



Spirit and Sanctification: Sketching St. Paul's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Romans

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Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* supplies one of the most memorable explanations of the third article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.¹

Luther's rich description of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, as confessed in the third article of the Creed, has provided significant, practical benefit to

¹ Martin Luther, "The Third Article: On Being Made Holy, Small Catechism" in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 355–56. The older verbiage in English translation, which spoke of the Holy Spirit as "sanctifier," is not preserved in the Kolb-Wengert edition of the *Book of Concord*.

One of the key features of Paul's Letter to the Romans is his understanding of the transformation of the believer into a new creation through the redemptive and sanctifying power of God in Christ Jesus. This transformation is provided through the power of the Holy Spirit, by which the believer is joined in faith to God's creative actions.

Christians learning to confess what it means to have the Holy Spirit on account of baptism into Christ.² In this, it is the application of the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection—confessed in detail in the second article of the Creed—that vitally configures the shape of Luther's pneumatology.

Even so, it has also been contended that this Holy Spirit who “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” has since disappeared from Lutheran theology.³ Consequently, this article will attempt to sketch in the details of the sort of robust doctrine of the Spirit called for by Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed.⁴ To do so, I will engage in a constructive reading of Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the description of the Holy Spirit he supplies therein. I contend that at the center of Paul's understanding of the new creature is a rigorous and unavoidably personal account of the Holy Spirit who is bestowed in baptism into Jesus Christ (see Rom 6:3–4). I will first situate the argument in the context of an ongoing discussion of the personhood of the Holy Spirit, especially in conversation with Robert W. Jenson and Karl Barth—two theologians committed to the particular language of Scripture in determining how theology speaks of, and for, God.⁵ I will then proceed to execute a short reading of Paul's letter on the matter of the Holy Spirit and conclude by discussing some of the ramifications.

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PNEUMATOLOGICAL PERSONHOOD AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Before setting forth Paul's teaching on the Holy Spirit as a resource for speaking in an adequately personal way of the third person of the Trinity, it is instructive to first articulate what, exactly, happened to the Spirit in the history of doctrine. A discussion of the place of the Holy Spirit in the various traditions, both East and

² Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 241.

³ Luther, “The Third Article.”

⁴ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther Through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 127–76; Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 294–389; Cheryl M. Peterson, “‘Rebirth into Ecclesia’: Hinlicky on the Spirit, Church, and Christian Mission,” *Pro Ecclesia* 26, no. 2 (2017): 169–74; Michael Plekon, “Creator Spiritus: Paul Hinlicky on Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, and the Life of Holiness,” *Pro Ecclesia* 26, no. 2 (2017): 159–62.

⁵ See also Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

West, as well as Protestant and Roman Catholic, would be highly edifying but is outside the scope of an article like this one.

Yet in the case of Lutheran theology in particular, Paul R. Hinlicky (to name a single example) has recently suggested that the Holy Spirit has “disappeared” from that doctrinal tradition. This disappearance, he suggests, is a result of the pernicious influence of Philip Melancthon—Luther’s main associate and most important student—on the whole enterprise of Lutheran dogmatics after the Reformation. By attenuating Luther’s aggressive and objective proclamation of the work of Christ on rhetorical grounds—thereby divorcing the doctrinal *content* of theological reflection from its rhetorical *announcement* in preaching—Melancthon, Hinlicky contends, opens the way for the Spirit to become subjectively sublimated, and therefore depersonalized.⁶ Such a sublimation of the Spirit takes place both in post-Enlightenment Protestant liberalism under the auspices of cultural transformation, as well as in the more conservative reconstructive projects of figures like Karl Barth.

Barth’s case is especially critical because of the dominance of Christology even in the domain of pneumatology. In the *Church Dogmatics*, with his treatment of the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth attends carefully to the objective grounding for the reconciliation between God and humans. For Barth, “it is the event—we speak of Jesus Christ—in which the covenant between God and man is sealed on both sides, in which peace is established both from above and from below, and in which the justification and sanctification of man are both accomplished, whether or not there is a response in the faith and love of a single individual.”⁷ Consequently, Barth’s treatment of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit deploys the prophetic office of Christ as the means by which to secure the legitimacy of a more general discussion. This situates the sphere of human life under the auspices of the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸ It is Easter, and therefore the prophetic declaration of Christ’s resurrection, which then secures the objectivity by which the Spirit’s person and work are responsibly established.⁹ The person of Jesus Christ is thus the doctrinal mechanism that anchors the *pro me* (for me) character of the gospel to its objectivity *pro nobis* (for us).¹⁰

Though Barth’s exercise in doctrinal reconstruction embodies a distinctly antiliberal sort of theological reflection, Hinlicky contends that Barth’s overemphasis on Christology involves him in a distortion of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that renders the third person of the Trinity less than fully personal. Concerning Barth’s revisionist pneumatology, Hinlicky writes that “after the bloodbath of the

⁶ Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken*, 175.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 3, first half-volume, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), IV/3.1.8 (hereafter cited as *CD*).

⁸ Barth writes, “This, then, is our general and detailed christological answer to the question of the possibility and legitimacy of a transition from the sphere of Jesus Christ Himself to our own general sphere of human life” (Barth, *CD* IV/3.1.284).

⁹ Barth, *CD* IV/3.1.284–367.

¹⁰ Barth, *CD* IV/3.1.283–84.

Great War, Barth contracts from the general pneumatology of a reformed, Christian civilization to a particularist pneumatology mediated exclusively in Christ, who is alone the *imago dei*. In either case, the Holy Spirit as divine person and public agent in the world has disappeared.¹¹ Though registered in the interest of modesty and responsibility to Scripture, Barth's constriction of the Holy Spirit in such rigorously christological terms has the effect, according to Hinlicky, of sustaining the disappearance of the Holy Spirit already instigated in the antecedent tradition.

Robert Jenson's criticisms of Karl Barth on the subject of the Holy Spirit evince a similar impulse to Hinlicky's with regard to pneumatological personhood.¹² For Jenson, Barth's failure to issue an adequately personal pneumatology can be traced back to Saint Augustine's contention that the Holy Spirit is the bond of love (*vinculum caritatis*) between the Father and the Son.¹³ Accordingly, it is on this basis that Barth constricts the role of the Holy Spirit to that of the prophetic "echo" of Christ's office. In this way, the Spirit becomes a feature of Christology—subsumed under the classic doctrinal categories of the threefold office of Christ: prophet, priest, and king.¹⁴ The Spirit, on Barth's reading, belongs under the first of these categories. Jenson, however, contends that this will not work. Such an understanding of the Holy Spirit fails to account for him precisely as a person of the Holy Trinity, coequal with the Father and the Son.

Consequently, Jenson's doctrine of the Trinity attempts to take seriously the historical profile of God's self-revelation. The contours of God's disclosure of himself in history through the gospel therefore shapes Jenson's theological consideration of what sort of being God is. Such an alternative, evangelically transfigured "metaphysics," is precisely the way in which Jenson also reworks the doctrine of the Holy Spirit—all in the interest of rendering the Spirit as a fully personal agent.¹⁵ Consequently, inasmuch as Easter is, for Jenson, fundamentally determinative for the personhood of the Son, Pentecost must also be taken as a "peer of Easter."¹⁶ Pentecost is rendered as similarly determinative for what sort of person the Holy Spirit is. For Jenson, the West in particular fixates unhelpfully on relations of origin in the inner triune life of God to discern the personal identification of the three persons. Consequently, he argues that a fully personal account of the Holy Spirit will be oriented, rather, both to the future and to the Spirit's activities attested to in Scripture. Jenson writes, "The Spirit 'fulfills,' 'rests upon,' 'glorifies,' and 'explores.' If these are systematically acknowledged, the problems on our

¹¹ Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken*, 176.

¹² Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University, 1997–1999), 1:146.

¹³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.27. Note, however, that Jenson seeks, in his own way, to preserve Augustine's formulation. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:155–56.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the threefold office of Christ in Francis Pieper's admirable distillation of Lutheran orthodoxy, see Barth, *CD IV/2.330–94*.

¹⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

¹⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:146. Robert L. Wilken, "Is Pentecost a Peer of Easter? Scripture, Liturgy, and the *Proprium* of the Holy Spirit," in *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 158–77.

agenda at least present themselves somewhat more hopefully.¹⁷ To parse Jenson's contention in the terms offered by Paul Hinlicky, active identifications of the Spirit provide an objective ground for such an account, as opposed to a merely subjective ground in which the Spirit might thereby disappear beneath either doctrinal modesty or pious, liberal moralism.

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SPIRIT AND SANCTIFICATION: PAUL'S WITNESS TO THE SPIRIT IN ROMANS

Jenson is correct to propose an objective grounding for a more rigorously biblical and evangelical description of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. However, the specific contribution set forth in *Systematic Theology* appears more as a refutation of the church's reception of the platonic heritage, with its preference for the metaphysics of persistence, than anything else.¹⁸ Jenson is, in my view, correct to propose an alternative to this heritage under the auspices of a more faithfully biblical approach to Christian dogmatics. Such an approach will, consequently, be more concrete, apocalyptic, and eschatological than one critically and acutely shaped by the platonic inheritance of classical antiquity. However, in the case of the Holy Spirit, he does not quite proceed to offer the rigorously biblical and eschatological account of the Holy Spirit that he so justifiably calls for. In the interest of sketching out the details of such a fully personal account, I will now turn to Saint Paul's own witness to the Holy Spirit in his Epistle to the Romans.

If Barth, as we have seen, articulates the objectivity of the Spirit's person and work in the event of Easter and the prophetic announcement of Christ as risen,¹⁹ Robert Jenson's alternative endeavors to secure the Spirit's personhood somewhat more independently in Pentecost.²⁰ The interior contents of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, however, locate the person and office of the Holy Spirit in the apocalyptic event of Christ's self-giving to sinners—attested to chiefly and most concretely in baptism (Rom 6:3–11).²¹ In Romans 5, Paul contends that it is God's justifica-

¹⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:158.

¹⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:159. See also Paul Hinlicky's discussion of "protology" under the rubrics of divine simplicity in William G. Witt, "Robert W. Jenson, Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation," ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

¹⁹ Barth, *CD IV/3.1.284–367*. Note that Paul seemingly suggests the opposite in Rom 8:11.

²⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:146.

²¹ Cf. Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 71–79, with his distinctly Reformed plea to focus an apocalyptic pneumatology on the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

tion of the ungodly in Christ that provides the assurance of peace with God (v. 1). In spite of this peace the Christian possesses—for the Holy Spirit has poured the very love of God into the believer’s heart (Rom 5:5)—much trial and suffering will ensue, just as they certainly did in the life of Saint Paul: “we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” (Rom 5:3–5a NRSV). Such trials, however, disclose a “rupture between ages,” as Oswald Bayer has put it,²² and therefore they also occasion the dispensation of God’s sustaining mercy in the Spirit all the more (Rom 5:3–11).

Martinus de Boer has characterized Paul’s program in Romans 5–8 as one of “mythologizing” (as opposed to one of “demythologizing”). In this, de Boer discerns Paul’s intention to offer a theological description of the cosmic realities of sin, death, and redemption, which lie behind, anchor, and norm the anthropological realities and experiences that correspond to them.²³ The Adam-Christ typology from Romans 5 is an especially salient example of this kind of bifocal cosmic-anthropological perspective: for it is through a single man, Adam, by whom sin entered the world, and by whom all people find themselves in that selfsame condition of sin and separation from God (Rom 5:12). Likewise, through the one man Jesus Christ, the world’s redemption and reconciliation have been objectively and cosmically accomplished. For Paul, this “free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:16b–17).

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The human’s reception of the benefits of Christ—bestowed especially in holy baptism by the Spirit—is anchored in these objective, historical, and cosmic dimensions of the redemption Christ has wrought. Such a linkage between the cosmic features of redemption and their subjective application ensures that a corresponding account of the person and work of the Spirit does not spill precariously into one side or the other (objective accomplishment or subjective application). Baptism into Christ entails that believers have really and truly entered into his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:4). In this, the events of the life of Christ—objective and cosmic in scope—are intimately and individually applied to the believer with whom Christ has identified himself through baptism.

²² Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 1–12.

²³ Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul’s Mythologizing Program in Romans 5–8,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 14.

The subsequent discussion in chapters 6–8 illuminates the place of the Spirit in the life of the believer who has been united to Christ by baptism: for it is with the mind that the believer finds themselves captivated by the Spirit of God, but it is with the flesh that they remain a sinner, captive to sin and under the judgment of the law. “But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom 6:17–18). With the mind, the believer is captive to the Holy Spirit; but according to the flesh, they are still in bondage to the reign of sin and the condemnation of the law (Rom 7:25). In the contradiction of the *simul iustus et peccator*—the believer’s life as simultaneously justified and sinful, as Luther describes it—the individual is just as much subjected to this “rupture between ages” as the rest of the cosmos. Negotiating the perilous circumstance between the old age and the new—both in individual and cosmic terms—requires the sustaining and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Thankfully, for Paul, “now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:22–23). The new life of the Spirit is not one characterized by the obedience and subjugation of the law but is rather lived out as a whole new life of the Holy Spirit himself—a gift imparted now to believers in Christ (Rom 7:6). The law, because of its entanglement with sin, could never produce obedience to its own requirements. Yet now, on account of the Spirit, the believer truly fulfills the just requirement of the law (Rom 8:4). The Spirit who performs this sanctifying work is the bridge between the objective work of Christ on the cross in external, historical events—death and resurrection—and the subjective application of those events to individuals.²⁴ Paul writes, “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom 8:10–11).²⁵ It is the Holy Spirit, precisely as a person, who secures the objective, saving action of Christ in history for the benefit of the one in whom he dwells. The Spirit, then, not only configure the believer’s life in terms of past objective events but also orients them to the future. For it is this hope of life being given to the dead (Rom 8:11) that sustains the Christian through the trials and suffering of life. All of creation “groans” awaiting its total restoration (Rom 8:22). In the same way, Paul writes

²⁴ It is important to distinguish, at this juncture, between Paul’s description of Christ’s saving work as “sanctification” from accounts of sanctification within a sophisticated *ordo salutis* (especially in Reformed scholastic theology). For Paul, sanctification refers to Christ’s objective making-holy of the world and believers, not a process of gradual moral transformation. Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View of Sanctification,” in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 226–44.

²⁵ Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Cf. Barth’s remarks on pneumatology sealing either side of the Christ-event, both “above” and “below” (Barth, *CD IV/3.1.8*).

that “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23).²⁶ And when the believer is incapable even of prayer, “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).²⁷

In all these unavoidably specific ways, the Holy Spirit imparts the objective work of Jesus Christ to those who believe. Lutherans will rightly be eager to coordinate all such discussion of the Spirit’s person and office with what he does in the sacrament of baptism to incorporate believers into the very death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

I have glossed Saint Paul’s conscription of the Spirit in Romans 5–8 so as to specify what a more thoroughly personal account of the Holy Spirit would look like. Robert Jenson, as seen earlier, seeks to ground the Spirit’s personhood in the objective, historical event of his outpouring on the disciples at Pentecost.²⁸ He also gestures toward a more thoroughly historical and eschatological account of the Spirit’s identity by utilizing the language of fulfillment, resting, glorification, and exploration.²⁹ In addition to these, with Saint Paul, we must also say that the Spirit “pours” God’s love into the believer (Rom 5:5). The Spirit is likewise intimately involved in this work of “sanctifying” that has been wrought by Christ and is now applied to believers (Rom 6:19, 22). The Spirit even “enslaves” in the sense that he has made the mind and heart of the believer his very possession (Rom 7:6).³⁰ Not only does he enslave, but, most paradoxically, he “sets free” from the reign of sin and death as well (Rom 8:2). Nor should it be neglected that the Spirit “dwells” in the believer (Rom 8:9). Yet in another juxtaposition, the Spirit both “gives life” to those plagued by mortality (Rom 8:11), just as he “puts to death” the wicked deeds of the body (Rom 8:13). Amidst the trial and suffering of the Christian life, the Spirit also

²⁶ On the “apocalyptic” nature of this passage, see the remarks of Roy A. Harrisville, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1980), 130–33.

²⁷ It is pertinent to note that Barth entitles his chapter treating Romans 8 “The Spirit,” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Sir Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 271–329. Luther’s pre-Reformation “Lectures on Romans” are notable in that Luther tends to reference the Spirit adjectivally, rather than actively and verbally. See Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 25:43–78 (hereafter cited as *LW*). Cf. “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” *LW* 35:365–80.

²⁸ The focus on the apostolicity of this event of Pentecostal outpouring bears a significant amount of weight within the architecture of Jenson’s thought. His strong account of apostolicity entails the continuing mediation of that authority in the teaching magisterium of the church by way of the historic succession of bishops. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2:167–88, 228–49.

²⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 1:158.

³⁰ Cf. Gal 4:1–7.

“helps” and “intercedes” on behalf of the believer (Rom 8:26–27), imparting hope for the renewal and restoration of all creation.³¹

In all these unavoidably specific ways, the Holy Spirit imparts the objective work of Jesus Christ to those who believe. Lutherans will rightly be eager to coordinate all such discussion of the Spirit's person and office with what he does in the sacrament of baptism to incorporate believers into the very death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Enlisting Paul's witness in such concrete, eschatological, and apocalyptic terms is thus an indispensable feature of the kind of preaching and dogmatics in which the Spirit appears as a most prominent, personal, and vitally present agent—and not one who disappears from view in either modesty or moralism.³² ⊕

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³¹ Paul attests to the truth of what he teaches, saying that “my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 9:1).

³² Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken*, 176.