



Holy Spirit and Holy Communion

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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

Many Christians, particularly in the Western world, are of the opinion that nothing certain can be said about the Holy Spirit and its workings. This notion probably derives from John 3:8, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The Spirit and those born of the Spirit cannot be grasped—like the wind. This understanding seems to correspond with the observation that in the Bible the word for spirit (רוּחַ in the Old Testament and πνεῦμα in the New Testament) can also denote the wind. Yet, the fact that we cannot dominate and define the Spirit does not mean that we cannot talk about it. The proverbial admonition to “strive for the knowledge of God” holds true also for the Holy Spirit. Many living and fast growing churches, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, concentrate in their piety exactly on God’s Spirit and its workings.¹ But what do we confess when we testify in the creed to our belief in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God?

As with the wind, we can recognize the Spirit in its workings. The biblical sayings about the *pouring out of the Spirit* (Joel 2; the story of Pentecost in Acts 2) belong to the most important among the more than 300 biblical references that talk

¹Cf. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

The Holy Spirit keeps, saves, and elevates us, making us one while preserving essential and legitimate differences. The work of the Holy Spirit is revealed in the biblical witness and in the regular observance of the Lord’s Supper.

about the Holy Spirit in a clear and definite way.² Just as rain gives life to an entire region, so the “poured out” Spirit of God renews the life relations of human beings. They are brought into living new relations—to God and to each other. According to the promise in Joel, in this new community of saints, constituted through the Holy Spirit, there is equal place for men and women, old and young, and for so-called free persons and menservants and maidservants (in those days probably male and female slaves). In the Old Testament frame of mind, such a prospect is sensational. Thus, the group of people who normally have the say can no longer determine for others their understanding of God or define their faith. Together and for each other the different groups of people disclose the knowledge of God and the knowledge of God’s will.

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The story of Pentecost makes it even more urgent than Joel 2 does to perceive that *differences are preserved* among the people who are overcome by the Spirit. The enumeration of the many peoples in Acts 2 is meant to represent the whole Jewish world. These people still live in the Babylonian dispersion and do not understand each other. However, through the outpouring of the Spirit a new commonality comes into being, because now everybody can understand “the great deeds of God.” In this process, the cultural, national, and linguistic differences between the people are maintained. The wonder of the outpouring of the Spirit lies in the common understanding found in the midst of linguistic, cultural, and social difference. Without eliminating the different languages, different cultural heritages, and different historical coinages, the Spirit brings into being a differentiated universal community. Thus, God’s Spirit works through not only one people or only one culture or only through men or only through women or only through the old or only through the ruling class or only through the suppressed.

But how does this knowledge that a differentiated community is established relate to the many statements about the *unity of the Spirit* or the unity of the believers brought about by the Spirit? The Holy Spirit establishes a community in which faith, love, and hope are alive. It creates a community in which justice, the protection of the weak, and the knowledge of God and of truth are forever sought anew. Under the power of the working of the Holy Spirit the search for God and the love for God become concrete. God’s Spirit persistently works against unjust differences. It transforms and relativizes natural and cultural differences, which go along with injustice, uncharitableness, and hopelessness. This, however, does not mean that the Holy Spirit simply does away with differences. Rather, the unity of the Spirit is the unity and the interplay of the *different gifts of the Spirit*. Accordingly,

²For the following, see Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) ch. 5.

the unity of the body of Christ that is brought about by the Spirit is a unity of the different members (1 Cor 12:12-31). To be sure, the whole body of Christ is ordered towards its Lord, towards the “head,” Jesus Christ himself. In itself, however, its structure is not monohierarchical, but pluralistic in a structured way (not to be confused with a chaotic “plurality”).

Why does the unity of the Spirit have such a complicated form? In the Apostles’ Creed, we say: “I believe in the Holy Spirit,...the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins....” When they think of the *forgiveness of sins*, many people today have in mind only a forgiveness of guilt or debts or trespasses. Over against this, the biblical traditions know that, though sin has something to do with guilt, debts, and trespasses, it is, at the same time, more than those. Sin is a power that enslaves people and from which they cannot flee, which makes them search, ask, and cry for God’s justice, mercy, and rescue.

Already the earliest accounts of the freeing power of the Spirit in the Old Testament speak of a community that finds itself in a hopeless situation, threatened overwhelmingly by enemies after it has turned away from God. But God’s Spirit comes down and turns the tables through a person seized by the Spirit. The people are saved and kept through God’s help and God’s intervention.³ They are forgiven their sins. Life that seemed to be close to death, even delivered to it, is now saved and restored. The destructive power of sin is revealed in its utmost depth at Christ’s cross. The cross reveals that human sin is hardly grasped when it is understood as individual self-reference and self-praise. Jesus Christ is put to the cross in the name of religion, in the name of the Jewish and the Roman laws, in the name of the ruling politics and the current public opinion. The cross reveals the triumph of the powers of the world, which use God’s good law and analogous norms in order to turn against God’s presence and even to veil this fact. At the cross, we learn that the good law of God can, under the power of sin, be completely misused and distorted. People distance themselves individually and communally from God’s presence. In doing so, they even spread the appearance of justice, piety, political necessity, and public consensus.

In this situation of general delusion, the pouring out of the Spirit is a healing necessity. All religious, political, legal, and moral achievements are called into question. Human self-righteousness is disclosed in order to open human beings to true justice, true mercy, true knowledge of God and God’s intentions in creation. Through the Holy Spirit, God works on people trapped in delusion. God takes them into his service through the Spirit—for their own good and for the good of others.

However, God’s Spirit is not only a Spirit that saves us and frees us. *The creative Spirit of God saves us in that God elevates us*. Through the Spirit people are not only again and again led out of misery and entanglement. Through the Spirit they are taken into a new life. They get to participate in the life of the resurrected Christ. They are deemed worthy to be members of his body, living building stones of the

³See Welker, *God the Spirit*, ch. 2.

temple of God (Eph 2:19-22). They become members of the “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). It is through the Spirit that they become bearers of God’s presence. Through the liberating power of the Spirit, the situation of poor and forlorn people under the power of sin is not only revealed to them; they are also freed from this power. They are freed from it by being given an immense dignity. They are granted community with Christ and participation in his life. They gain participation in the blissful and victorious conquest over people’s opposition to God’s presence and, through that conquest, in festive and peaceful community with each other.

THE SPIRIT IN THE LORD’S SUPPER

The recognition of the differentiated *keeping, saving, and elevating working of the Holy Spirit* is not limited to the biblical traditions. The ecumenical discourse in the last decades of the twentieth century on a world level has led to a growing awareness that the Lord’s Supper is—among many of its other dimensions—an impressive mirror that allows for a nuanced appreciation of the working of the Holy Spirit.⁴

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Without giving up on the centrality of the presence of Christ in Holy Communion, the ecumenical discourse has disclosed a trinitarian richness in the sacrament, that has led also to important pneumatological insights. It has become obvious that the eucharistic thanksgiving for bread and wine as gifts of the *new creation* should not lead to a false abstraction from the fact that bread and wine are also, and in their initial existence, gifts of God’s *good creation*. However, this does not mean that bread and wine are merely “gifts of nature.” The presence in our midst of even the smallest amount of bread and wine presupposes a complex and successful interaction of nature and human culture. This insight can lead to a deep sense of gratitude for the working of God’s creative Spirit: How much work has to be done by God’s creative Spirit in order to attune the course of nature and human culture so that bread and wine can be made! How much work has to be done by God’s creative Spirit to bring human beings together peacefully and to concentrate them together on the presence of God! How much work has to be done by God’s creative Spirit to enable human beings to share the gifts of creation and the gift of the word of God, to listen to the word and to each other, to understand the word and each other, to glorify God and to love each other!

⁴See *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist, 1984). A key to the worldwide discourse on Holy Communion is provided by my book *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); see also John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997) ch. 4.

A deep sense of awe and gratitude results from the contemplation of the workings of the Spirit in creation. This sense of awe and gratitude is beautifully expressed in Luther's catechisms when he reflects on all the good gifts of creation with which God the Creator surrounds "me." The awareness that God surrounds me and us with all the good natural and cultural gifts through the working of the Spirit adds an important dimension to our understanding of God's creativity and of the breadth of the Holy Spirit's activity.⁵

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More problematic than the conventional abstraction from the working of the Spirit in creation have been new tendencies to counter this by celebrating Holy Communion as a feast of life and peace, of fellowship and reconciliation, but without much attention to the notions of sin, the centrality of the cross, and the meaning of the sacrifice. The overt or the hidden replacement of Holy Communion by a mere *agape* meal has not only neglected the presence and work of Christ;⁶ it has also neglected the rescuing and saving power of the Holy Spirit, who brings Christ to us and us to Christ in dramatic and life-renewing ways. In many parts of the world the typically modern confusion of sin and guilt, and the inability to understand the power of sin go together with an enormous trust in the power of morals, the law, politics, and religion as such. The abilities of human beings to turn the good law of God and the moral, legal, political, and religious potential to create trust and peace into tools of deception and self-jeopardy are greatly underestimated. We will need the mighty working of the Spirit and the powerful presence of the resurrected Christ to overcome these dangers time and again.⁷ We will need to mark as illusions the opinions that moral communication can be "value-free," that the law follows its inner logic alone, and that religion is good per se. More, we will need the ever new discernment of the Holy Spirit from other principalities and powers, and the awareness and appreciation of the good gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to free human beings from delusion and false security.

The sustaining and rescuing powers of the Holy Spirit are addressed by the Apostles' Creed with the words: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body." The resurrection of the body, however, and the final clause, I believe in "the life everlasting," bring into view the eschatological working of the Spirit. This

⁵See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

⁶See Michael Welker, "The Body of Christ, Holy Communion, and Canonic Memory," *Word & World* 22/2 (2002) 164-169.

⁷For the "realism" of the resurrection, see Ted Peters, Robert Russell, and Michael Welker, eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

adds—alongside the sustaining and rescuing work—a third dimension: the elevation and ennoblement of the creatures. Bread and wine, the gifts of creation, become bread and wine “from heaven,” gifts of the new creation. Participants in Holy Communion are not just symbolically fed and nourished; they do not merely celebrate justice and peace and reconciliation among each other in this table fellowship. As they have become aware of their utter dependence on God’s saving work and power, as they believe in God’s merciful presence in Christ and the Holy Spirit, they experience the reconciliation with God in which they themselves become part of the new creation. They are edified to become members of the body of Christ. They are incorporated in the divine life. The Holy Spirit does not only bring them back on track so that they become reincorporated into creation; the Holy Spirit lets them participate in God’s eternal life. This participation is still “hidden in God.” It is hidden to the world like all the signs of the coming reign of God. Faith, enlivened by the power of the Spirit, rejoices in this present and coming participation. ⊕

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