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## God's Spirit in Creation and in Christ

ACCORDING TO CHRISTIANS THERE is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. More needs to be said at this point about the Holy Spirit, who is at work in the creation and in the new creation. A crucial conviction of the Christian community is that God is close to us. Although God is rightly understood as exalted beyond this creation as the transcendent source of all things, and although in Christ it is firmly believed that God is with us as one who shares our history from within, it also belongs to the church's convictions to say that God is in the depths, at the heart and core of all things, on the inside of the creation and of the created. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We have already noted the freedom by which God is able to project God's own self into the world. We can now affirm that it is through God's own Spirit that God does this. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol you are there" (Ps 139:7-8).

In the unfolding story of biblical revelation, it is only in the later stages, especially after the book of Acts, that the Spirit of God comes into the clearest focus. Likewise, as the growing Christian community honed and developed its convictions in its creeds, it was only after it had achieved relative clarity about what it believed about Jesus the Messiah that it could turn its full attention to the Holy Spirit. Once again, however, we encounter the difference between the order of being and the order of knowing. The fact that the Spirit of God comes into fuller focus in the later stages of revelation does not mean or imply that the Spirit has not been present with God from eternity, nor that the Spirit has not been active from the beginning in the

work of creation and the work of salvation. Indeed, as we shall see, God's Spirit is intimately involved in all these things as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, God's agent in bringing God's purposes for the world to fulfillment. From the beginning this Spirit has been at work with the Father and the Son, both in creation and in redemption.

### GOD'S THIRD WAY OF BEING GOD

The Spirit may be thought of as God at God's closest to us or as God's third way of being what God is. In both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (the Septuagint and the New Testament) the words for "Spirit" (*ruach* and *pneuma* respectively) carry three meanings: spirit, wind, and breath. The words imply something invisible, universally present, essential for existence, and free, and so it is with God's Spirit. By the Spirit, God works in the world in ways that are at the same time clear and mysterious: clear in that there would be no creation without the regular provision that the Spirit gives, yet mysterious in that we do not fully comprehend the workings of God. "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" (John 3:8). It is entirely correct to think of the Spirit as immensely powerful, just as the wind can operate at hurricane force. But it would be wrong to imagine that the Spirit is merely a force or power and therefore impersonal. The Christian community is persuaded that God is personal, that this is further emphasized in the incarnation of God in the person of Christ and that the Spirit of God also bears personal characteristics. To make the point, the neuter noun *pneuma* in the New Testament is on occasion even given personal pronouns in defiance of Greek grammar (John 16:13). This same verse indicates that the Spirit guides into the truth. Related verses in John speak of the Spirit as one who teaches and reminds (14:26), testifies (15:26), convicts (16:8), and brings glory to Christ (16:14). The Spirit is spoken of as possessing intelligence and knowledge (John 14:26), a will (1 Cor 12:11), and emotions (Eph 4:30). The Spirit can be lied to (Acts 5:3-4), grieved (Eph 4:30), and resisted (Acts 7:51). All this is indication that as the Father and the Son, so the Spirit is personal in nature. It is no surprise therefore that Jesus, according to John's Gospel, speaks of the Spirit as "another Advocate" (John 14:16), and here the word "another" has the meaning not of "other and different" but "another *of the same kind*." As Jesus is "another of the same kind" as the Father so the Spirit is "another of the same kind" as Jesus, that is to say, fully divine and fully personal.

We return here to the mystery of the Trinity, namely that God has three ways of being God: Father, Son, and Spirit. Within this statement the whole history of divine revelation is told, and indeed the whole story of salvation. The Spirit is personal and also fully divine. This is emphasized by indicating that the Spirit does what God does, whether this be creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30), the resurrection of Christ (Rom 8:11), or the inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16). The Spirit, we are told, is the “eternal Spirit” (Heb 9:14), and such eternity is a divine characteristic. “For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:10–11). The logic here is clear: the Spirit can search the mind of God definitively because the Spirit is truly and fully God—God on the inside.

When we speak of the Spirit, therefore, we are speaking of one who is fully divine, fully personal, and fully at one within the life of God’s being with the Father and the Son. God works in the world by means of the Spirit who goes out from God. To deal with the Spirit is to deal with God’s own self. More than this, because we are able to imagine the Spirit as being on the inside of God, we might also think of the Spirit working on the inside of the Christian community and of the Christian believer. The Christian blessing also known as “the grace” takes us one step further: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor 13:13). As Christ is characterized by grace, and the Father by love, so the Spirit is characterized here by “communion,” or fellowship. Wherever the Spirit is at work the Spirit creates fellowship, making connections and bringing unity. This is so within the very life of God as the Spirit unites Father and Son in the bond of love. It is so in creation as the Spirit holds the fabric of the universe together. It is so in the Christian community, where the Spirit is the “bond of peace” that unites those who believe (Eph 4:3). It is so within believers whom the Spirit unites with the Father through the Son. Working on the inside, the Spirit draws and holds things together as the holy bonding agent of God.

## THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST IN CREATION

Because the Spirit comes into focus only in the later stages of the biblical revelation, there is a tendency to associate the Spirit with the work of salvation and the life of the church. This would in itself, of course, be entirely correct. But it would be a mistake to confine the Spirit to these realms. For one thing, this would reduce the scope of how we think of the Spirit, and

for another, it would reinforce a division between the church (in which God's Spirit is thought to be active) and the world (from which the Spirit is thought to be absent). It is better to understand that the Spirit is at work in the creation as a whole and then also active in the new creation that is being brought to pass in the midst of the old. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of life on whom all creation depends and whose handiwork is seen in the beauty and majesty of all created things. The Scriptures associate the Spirit in various places with water, oil, wine, and wind and these are very basic elements in the fabric of life. The Spirit was present in the original creative work of God. Even while the creation was "formless and empty," the Spirit of God "was hovering over the waters" (Gen 1:2 NIV), presumably working to bring order and form out of the chaos. We have noted how the biblical depiction of creation gives priority to the word of God as the agency through which God creates. Repeatedly God speaks and the creation springs into being at God's command. Already here we can with some imagination detect the presence of the Triune God. The Father speaks, the Son is the word that is spoken, and the Spirit is the breath by which the word is uttered. Creation is a cooperative act of the one God, Father, Son, and Spirit. The Spirit goes out from God's own self to let creation be, to give it shape and order and sustain it as it responds to God's command to flourish and grow. So the Spirit is present and active in the very origins of the created sphere and continues to be active as the creation unfolds its potential before the Lord. The Spirit is always inseparably active in whatever the Father and the Son may do since God cannot be divided. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps 33:6). "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4).

Since God continues to sustain the creation, the Spirit is also at work for this purpose: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to the dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps 104:30). Furthermore, we are to attribute to the Spirit the skills and gifts granted to human beings that enable them to enrich and beautify life. Bezalel and Oholiab were the creative geniuses who furnished the tabernacle in which Israel worshiped God for several centuries. They were gifted by the Spirit of God for this purpose: "The LORD spoke to Moses: See I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and I have filled him with divine spirit [or "with the Spirit of God," margin], with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given skill to

all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you” (Exod 31:2–6). By derivation from these verses we may conclude that all artistic abilities are given by God, though the way they are put to use is a matter of human responsibility. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas 1:17). Believing in the Spirit of God enables us to see that although God’s saving purposes may focus upon the people of Israel and on that enlarged Israel that we call the Christian community, God’s activity is not confined to these communities. God is the Lord of the whole earth and is active in hidden ways in the histories of all peoples. This, at least, is the claim of the book of Amos: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?” says the Lord. ‘Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphthor and the Arameans from Kir?’” (Amos 9:7). The universal Spirit of God is the means by which God is active in creation and throughout its varied expanses and manifestations. God’s Spirit cannot be confined or limited by human imagination, and wherever the Spirit is active, creating communion and fellowship is a hallmark of what the Spirit does.

Having made these universal and inclusive claims, however, we do need at this point to add a qualification. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of *Christ*. Not everything that looks spiritual or claims to be so can be said to be of Christ, and therefore not everything that is apparently spiritual can be owned as the Spirit of God. Amongst the most significant of Jesus’ statements recorded by John is John 16:13–14: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” This is a crucial guiding statement for the Christian community in its practice of discerning between what is true and what is false. The Spirit is not to be found in any idea, practice, or deed that plainly contradicts Jesus or is in conflict with his life and teaching. The Spirit, however, may be found at work in everything that is true, compassionate, gracious, and beautiful (Gal 5:22; Phil 4:8–9). Whatever makes for a Christlike world can be said to be of the Spirit of God.

## THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST IN NEW CREATION

If the Spirit is the Spirit of life and is active in the creation then all the more can it be claimed that the Spirit is active in bringing to pass the new creation. This must mean that the Spirit is intimately involved in the life and ministry of Jesus, who is the one in whom that new creation is coming to

be. Once more we may deploy the image of the spoken word. Christ is the Word spoken to us by the Father and the Spirit is the breath by which that Word comes to expression. Christ has come to renew the old humanity and the old creation, each in its own ways falling short of God's will and intention, and does so from within, by first of all participating in the life of the creation that he might raise it from the depths and into the heights. It is God's Spirit within Jesus who enabled him to be who he was and to do what he did. The Christian community is fully persuaded that the Spirit comes to us through Jesus, that Christ is the one who "baptizes with the Holy Spirit." But Christ can only do this because first of all he was the one on whom the Spirit descended and remained (John 1:32–34). Christians are used to giving thanks to the risen Lord for granting them the gift of the Holy Spirit. They should equally give thanks to the Spirit of God for giving them the Christ, the anointed one. Jesus is the product of the Holy Spirit working through history and in the affairs of human beings to raise up God's Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

This theme is most clearly developed in the Gospel of Luke. As in the book of Acts by the same author, Luke shows a particular interest in the Holy Spirit. He makes it clear that before the birth of Jesus the Spirit was already active, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. Of John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus, it was said, "Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (1:15). When the angel-messenger appeared to Mary he promised, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35). When Mary met her cousin, the mother of John, Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and pronounced a blessing on her (1:41–42). In a moment of ecstasy, we read that Mary's spirit "rejoices in God my Savior" (1:46), while when John the Baptist was born, "his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit" and prophesied that his son would be a prophet of the Most High (1:67, 76).

Once Jesus was born his parents were blessed by a righteous man called Simeon, of whom it is recorded that "the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (2:25–26). These pictures suggest that Jesus was born into a network of devout Jewish believers who were alive in the Holy Spirit and were being made ready to receive the one through whom the world would be transformed. This prepares us for the fact that in Jesus himself God's eternal Word was being entrusted to the womb of a young peasant woman by the work of the Holy Spirit, whose power, as we have noted, overshadowed her, and caused her to bear a son: "Therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (1:35). Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit and of Mary. In this we see God at work entering into the

hereditary flow of the human race whilst at the same time doing what was necessary to renew that race from within in a way that human beings could not themselves achieve. The fact that Jesus was born of a virgin indicates that just as the Spirit hovered over the waters in the original creation so now, as the Spirit hovered over Mary, an act of new creation was taking place in the midst of the old. Jesus was not the product of the human race, not even in its most devout and godly expression, and certainly not “of the will of the flesh or the will of man” (John 1:13), but of God working through the Spirit. The virginal conception is a sign of something surprising and new beyond imagination, the embracing by the person of the eternal Son of a specific human identity in order that he might be present among human beings for all human beings as the embodiment of the love and grace of God. By the work of the Holy Spirit it was possible for Jesus to be utterly and truly human, “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4), whilst remaining utterly and truly God’s own Son.

### JESUS AND THE SPIRIT

Being born of the Spirit it is no surprise to go on to read in the New Testament that Jesus’ life and ministry were understood by reference to the same Spirit. “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40, compare Isa 11:1–5). It was at his baptism that he entered into the fullness of his mission. This baptism is recorded or referred to in all four Gospels as the time when, “The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:21–22). This should not be taken to imply that the Spirit was not present in Jesus prior to this time. The Spirit who had always been *within* Jesus now came *upon* him for the fulfillment of his work. What happened here was the inauguration of the age of messianic fulfillment. Jesus, having proven his obedience to the Father in the largely hidden years of his childhood and early adulthood, was now ready to fulfill his calling and was empowered by the Spirit for the work that awaited him. His baptism in water by John indicated his identification with repentant Israel and his solidarity with fallen humankind, while the coming of the Spirit upon him was the sign of the new age of messianic salvation of which he was the agent. As Jesus set out on his mission this new day now dawned. The later coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was understood to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of the book of Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16–21); but it was first of all through the ministry and work of Jesus that that day became possible. And the Spirit was integral to its happening.

The ministry of Jesus—his healings, teaching, and acts of deliverance— took place in the power of the Spirit. After his baptism, and “filled with the Spirit,” Jesus was “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness to be put to the test. Having proved he was more than equal to it, the same Spirit led him out of the wilderness (Luke 4:1, 14). In his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, in what is sometimes called “the Nazareth Manifesto,” Jesus declared, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Jesus now showed himself to be profoundly conscious of the Spirit. He heard the Spirit speaking in the Hebrew Scriptures (Matt 22:41–44) and proclaimed concerning his acts of deliverance, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20). He spoke to the disciples of the Father’s willingness to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13), assured them that the Holy Spirit would help them when they were on trial (Luke 12:12), and commanded them to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). The prominence of the Holy Spirit in the whole ministry of Jesus is highly significant. It enables us to make the claim that the mighty works of Jesus were not performed by virtue of his power as the Son of God incarnate but by the Spirit. Even though he was God’s Son, he came in humility as one who was fully dependent on the Spirit. In humbling himself in the incarnation and embracing a frail human identity (Phil 2:5–8), Jesus was laying aside his divine prerogatives and making himself fully dependent on God’s Spirit to accomplish his mighty acts of healing and deliverance. And God’s Spirit was given to him without measure. This is the manifestation of divine power through voluntary human weakness.

It is not only in the mighty works of Jesus that we can discern the presence of the Spirit but also in the motivation and will-power that led him to the cross. The writer of the book of Hebrews proclaims, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Heb 9:13–14). Here the “eternal Spirit,” God’s Spirit, is understood as the power at work within Jesus enabling him to offer to God a holy life without blemish, culminating in giving himself in sacrifice upon the cross. The Spirit is not only to be associated with acts of power, therefore, but with costly self-giving and with that work through which Christ made atonement for the sins of the world. More mysterious even than this is the question of what happened to Jesus in between his dying on the cross and his being raised from the dead. The closest the New Testament comes to disclosing this is in 1 Peter 3:18–20, which states: “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in



which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.” Although this passage raises many questions, the reference to “in the spirit” is suggestive. It is the Spirit of God who was the agent of being “made alive” in this way: there is no other source. It can be imagined, therefore, that the Spirit accompanied Jesus on his journey into death in order that he might retrieve him from there. The Spirit did not allow Jesus to be “abandoned to Hades” or to experience corruption (Acts 2:31).

This sets the scene for what is then stated unambiguously: by the Holy Spirit Jesus was raised from the dead and “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). With even greater clarity Romans 8:11 declares, “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.” The Spirit who gave birth to Jesus in Mary’s womb and then accompanied him through life and so into death and beyond, is the same one who then caused his body to be raised out of death into that new level of glorified life in God that we call the resurrection. Having endured what it meant for our sakes to know himself forsaken by the Father (Mark 15:34), Jesus was restored to full and intimate communion with the Father by the Spirit, who is the Spirit of communion and fellowship.

### THE SPIRIT IS TO BE HONORED

The Spirit then is the Spirit of creation and new creation, the one who creates and recreates. The Spirit is God active in the world bringing the gracious, surprising, and compassionate will of God to pass. The Spirit should neither be restricted nor neglected. God’s Spirit should not be constrained in our minds by being confined to the life of the church or the individual believer alone; rather the Spirit is universally active, giving life to everything that has breath, inspiring that which is good, true, and beautiful, since anything that is good in the creation and all that we celebrate in the new creation should be understood as the gift of God. Neither should the Spirit be neglected as though the Spirit is always “in third place,” after the Father and the Son. Wherever Father and Son are to be found, the Spirit is already there as the one who creates fellowship and enables connection. The life of the Spirit is deep and rich and is to be further explored as we turn to the life of the church and of Christians.