act of God of comparable significance to the incarnation; it is the Holy Spirit who makes of man and his acts a bearer and image of God’s saving acts.” He continues, “The Spirit brings the relation between God and humanity into clear focus and at the same time clearly maintains the distinction between them.” Following on from this, van Ruler views the Spirit as also working both in the historical tradition of the church as well as in the personal lives of individuals. “It is in the Spirit that God and humanity, tradition and heart, office and congregation, church and culture, are brought together, but also together in an indissoluble, but not disturbing opposition” (p. 8). Finally, he clarifies, “The Spirit indwells the church both as an institution and a community. But the Spirit also indwells the Christian—in his body as well as in his heart and in his relations with his fellowman. But the Spirit also indwells the people and their cultures which in the course of the apostolic word are and become taken up in the covenant with Israel. The Spirit indwells the *corpus Christi*, the *corpus christiani* and the *corpus christianum*” (cited in Fries, “Incandescence,” p. 5, from Arnold A. van Ruler, *Theologisch Werk*, vol. 1 [Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach N. V., 1969], p. 185).

²¹ The ascension is a sign that these last days are the age of an “intermezzo” in which the kingdom of God is both hidden and revealed. That is, it is hidden in its completeness at the right hand of God and yet eschatologically present as the first fruits of the Spirit.

²² Eugene P. Heideman, “Van Ruler’s Concept of the Church,” *Reformed Review* 26:2 (1973), pp. 136-43 (137) maintains that van Ruler understands the kingdom of God to be “the ultimate rule and saving activity of God with this world.” “In emphasizing the Kingdom of God in its eschatological and soteriological fullness, Van Ruler was thus attempting to maintain the traditional Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God over all.... In this age, the Kingdom of God is hidden with the Ascended Lord at the right hand of the Father; it is also present in this world in the powerful activity of the Holy Spirit, who gives signs of its presence in our age.”

the ascended Lord. It is in this context that van Ruler speaks of people as being evangelized and of institutions being “Christianized.”²³

Both van Ruler and Fries do not limit salvation to human beings. They see Christ as the cosmic savior of the earth and the universe. As Fries explains, “The full realization of salvation, which involves more than the believer, more than the church, even more than our planet, finally embracing the entire universe comes through him [Christ] at the end of time.”²⁴ In the meantime, the Holy Spirit prepares the creation for that day.²⁵ The Spirit empowers the word of God to transform the human heart and the world. Thus, social and political concerns should not be held to ransom over against personal concerns. God’s Spirit is working in both arenas. If we cannot see the Spirit at work, then our vision needs to be adjusted.

Van Ruler and Fries go further than Luke, when they advocate that the work of the Spirit goes beyond even the unchurched. They view the redeeming activity of the Holy Spirit as not only in the church and in all aspects of unchurched humanity, but also in the whole of creation. They reason that there are signs already present that the redemptive work of the Spirit is ushering in the full salvation of the kingdom of God.²⁶ Certainly this was Paul’s hope “that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole of creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (Rom 8:21-22, NASB).

4.2 Luke-Acts

My reading of Luke-Acts would suggest that the author believes in the restoration of all things, but makes no direct mention of this consummation being connected with the work of the Holy Spirit. In Acts

²³ Hesselink, “Contemporary Protestant Dutch Theology,” p. 89.

²⁴ Fries, “Incandescence,” p. 7. See Romans 8:19-22.

²⁵ Berkhof, *Doctrine*, p. 96 proposes that the relationship between the Spirit of God and creation is neglected in Christian thinking.

²⁶ See van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics*, pp. 6-8 and Fries, “Incandescence,” p. 7. Also compare Heideman, “Van Ruler’s Concept of the Church,” p. 137 and Hesselink, “Contemporary Protestant Dutch Theology,” pp. 88-89.

3:19-21, Luke records Peter's plea for repentance to the Jewish audience in eschatological terms:

Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that he may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until *the* period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient time (NASB).

5. The Holy Spirit Working in Other Religions

5.1 Fries, Smith and Bromiley

Fries proposes an expanded view of God in creation as seeing the Spirit at work in all religions, "finding in them new light for our faith." Christians may share their faith, but not judgmentally. If we find things contrary to the Christian understanding of God, then he suggests we need to remind ourselves that God the Spirit is there somewhere preparing the non-Christian.²⁷ The Christian's conversation with the unbeliever should be one that does "not renounce their religion, but believes for that day when their heart also will be broken apart and the Word will drop in."²⁸

Eugene L. Smith²⁹ argues that one of the most critical issues in the encounter with other faiths is the understanding of the Holy Spirit. He contends that almost every living religion has at the center of its belief a conception similar to the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit. In Smith's thinking, "a deepened understanding of the points of similarity and of

²⁷ In Galatians 1:6-8, Paul is prepared to curse anyone who distorts the gospel of Christ, which is very different from what Fries is suggesting here.

²⁸ Fries, "Incandescence," p. 7. The apostle John challenges this idea in 1 John 5:19-21: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know him who is true, and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols."

²⁹ Even though Eugene L. Smith was a Methodist/Wesleyan, he was not representative of that tradition. He was a universalist who did not understand the spiritual significance of the cross of Christ.

difference between Christianity and other faiths is one of the most critical needs of the Christian mission.”³⁰

Smith believes that people outside Christianity display the same qualities of character as manifested by the Holy Spirit within Christians. The results of the Spirit within a person are what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” Smith contends that these results are the same in non-Christians as well as Christians: “There is no necessity in the New Testament for doubting that these are qualities of God, no matter in which of his children they may appear and that their appearance in any of his children is a sign of the presence of his Spirit.”³¹ According to Smith, every individual has the indwelling Holy Spirit given by the Father: “We meet the Holy Spirit in every person. Our bond of kinship and affection

³⁰ Eugene L. Smith, “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” in *Basileia: A Festschrift to Walter Freytag*, eds., Jan Hermelink and Hans Jochen Margull (Stuttgart, Germany: Evang. Missionsverlag GMBH, 1959), pp. 372-93 (375).

³¹ “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” p. 382. Smith’s views on the work of the Holy Spirit do not represent his own tradition. John Wesley’s familiar journal entry on his salvation experience is worth repeating: “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death,” *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol. 14, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth, 1938), p. 475. Again in Wesley’s “The Witness of the Spirit, I,” *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 274, he describes this assurance of salvation, often referred to by him as “the witness of God’s Holy Spirit,” as follows: “But what is that testimony of God’s Spirit, which is superadded to, and conjoined with, this [testimony of our own spirit]? How does he ‘bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God’? It is hard to find words in the language of men to explain ‘the deep things of God.’ Indeed, there are none that will adequately express what the children of God experience. But perhaps one might say (desiring any who are taught of God to correct, to soften, or strengthen the expression), the testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”

with those outside the Christian faith is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit alike within them and us.”³²

Geoffrey W. Bromiley likewise maintains that anything that is good and noble in humanity is due to the result of the Holy Spirit. As he puts it:

It is true that the breath of God is not immediately and definitively withdrawn from the sinner. It is true that the sinner, too, can think, speak and do many things that bear the mark of the Spirit, that are even a distorted reflection of what may be known of God by his self-revelation in nature and conscience.³³

In Bromiley’s thinking, sinful human beings are still God’s creation made in the image of God. Though people are marred by sin, vestiges remain of God’s goodness and sovereignty. As such, fallen humankind can still do things that are helpful. Poetry, art, music, scientific discoveries and technologies are all evidence that the Holy Spirit is still enabling fallen humanity.³⁴ God has not abandoned his fallen creation. Bromiley differs from Smith when he argues that if a person is to know God’s saving grace and receive eternal life, then they need to receive the new life of the Spirit.³⁵ This is only possible through the special grace of the Holy Spirit. “God’s definitive purpose for creation, the perfection of his transcendent immanence, is not achieved without the new creation, the new breathing of the Creator Spirit.”³⁶

From Smith’s perspective, “The task of the Christian mission is to enable the Holy Spirit to complete His work in each person within whom He dwells. Our part is to make known to each person the data about

³² Smith, “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” p. 389.

³³ Smith, “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” p. 389.

³⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Holy Spirit,” *Christianity Today* 12:23 (1968), pp. 24c-24w (24j) elaborates, “By the Spirit, God is immanent in all his works, each after its kind. Man himself is both body and soul, and God’s common grace is to man in his totality, not just to a special part of man that is exclusively or specifically from God.”

³⁵ Bromiley, “The Holy Spirit,” p. 24j comments, “Without the special work of the Word and Spirit, man is now excluded from the knowledge and salvation of God.”

³⁶ Bromiley, “The Holy Spirit,” p. 24k.

Jesus Christ.”³⁷ That is, as we witness to Christ the Spirit works within us to make our witness effective and works within the other person where he already dwells to prepare them to receive the gospel of Christ. “Part of the Christian mission is the interpretation to each person of the work of the Spirit within them—the Holy Spirit whose redemptive function is the self-effacing witness to Jesus Christ.”³⁸

Like Bromiley I find these claims of Smith unscriptural since he makes the incarnation and the cross of Christ obsolete. For him, all people have the Spirit of God manifesting the fruit of the Spirit through their lives. God the Spirit is already present in every human being. If this is correct, then why would the early church confront non-Christians to change their religious allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?³⁹ Smith speaks of Christian mission as enabling the Holy Spirit to complete his work in each person within whom the Spirit is already living. This is again in contradiction to the teaching of the New Testament where “completeness” is found only in the believer (Col 2:10). Paraphrasing Stephen C. Neill, “If everything is the Holy Spirit, then nothing is the Holy Spirit.”

5.2 Luke-Acts

In Luke-Acts there is some evidence of the Spirit’s activity among non-Christians, and in that sense this involves people from other religions. For Luke these missionary movements of the Spirit are always associated with God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. For the Gentile writer, salvation involves repentance and forgiveness of sins with God cleansing the heart through faith in Jesus (Acts 2:38).

One of the clearest examples of Luke’s thought on the Spirit and people of other religions is found in Acts 10. The conversion of the Gentile God-fearer Cornelius serves as a platform to promote the notion that the mission of the Jewish Messiah was not just for the Jewish people. The Gentiles were always included in God’s purpose of universal salvation (Luke 2:30-32). That is why the Spirit said to a perplexed Peter regarding the emissaries from Cornelius that he was involved in all that was happening (Acts 10:20). This included an angelic visitation to

³⁷ Smith, “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” pp. 388-89.

³⁸ Smith, “An Inquiry into the Work of the Holy Spirit,” p. 389.

³⁹ See Acts 26:18.

Cornelius and a supernatural vision to Peter. In all this it was the Spirit behind the scenes orchestrating the missionary proceedings.

As Peter went into a Gentile house for the first time (10:28), he realized that God had accepted people of all nations who feared him and did what was right (10:35). The Spirit was at work among people of other religions to bring them to God, but for the Jewish Christian leader there were still traditional reservations. It was not until the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles in a manner similar to the Jewish believer's experience at Pentecost that Peter realized the full revelation of the kingdom of God through Jesus (10:44-48). It was while the apostle was speaking about the Messiah that the Spirit descended. "Of him all the prophets bear witness that through his name every one who believes in him has received forgiveness of sins" (10:43, NASB). The Spirit came upon these people of other religions gathered at Cornelius' home because they had believed in Jesus the Christ.

When Peter related this experience to the church leaders in Jerusalem to convince them that God was involved in what had happened (Acts 11:5-17), he described the action of the Spirit on the Gentiles at Caesarea as the same as that on the early Christian disciples at Pentecost. He declared that the gift of the Spirit was given to the non-Jews after they had believed (11:17). Believing by faith in Jesus was the prerequisite of receiving the fullness of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Gentiles still needed to receive the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, in Acts 15 at the Council of Jerusalem, it is Peter alongside Paul and Barnabas who proclaimed that the Gentiles could come to Christ without circumcision or the yoke of the law. Describing the events of Acts 10, Peter was aware that people of other religions believed through the word of God, and thus knowing their hearts, God gave them the Spirit, "cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:7-11). For Peter, both Jewish and non-Jewish people came to God by believing in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed some thoughts from selected Protestant theological writers about the Holy Spirit and mission in non-Christians, creation and other religions. Van Ruler sees the mission of God beyond the walls of the church with the Spirit of God active in the world, independent of the missionary church. I would agree with van

Ruler up to a point, but find difficulty in fully embracing his next step of reasoning—that non-Christians, who are already in contact with God through the Holy Spirit, receive a closer relationship with him when they hear the gospel. I believe that the Spirit is preparing people for the gospel, but that it is unbiblical to consider any kind of relationship with God without a committal to the lordship of Christ. It would seem that Fries is not opposed to this thinking. He sees the means of regeneration as the word of God penetrating the human heart through the “incandescence of the Spirit.”⁴⁰

Both Fries and van Ruler also discuss the work of the Holy Spirit in the whole of creation. Their idea is that the redeeming activity of the Spirit is affecting all aspects of nature and human society. Salvation is not only for human beings, but also for the entire universe. It is, therefore, the task of the Spirit to bring about transformation in human hearts and in the world. It is a short step for Fries to propose that the Spirit of Christ is at work in all religions preparing the non-Christian for the gospel. Smith goes even further when he suggests that the Holy Spirit is working in people of other religions, evidenced by the qualities of their character. He believes that the Spirit is in all humans and is the bonding element between Christianity and other religions. I find Smith’s argument on the mission of the Spirit in other religions unscriptural.⁴¹

I agree with Bromiley that the Spirit of God has left his mark on humanity created in the image of God and that a person needs to receive the new life of the Spirit by believing in Jesus. Smith’s view does not include this personal, living relationship with God that comes from faith in Christ alone. Eternal life is the breath of the Spirit into a person’s life, after he or she has made a conscious decision to follow the Lord Jesus. This is the teaching of the early church in Acts⁴² and the letters of the apostles.⁴³ As Paul states:

⁴⁰ Peter speaks of this illumination of the Holy Spirit through the word of God in 2 Peter 1:16-21. Also see Titus 3:4-7.

⁴¹ Compare Charles E. van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), pp. 254-57, and “Faith, Love, and Hope: A Theology of Mission On-the-Way,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Charles E. van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), pp. 253-263.

⁴² See Acts 2:38-39; 3:19-20; 20:21; 22:16.

⁴³ See Romans 10:17; Galatians 3:1-5; Ephesians 2:4-10; 1 Peter 1:3-5.

But when the kindness of God our Savior and *his* love for mankind appeared, he saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to his mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by his grace we might be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7, NASB).

In my opinion, Luke may give some indication that he sees the Holy Spirit working in non-Christians, but it is always in the context of leading them to Jesus. This is always accomplished through repentance of sins and faith in Christ. The narrator of Luke-Acts does not view other religions as having any value in themselves, nor is he concerned with showing the Spirit's relationship with humanity outside faith in the Savior. The Spirit is seen working in people of other persuasions, as they are on the way towards accepting the truth that is in Christ Jesus.