

CHAPTER 8

THE HOLY SPIRIT

According to the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, the Holy Spirit is divine, consubstantial and equal to the Father and Son. As one of the persons of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit plays a major role in man's salvation. The Spirit hovered over and descended upon Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit dwelt in Christ throughout his life, enabling him to speak with authority, to heal sickness, and to cast out demons. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the Spirit descended upon the apostles at Pentecost.

The Spirit binds the Father and the Son together. It unites God with man, and also man with man. In other words, the Spirit is God at work. The Spirit is the source and proof of divine revelation. The Spirit guides us, teaches us, helps us to witness, and serves as our advocate, comforter, and counselor.

According to the New Testament, the Spirit conveys new revelation. After Christ is no longer on earth, the Spirit will come to lead men into all truth, says the Fourth Gospel (John 16:13). Luther insisted that the Holy Spirit does not reveal apart from Christ, and never betrays Christ. The Word and the Spirit belong together. The Spirit never changes or adds to what Christ has taught. To think otherwise is to leave the church open to all sorts of claims to private revelation, and to spiritist cults. We can judge those who claim to speak by the Spirit by

comparing what they say and do with what the Spirit has already revealed in Christ.

The New Testament and the Church agree in defining the Holy Spirit as God's activity in history. The difficulty is in thinking of the Spirit in a personal, rather than an impersonal way. Quite often we speak of the Spirit as "it." However, God is personal, so the Spirit must be personal. Augustine treated the Spirit as an impersonal force. He used the analogy of the Father as the divine lover, the Son as His beloved, and the Spirit as the love which constantly flows between them. Martin Buber once explained that the Spirit is not like blood in our veins (a thing), but like air in our lungs. The Spirit is not a quasi-material substance, but a kind of divine atmosphere or influence.¹

The Hebrew Old Testament word for spirit is *ruach*, meaning "breath"; the Greek New Testament word is *pneuma*, meaning "air" or "wind." Genesis says that God made man a living soul by breathing into Adam (Gen. 2:7). In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit is described as a wind which blows from one direction to another—that is to say, there is a certain liberty to the Spirit's activity (John 3:8). The Spirit can never be controlled. These verses seem to treat the Spirit as impersonal energy, or an ethereal substance. What the Bible means is that God's love and freedom are at work in us, yet the Spirit is not a constituent part of our human nature.

In the Genesis story of creation, the Spirit is the source of man's life. Adam is alive simply because God breathed His spirit into his body. Therefore, the ecumenical creeds describe the Holy Spirit as "the giver of life." Pannenberg points out the need for a doctrine of the Holy Spirit showing how it works throughout the biological realm; all of creation is permeated by the Holy Spirit.²

The Spirit is also active in the Christian community. According to Acts, the church was born at Pentecost, when the

assembled disciples were showered with charismatic gifts (Acts 2:1-4). The Spirit is the source of the Church's teachings. The Spirit illuminates the minds of believers. The Spirit reconciles men to God. The sacraments and preaching are instruments through which the Spirit nourishes and edifies the body of Christ. So the Spirit works at the communal and individual levels.

The Spirit had a crucial role in the life and work of Jesus. He was conceived by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, and resurrected by the Spirit. Whereas the Spirit came to the prophets from time to time, in Jesus the Spirit made a permanent dwelling place. He possessed the Spirit beyond measure, and was able to pour out the Spirit on his Church.

The Spirit is also intimately related to the messianic hope, prophecies of the coming kingdom and the apocalyptic end-time. The Old Testament says that when the consummation of history occurs, the Spirit will pour out like rain, reviving a parched land, or animating a whole valley of dry bones (Joel 2:28-29; Ezekiel 37:1-14). The Spirit will reveal in visions and prophecies what will take place at the end of time. According to the Jews, the Messiah is a man anointed with the Spirit of God.

Paul identified the Spirit with the risen Lord, claiming that the function of the Spirit is to unite every believer to Christ (1 Cor. 12). From the Spirit are derived the charismatic gifts, and the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13).³ By the Spirit, we confess that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:9), and it is confirmed that we are sons and daughters of God.

For Paul, to live in Christ is to live according to the Spirit. Paul sharply contrasts the spiritual and the carnal life. Because of the presence of the Spirit, we are able to resist temptations

of the flesh. The Spirit enables us to pray, and confers eternal life on us through Christ. It is evident how varied the work of the Holy Spirit is in Pauline theology, and how difficult it is to separate it from the work of the Father and Son.

As you can see, it has been difficult to define exactly the nature, work and gender of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the activity of the immanent God. However, God never works directly in man and history, but only through angels, the prophets and saints of the Old Testament age and New Testament period, and the sages of non-Christian religions: in other words, all human ancestors who faithfully served God on earth and are still eager to assist Him and their fellow men. All of these together are called the angelic world, or mediating and ministering spirits. God sends them to mankind to teach us, guide us, nurture us, warn us and protect us. They may come individually, or work cooperatively. Their missions may be to teach, to heal, or to serve as guardians. They can be masculine, or feminine, or appear as an impersonal force. Sometimes these mediators convey to men and women great powers of healing, preaching or leadership.

At Pentecost many discarnate spirits from different nations descended on the assembly of disciples and enabled them to speak many dialects and languages. Since a large number of spirits was present, great power was manifested.

The work of all good spirits, angels, the spirit of Jesus and finally, the spirit of God, can be called the work of the Holy Spirit. All these are active in men and history, helping faithful believers and serving God.

Their presence and help can be felt visibly, audibly and through physical sensations; but sometimes they are not distinctly sensed, because their work is like fresh air in our lungs, a divine atmosphere and influence, as Buber says. The Holy Spirit manifests itself as inspiration, the inner power or intu-

ition which Swedenborg called the divine influx in our intellect, feeling and will. In such cases, the Spirit works very gently and naturally, as if it is our own thought or feeling, yet greatly accelerating our talents.

Whenever interest in the Holy Spirit has become a matter of major concern, the church has experienced a revival of enthusiasm and renewed dedication. In the ancient church those who stressed the work of the Spirit often became Gnostics, Marcionites, or Montanists. In the Middle Ages, the church was revitalized by Joachites and Spiritual Franciscans. During the Reformation, militant Anabaptists revived millenarian hopes. The 17th century saw the appearance of the Quakers; the 19th century produced spiritualist groups and the Mormons. In our own time, Christian movements like the Pentecostals and Charismatics claim to be Spirit-guided. Repeatedly, the Holy Spirit has regenerated the church in remarkable ways.

For this reason, some mainline theologians have reemphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit. For example, L. Harold DeWolf, a liberal Methodist professor at Boston University, claims that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit conserves some very important religious values.⁴ For one thing, to believe in the Spirit keeps the Church from becoming preoccupied with the past; the Spirit is at work right now. Secondly, belief in the Spirit protects the Church from becoming rigid and traditionalist. Christians need to affirm a growing revelation; we should believe that the Holy Spirit will guide us into a new understanding of God's purpose. Thirdly, belief in the Holy Spirit affirms the divine presence among us and in us. As Paul said, God is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).⁵

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

- 1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 39.
- 2 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 171.
- 3 The four ethical virtues are: wisdom, justice, courage, and magnanimity.
- 4 L. Harold DeWolf, *A Theology of the Living Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 272-273.
- 5 Here Paul, in a speech to the Athenians, is quoting the poet Epimenides of Cnossos.