

Exactly 100 years ago the great Church of Scotland theologian James Orr brought forth his famous work *The Progress of Dogma*. In it he propounded an fascinating theory. Orr noted that throughout the history of the church certain issues have, in turn, assumed prominence, and that the practical result has been the clarification of the church's beliefs in that area. For example, the disputes of the church in the first 2 centuries centred on the truth of the Christian religion, which, in the tolerant climate of the Roman empire, was the religious 'new kid on the block'. As a result, as Orr points out, the second century was "the age of apologetics and vindication of fundamental ideas of religion. After Christianity became an established religious option and increased in influence, the focus of controversy shifted to the Christian idea of God. Therefore, Orr notes, the 3rd and 4th centuries were dominated not by conflict with Rome, but by the church's internal struggles to put its faith in Christ and its experience of the Holy Spirit in the context of its conviction that there is yet only one God, who reveals Himself to us predominantly through Christ and the Spirit. By the end of the 4th century, after the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), the doctrine of the Trinity had finally arrived as the best (yet) attempt to define the place of Christ, particularly His relation to God, and the place of the Holy Spirit in relation to both the Father and the Son. Ironically, it was the anti-Trinitarian Arians who contributed much to the Constantinopolitan formulation by their insistence that the Spirit was a personal being, even if only a creature.

Orr's analysis goes on to detail the succeeding eras of dogmatic controversy: 3/ the beginning of the 5th century, the era of anthropological controversy (man and sin); 4/ the 5th to 7th centuries, the age of Christological controversy; 5/ the 11th to 16th centuries, soteriological controversy (doctrine of atonement); 6/ the 16th century itself, the application of redemption (justification etc.).

When James Orr wrote *The Progress of Dogma* he also noted that the great theological issue of his day was eschatological, that is, the last things. I don't suppose that anyone who has been born in the century since Orr's observation will dispute his conclusion. But could James Orr have foreseen the day when a single book on eschatology would sell 25 million copies? Part and parcel of our interest in rapture and Armageddon scenarios is the modern church's emphasis on the Holy Spirit. After all, according to Orr's theory, unlike God the Father and Christ, the Spirit has never had an era of *His* own. And did not the prophet Joel, followed by the Apostle Peter at Pentecost, link the coming of the last days with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit? (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17) We Christians are fascinated with the Holy Spirit has never before. This issue of the *Journal*, we hope you will agree, looks at the Holy Spirit from a few fresh angles.

[ARTICLE TITLE] The Spirit in the early church: The Humility of God

It is a common criticism of orthodox Trinitarianism that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is by no means clearly defined in the New Testament. Nor indeed, according to these critics, even in the early church fathers. Liberal critics who tend to see where the Spirit is concerned, at best ambiguity in both the New Testament and the early fathers. Those who have a vested doctrinal interest outside of orthodoxy will often go further, asserting that the Holy Spirit was nothing more than a power or force to early believers. Such commonly take a stripe off the church for preferring 'traditions of men' (i.e. creedal affirmations of later centuries) to the 'simple truths of Scripture'.

Is there any truth in these criticisms? Are Trinitarian Christians di-theists, or tri-theists, as the non-orthodox, Jews and Muslims sometimes claim? What are Christians going to say to such critics in defending "the faith once delivered to the saints", assuming that faith to be what we label 'orthodoxy' in the face of the counter-claims of the heterodox? (i.e. not only the cults, but other 'experts' in early Church history such as Shirley MacLaine and Muslim apologists) And if the faith was "once delivered" how are we Christians to explain apparent development in doctrine to those who sincerely challenge our faith?

The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

Christians have to concede that doctrinal development, or clarification, is a phenomenon observed not only in church history but in Scripture itself. Even in the days of Moses, Yahweh himself gives space for the growth of understanding in things pertaining to God. After Moses meets his God for the first time at the burning bush, Yahweh tells him to go to the people with Israel with a message: *Jehovah, the God of your fathers, ... has sent me unto you*. Plainly this is the same God who once stood before Abraham (Gen.18) and Who, Jacob recalled at the end of his life, appeared to him as God Almighty at Luz in Canaan (Gen.48:3). Yet this God now says to Moses, *I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as the Almighty God, but by my name Jehovah I was not made known to them*. Now this does not mean that the patriarchs had no knowledge of the consonants of the Divine Name before, as that would plainly contradict the testimony of Genesis. Bible scholars are inclined to see hear, rather, the God of Israel revealing Himself *in a new aspect*. In the ancient middle east the concept of NAME has a far more profound significance than it has for us. The Names of God, therefore, reveal aspects or attributes of God that complement, rather than contradict, one another when viewed together.

Just as the exodus revealed Yahweh/Jehovah as God of Israel, the faithful covenant God, the self-revealing God, God present

with His people, in a new and unique way, so in the subsequent history of Israel their God continued to reveal the greatness of His Person in new, and often unexpected ways.

In the early portions of the Old Testament, the Spirit is by no means prominent. Yet He is present, hovering over the waters of creation (Gen.1:2). The Spirit strives or pleads with man up to the judgment of the flood (Gen.6:3 - note the hint of personality in that Yahweh says *MY Spirit*). He enables the workers on the tabernacle (Ex.31:3; 35:31) and Moses in his prophet's function (Numb.11:17-29). Joshua, Moses' successor, is also filled with the "Spirit of wisdom" (Deut.34:9), and the judges perform mighty deeds when His power falls upon them (Judg.3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6,19;15:14). King David marvels that there is no place where the Spirit does not dwell (Ps.139:7-9 -- note though David asks *Where can I go from your SPIRIT*, his following question is *where shall I flee from YOUR PRESENCE?*. David knows that whether he ascends to the heavens, or descends to Sheol, or flees to the uttermost parts of the earth -- "*THOU ART THERE*"! David also knows that such divine wisdom as he utters is the *inspiration* of the Spirit (2 Sam.23:2).

Griffith Thomas well sums up the development of the doctrine of the Spirit in the Old Testament: "In the earlier history the Spirit is depicted as a Divine energy. In the later books there seems to be something like an approximation to the doctrine of the Spirit as a personal Being."¹ Thomas also notes that though there are some 88 references to the Spirit of God in the OT, only 3 of them refer to the *Holy Spirit*. Most often the Spirit is connected to the life principle, which fact prompts Thomas to this observation: "It is significant that Nephesh, 'soul', is never applied to God. Thus the idea of the Spirit of God seems to be formed on the idea of the spirit of man. As man's spirit is man himself, so the Spirit of God is God himself active and energetic on man's behalf."² The concept of holiness, rather, is most often connected with the name Yahweh, for example in the holiness codes of Exodus, Leviticus and that prophet-priest Ezekiel, whose constant refrain is *the nations shall know that I am Yahweh*. It is Ezekiel and Isaiah who have the most developed concept of the Spirit in the Old Testament. Isaiah (63:10) even laments that Israel's rebellion "grieved his [Yahweh's] holy Spirit". Yet, despite their constant revolt, God's Spirit still is still Israel's exclusive gift.

H.B. Swete well sums up the teaching of the Old Testament regarding the Spirit: "The Hebrew *ruach*, like the Greek *πνεῦμα* and the Latin *spiritus*, originally had a physiological and not a psychological value, denoting the human breath. But since the breath is the symbol of animal life, and in man is also the means of expressing emotion and thought, the word naturally passed into higher meanings, such as the principle of life as contrasted with the 'flesh' or material form; the seat of thought and desire, of the rational and moral nature of man [continue if space]."³ For the prophets of the OT, as well as the apostles in the NT, God was *over all and through all and in all* (Eph.4:6). Yet the OT way of expressing these distinctions in God was more commonly in language respecting *the angel of Yahweh* or *the Spirit of Yahweh*: "... it is clear that the doctrine of the Spirit is really the doctrine of a Divine immanence placed side by side with the predominant Old Testament thought of the Divine transcendence."⁴ *The angel of Yahweh* is God on earth but outside man, but *the Spirit of Yahweh* is God inside man or the creation in general⁵.

The Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels

By the time of Christ Palestinian Judaism had so exalted the transcendence of God that the truth of God's immanence was in danger of eclipse. In the intertestamental literature of the Jews the Old Testament *angel of Yahweh* and *the Spirit of God* have virtually disappeared. Now mediating between heaven and earth in their place is an elaborate hierarchy of angels (this change would later make the Gnostic idea of mediation very palatable).

In the gospels, however, the Spirit is prominent, but not pre-eminent. Thomas explains the gospels' view: "The general idea in the Synoptic Gospels is of the Holy Spirit as the Divine power at work on Christ, and promised to the disciples for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose of redemption. But the main stress is naturally laid upon the relation of the Spirit to Christ Himself as the Messiah."⁶ While Christ is with them, the disciples need no other helper.

The Holy Spirit IS very prominent in the early sections of the gospel of Luke. Yet here we meet one of the paradoxes of the doctrine of the Spirit in the early church. When Christians read the angelic announcement to Mary in Luke 1, *The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and power of the Most High shall overshadow you*, they inevitably read back into Gabriel's words the full Trinitarian dogma of the 4th century. But the earliest fathers, almost unanimously, associated this reference to the Spirit "not with the third Person of the Trinity, but with the Christ Who, preexisting as spirit or Word, was to incarnate Himself in her womb."⁷

The Spirit in Acts and Paul

After Pentecost, of course, the Spirit assumes a new prominence in Luke's narrative of the early church. In contrast to many 'Spirit-filled' congregations today, however, the apostles never forget Whose gospel they bear. There are, it is true, 58 references to the Spirit in Acts' 28 chapters. There are in those same chapters some 170 direct references to Jesus by name and/or one or more of His titles (Christ, Lord, Saviour, Holy One etc). This does not count any of the indirect references, where a pronoun (He, His, Him etc.) or a substitute such as the Jews' contemptuous *this name* and *this man* (5:28). In total, therefore, there are close to 300 references to Jesus in the 28 chapters of Acts. It is plain Whom the Spirit wishes to glorify.

In Paul's 13 epistles there are about 120 references to the Spirit of God. The Spirit is mentioned in all but one of those letters, the tiny missive to Philemon (contrast only about half of the OT books refer to the Spirit). Yet it is not the Spirit's relation to God which dominates Paul's thought about Him. Rather, as A.B. Bruce points out, "the great question for him was not, what the Holy Spirit

is, but what He does in the soul of a believing man.”⁸ George Smeaton analyzes Paul’s approach to his subject: “When we survey the names or titles of the Spirit in St. Paul’s Epistles they are numerous ... If we survey His titles as derived from the benefits and blessings which He confers, and of which He is the immediate author, He is called the Spirit that dwelleth in us (Rom.8:11), the Spirit of grace (Heb.10:29), the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus (Eph.1:17), the Spirit of adoption (Rom.8:15), the Spirit of life (Rom.8:2), the Spirit of meekness (Gal.6:1), the Spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind (2 Tim.1:7).”⁹

The Spirit in John

As with many other Christian ideas (e.g. the incarnation, the Deity of Christ, the new birth) it is the Apostle John who gives us the most illumination on the place of the Holy Spirit in the church. It is only John who records the last discourse (ch.13-17) in which Christ promises the disciples that they will not be left alone – He will send to them another Helper, the Paraclete (Comforter, Advocate), ‘the Spirit of truth’ (John 14:16,17). His mission, besides teaching them “all things” (14:26) – that is, bringing light to the church – the Spirit will bring life: *It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing* (6:63). H.B. Swete points out the connection between these two great gifts of the Spirit in John’s unique record of Christ’s conversation with Nicodemus: “*Unless one has been born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God. Without the Divine birth there is in man, as he now is, no capacity for discerning spiritual truth even if it is taught by a Teacher sent from God ... The birth from above ... admits not only to a sight of the Divine Kingdom but to a place in it.*”¹⁰ This great doctrine, that the Spirit imparts eternal life, became the foundation of Paul’s doctrine of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col.1:27). The impartation of the Spirit, symbolized so aptly by Christ breathing upon the disciples at the close of the gospel, *Receive the Holy Spirit* (20:22), has obvious connection with the creation of Adam, who was inert clay until Yahweh breathed into that clay the breath of life. As Adam became a living soul, so the disciples, and *all* believers, become *truly alive* only when the Spirit indwells them. They *have passed out of death to life* (4:24), so that John, in what is probably his last writing, can say *God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life ...*” (1 John 5:11,12).

It is worth space here to note a caution which attaches to John’s teaching on the direct guidance of the Spirit. Swete comments on 1 John 4:1-6, ... *try the spirits ... Hereby know ye the Spirit of God ... We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us:* “A secondary test ... is to be found in readiness to accept the testimony of the authorized teachers of the truth. No man who was taught by the Spirit of Christ could reject the witness of His duly accredited messengers ... the true prophet is distinguished by his acknowledgement of the Person of Jesus Christ and his acceptance of the accredited teachers of the church ...”¹¹

The Spirit in the early fathers

As the New Testament period comes to a close, we observe, in the case of the gospel of John, a new clarity regarding the office and importance of the Spirit, and on the other hand a diminution of interest in the subject in view of pressing practical problems. In the worship and life of the church, of course, the Spirit continues to play a significant role. But on the intellectual front, the claims of Christ become even more important than they had been in the earliest days of the church. For instance, in the epistle to the Hebrews there are but 7 references to the Spirit. That will not surprise us when we consider that the epistle has almost a singular apologetic focus, and that is but one aspect of the significance of Christ, His heavenly priesthood. The 7 mentions of the Spirit assume a different importance when we note that there is but a *single* reference to even the resurrection in Hebrews. For no doubt similar apologetic reasons the Spirit is comparatively insignificant in the book of Revelation, but we know that this book’s purpose is *the revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1).

Swete gives an apt summary of the next 3 generations, the writers we call the apostolic fathers and the apologists: “The post-Apostolic Church followed Apostolic precedent in associating the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son. From the end of the second century Christian writers began to speak of a Trinity (τριας, *trinitas*); early baptismal creeds professed faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and early doxologies and hymns glorified the Spirit with the Father and the Son. It was seen that the Spirit belonged to the sphere of the Divine, in so far that He could be the object of faith and adoration. Yet no early creed called Him God, and no Christian writer before the third century, with one partial exception, sought to investigate the relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. It was understood that He is third in the order of the Trinity, and in some undefined way subordinate to the Son, who is second ... Some writers of the second century manifest a tendency to confuse the Spirit with the Son, and on the whole His place in the Divine Life was so little emphasized that Catholic Christians were attacked by the earlier Monarchians as ditheists, and not as tritheists.”¹² As examples of this confusion or at least the lack of precision in Christian thinkers of this period, we might cite the Shepherd of Hermas, who identifies the Son with the Spirit, Justin Martyr, who seems to identify the Spirit with the Logos, and Irenaeus, who, more helpfully, left us the illustration of the Son and Spirit as the two hands of God¹³. Origen regards the Spirit as personal, but regards Him as a creation of the Son, though separated from other creatures by an infinite distance that in effect makes Him divine as well¹⁴. James Orr explains this imprecision of doctrine: “The earliest age of the Church shows little trace of reflection on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. From the first the Church acknowledged the threefold name of Father, Son, and Spirit, and so, implicitly, may be said to have confessed the deity and personality of the Spirit. But there was no dogmatic treatment of the subject. The Church possessed the Spirit, and did not feel the need of discussing it”¹⁵.

The Controversies of the 4th Century

Although confusion over the Spirit's relation to God continued well past the Council of Nicea (325 AD), the only early father who seems to have denied the personality of the Spirit was Lactantius, not a major figure in theological thought even then¹⁶. "Arius held that the Holy Spirit was the first created being produced by the Son, an opinion very much in harmony with that of Origen. Athanasius asserted that the Holy Spirit was of the same essence with the Father, but the Nicene Creed contains only the indefinite statement, 'And (I believe) in the Holy Spirit'. The Cappadocians followed in the footsteps of Athanasius and vigorously maintained the *homoousios* of the Holy Spirit. Hilary of Poitiers in the West held that the Holy Spirit, as searching the deep things of God, could not be foreign to the divine essence."¹⁷

Controversy raged on throughout the 4th century, but by the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) the catholic church had reached a consensus on the essential divinity of the Holy Spirit. Two ideas were finally decisive in the church's rejection of such aberrations as the Arian notion of the personal but created Spirit. One was the previously cited principle based on 1 Cor.2:10, ... *the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God*. Second, Scripture also is clear that the Spirit imparts eternal life to believers. Who can give us life, asked the 4th century fathers, but the One who has life in Himself, God? And who can penetrate the inner thoughts of God but God Himself? Just as only the spirit of a man knows *his* inner thoughts, so too only the Spirit of God can know God and reveal Him to His creatures¹⁸.

Conclusion: Why is the Spirit so shy?

Time was when Christians said little about the Holy Spirit. Though that situation has changed, we might well ruminate long on why the Spirit, the acknowledged Inspirer of Scripture, and the Begetter of the church, spoke so little about Himself throughout the long centuries we have just surveyed. Griffith Thomas gives his thoughtful answer as to the reserve of the Old Testament on the personality: "The special work of Israel was to emphasize the Divine unity and transcendence, and the Old Testament is therefore only preparatory to the fuller manifestation of the New Testament."¹⁹

Yet as we have seen, even in the book of Acts and other parts of the New Testament, as well as in the records we have of the early church centuries, the Holy Spirit still does not assume the a prominence we might associate with "the third Person of the Trinity". Do we, in admitting this to be so, concede the argument and abandon the field to anti-Trinitarian propagandists? I would venture to suggest that the silence of the Spirit regarding His own Person can be otherwise explained, and in a way that does more justice to both Scripture and the character of God. First, the gospel of John records Christ's words as to the special mission of the Spirit: *He shall testify of ME ... He shall glorify ME* (John 15:26; 16:14). Therefore we might expect, even if we knew nothing of the history of the church after the apostles, that the Lord would vindicate His own words by insuring that the Spirit, through the church, would keep the Person and work of Jesus Christ at the centre of its testimony. And so it was for the first 3 centuries and beyond. Until the great controversies circling about Christ's relation to God were settled, no other issue could hope to have a hearing. So, in a way, it is a tribute to those first generations of Christians, as factious as they sometimes became, that they felt so strongly about the subject of Christ's divinity that they were willing to fight each other over it.

On the other hand, when looked out from the divine, not the human perspective, the absence of the Spirit from these early squabbles testifies to the humility of God Himself. Christ Jesus, Philippians tells us, *who has always been God by nature did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal* (Phil.2:6, Phillips), but instead, Paul goes on, *made himself of no reputation* (KJV). But the One "of no reputation" becomes, in the book of Acts, the central subject of the gospel message. Not only the Holy Spirit, but the Father Himself, stand aside and allows the Crucified (i.e. abjectly humiliated) Suffering Servant to be the constant topic of conversation, and object of praise. This, surely, is the work of a God who deserves all worship and praise. As the servant Son glorified the Father on earth, so the Father glorifies the exalted Son (John 17:4,5). As Griffith Thomas puts it, "By the Holy Spirit the work of Christ is applied and realised, and any subordination recorded is only in the sense of that self-abnegation which is true of each Person of the Trinity in relation to the others."²⁰

Finally, we muse with Gregory the Great on the greatness of the Spirit of God: "One loves to lift the eye of faith to the height of the Divine Worker ... I gaze at David, Amos, Daniel, Peter, Paul, Matthew, and try to discern in them how great an artist the Holy Spirit is; but the study is beyond my powers ... The Spirit fills the fisherman, and makes him a preacher; He fills the persecutor, and converts him into the teacher of the Gentile world ..."²¹. Yes, the Spirit is a very great artist, yet like the greatest of artists, He is content to paint his Subject, not Himself.

REFERENCES:

1. W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit of God* (Eerdmans, 1964), p.15. This work, comprising the lectures Thomas gave before Princeton seminary in 1913, is a magisterial treatment of the subject. It has not been superseded.
2. Thomas, p.11.
3. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Macmillan, 1921), p.2.
4. Thomas, p.16.
5. For a stimulating discussion of these distinctions, see A.B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (T & T Clark, 1904),

pp.115-129.

6. Thomas, p.56.

7. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (A & C Black, 2nd ed. 1960), p.144.

8. A B. Bruce, *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity* (T & T Clark, 1896), p.242.

9. George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Banner of Truth, 1958), p.58.

10. Swete, pp.131,132.

11. Swete, pp.269.270. See also Swete, p.189, on I Cor.12-14, the prophet's accountability to the church.

12. Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church*, (Macmillan, 1912), pp.359-360. This work, together with its above-mentioned predecessor on the New Testament, still stands as the definitive study of this period.

13. Swete, *Ancient Church*, p.87.

14. K.R. Hagenbach, *A Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, (Sheldon & Co., 1861), vol.1, p.128.

15. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1901), p.125.

16. Swete, *Ancient Church*, p.374.

17. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Banner of Truth, 1978), p.90.

18. See Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (Crossroad, 1989), pp.212-213.

19. Thomas, p.16.

20. Thomas, p.71.

21. Swete, *Ancient Church*, p.349.