

## THE SPIRIT AS TRANSCENDENT LORD

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**ABSTRACT.** This essay was delivered as the third and last paper at Spurgeon's Annual Theological Conference in the summer of 2015. The theme of the Conference was the nature of the trinitarian God, neatly divided a sequence of papers on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this essay on the person of the Holy Spirit, Stackhouse challenges some of the assumptions we make when we speak of the Spirit as the God who is near. By placing charismatic experience alongside the biblical revelation, he argues for an understanding of the person of the Spirit as no less transcendent as the Father and the Son, and actively engaged not simply in the phenomena of signs and wonders but in drawing the believer into the very life of the trinity. As the essay develops, Stackhouse seeks to draw out the implications of this approach to pneumatology for our notions of identity, holiness, prayer and Christian community. He argues for a much stronger connection in charismatic/Pentecostal experience between Christ and the Spirit; and in so doing, he warns against some of the more popular, and somewhat ironic, emphases on power, method and function. As with the first paper of the day by Dr Nigel Wright, Stackhouse draws upon the work of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Like Wright, he regards Buber's I-Thou construct of religious experience as critical for the future of contemporary revivalism.

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It is commonplace in theological understanding as well as Christian experience to regard the role of the third person of the trinity as something to do with the distillation of Christianity to its most personal dimension. Indeed, it has been the task of Spirit movements, so-called, from the Montanists and the Messalians, all the way through to present day charismatics, to recover this personal, immanentist view of religion, in reaction to what they perceived in their time to be an overly-transcendent notion of divinity and faith. Not without their critics, these groups have plundered what is an essential interior component of biblical faith, whether it be the Johannine emphasis on the *paraclete*—the counsellor who draws alongside us—or the Pauline emphasis on the inner witness of the Spirit. Put simply, if the love of God is the predicate of Christian revelation, then this love is objectified in

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the crucified Jesus and experienced in the life of the believer by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, such is the critical place of the gift of the Holy Spirit in the *order of salvation* that, according to one or two creedal formulations in the New Testament, such as Titus 3:5, it precedes even the work of Christ (Fee 1996: 88).

My purpose in this paper is not to renege on any of this, less so to retreat to the 'practical' binitarianism that has so often characterised the worshipping life of the church. I assume, if not fully articulate, throughout this paper, a full blown trinitarianism that takes seriously the biblical presentation of the Holy Spirit as person. Only a trinitarianism, I believe, that takes seriously the hypostasis of the Spirit, is, in my opinion, worthy of the name. What concerns me, however, and what forms the burden of my paper, is not only the relationship of Christ and the Spirit, which lies so very much at the heart of the *filioque* debate, but also the question of what we might possibly mean when we speak of the Spirit as the God who is close—in particular, how we might guard such a notion of relational nearness from the raw power that sometimes attends a theology of immediacy. In other words, how do we celebrate the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, without things degenerating into impersonal phenomena—into what I have heard the late Colin Gunton describe as 'laser religion'?

I raise this right at the beginning of this paper because one of the great ironies of neo-Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on the person of the Holy Spirit, is that it has often left us with a decidedly functional, as well as formulaic, view of God. The plundering of elemental images which must inevitably accompany any biblical treatment of Holy Spirit activity—fire, water, wind—coupled to a predilection for signs and wonders, has meant the Holy Spirit has at times become associated with unmistakably *impersonal* notions of power, leading in some extreme cases to religious abuse. After all, if the Holy Spirit is only described via the language of the elemental, only referenced for the dynamism that it can inject into our otherwise mundane Christianity, then the line between genuine charismatic experience and religious manipulation becomes very thin indeed. To put it crudely: fires need stoking, water needs to keep flowing and wind needs to keep blowing; and although it is difficult to conceive of a biblical faith without such powerful metaphors, it is all too easy to see how such an emphasis could also divert into an impersonal, non-christological cul-de-sac—an obsession with signs and wonders rather than personal presence. Furthermore, as with all imagery, biblical or otherwise, overuse can flatten the original dynamism into a dead metaphor, worse still a cliché, with all the predictability which so often ensue in Spirit movements. In short, yesterday's enthusiasm becomes today's legalism (O'Donovan 1994: 24).

I realise that this is a rather negative, as well as polemical beginning to what is the final paper of the day. It appears as if two Wrights have made a wrong (Nigel Wright delivered the first paper of the day, focusing on God the Father; Stephen Wright delivered the second paper, focusing on the person of Jesus). What lies at the heart of the critique however, which has been formed over four decades of charismatic experience and practice, is that for all the powerful waves of Holy Spirit activity that the church has experienced, we are still in our infancy when it comes to understanding the full riches of a trinitarian faith. Indeed, the way the Holy Spirit is invoked in some of these settings seems positively retrograde: reminiscent of the temporary endowment of the Spirit that we find in the period of the Judges in the Old Testament, for example, rather than the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit that is promised to believers in Jesus Christ.

Making such an observation is not to deny the place or language of power encounter, for that would be guilty of positing a false antithesis, of which there are plenty in theological discourse. Undoubtedly, there is a clear emphasis in the New Testament, Luke-Acts in particular, on the Spirit as empowerment for mission. I put the finishing touches to this paper in that period of the church calendar that Barth calls the 'significant pause' between Easter and Pentecost, and am fully aware as the minister of a Christian community that without that essential waiting for 'power from on high', all our witness will come to nothing. And that the furtherance of this witness is accompanied by eruptions of the Spirit that unsettle as much as comfort is entirely what we should expect from the one who inaugurated his own disturbing ministry with the words 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me'. Pentecostals reflect in their emphasis on the power of the Spirit something of the primitivism of New Testament Christianity, and ought not to be mocked, which they are at times, for the extrovert, ecstatic nature of their spirituality. Sadly, however (and this is the central point of my paper), the christological and ecclesiological implications of the Pentecostal event are not always followed through so that what we are left with instead, paradoxically, is an 'in house' obsession with means and not ends (effects and not causes) and in some instances formulas and manipulations, rather than the free sovereignty of the person of the Holy Spirit.

Such an ironic state of affairs, whereby the truly ecstatic is eclipsed by mere emotionalism is something that Martin Buber, whose philosophy features as something of a backdrop to Nigel Wright's paper, has remarked upon in his construct of an I-Thou world, over and against what he critiques as the I-It world of modern living. On the surface the juxtaposition of I-Thou and I-It seems a very straight-forward distinction between the mystical and the mechanical. But this would not do justice to Buber's somewhat idiosyncratic, theological contribution. Rather, what Buber is describing is

the difference between encounter with the absolute, which lies at the centre of all things (the I-Thou) as opposed to the impersonal I-It of so much of human experience, including –and at this point Buber is of great importance for our theme—the phenomenal. As long as we are dealing with the merely subjective, argues Buber, the realm of experience or emotion, such as we might encounter in religious fervour, we are likely not in the realm of divine encounter at all, but something interior (Buber 1923)—something akin to what Bonhoeffer criticised the German Pietists for: namely, an inner-transcendence which is no transcendence at all.

The roots of this lie beyond the theme of this paper. I have tried to argue elsewhere that the latent gnosticism of so much charismatic fervour lies in an inadequate notion of mediation, to the extent that respectful polarities between the human and the divine collapse into an overly spiritualised anthropology. But quite apart from the pastoral disasters that emerge from such a theology, what is also devastating is the loss of something that should lie at the centre of any mature understanding of the charismatic life of the church: namely, a vision of communion within the life of the trinity where the Spirit as the gift of God bears witness with our spirit, to use Pauline language, that we are sons of God.

Notwithstanding the fact that charismatic experience by definition is a messy business, (those who want the Holy Spirit to submit to pristine conditions misunderstand the context in which the Spirit operates), the point I am wanting to make is that genuine Holy Spirit activity (and there is such a thing as genuine religious affections, as Jonathan Edwards articulates) takes us beyond religious experientialism into something approaching the absolutism that we see in Buber's philosophical vision—the I-Thou description of a person encountering the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Central to the authenticity of such an encounter is a certain humility, even reticence, regarding spiritual claims, not least because a truly spiritual life, that is to say a life in the Holy Spirit, is something derived and not autonomous. To put it bluntly, Christian spirituality at its most rarefied is not some esoteric, private experience which sets us above the ordinary, but rather the gift of adoption into the life of the Beloved Son. As the Father loves the Son, so we too by the Holy Spirit come to participate in the essential I-Thou, all the while conscious that our new identity is contingent upon the generosity of grace.

Remarkably, Buber himself ends up illustrating his main thesis concerning the I-Thou relation precisely with reference to Jesus' relationship to the Father. Without drawing out its trinitarian implications, less so claiming any sense of the uniqueness of it, Buber suggests, simply by the way he evokes Christian language, a similar pneumatology to the one I am describing here: a celebration of and participation in the unconditional love of the Son

to the Father. Gone from such a vision of encounter is any notion of utility or means, or even experience, which is so characteristic of the world and, sadly, even of the church, for we are now in the realm of relation ‘in which the man calls his *Thou* Father in such a way that he is simply Son and nothing else but Son’ (Buber 1999:90).

That such a relational, particular and intensely mystical revelation should struggle to emerge in contemporary faith says a great deal about the clinical nature of modern concepts of personhood. My own experiences of visiting care homes, and the like, have led me to conclude that for many people, carers as well as relatives, personhood diminishes the less as person is able to function or relate, or remember. In Buber’s vision however, and in some ground-breaking work of pastoral theologians like John Swinton, we come to a very different conclusion. We come to discover through the being of communion that we have no identity other than who we are in relation to others, and supremely in relation to the Father, through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. Personhood, it turns out, is not autonomous, self-generated, nor physiologically contingent, but something given to us by the Spirit. In short, personal ontology is at stake in the gift of the Spirit, and one which respects both inward and outward dimensions. By the Spirit coming to live in us, our humanity is rescued from the self-referential, *homo incurvatus est*, and drawn ecstatically into the eternal communion of grace. Furthermore, since the gift of the Spirit is only the down-payment, or first-fruits of that which is to come, then not only is the movement inward and outward, but also forward. We are always becoming what we will be.

Since this might be considered, certainly by Christians, if not by Jewish mystics, the very epitome of our pneumatology, it is easy to see why the Holy Spirit is so often the neglected person of the trinity because, almost by definition, there is a self-effacement as a result of what the Spirit is given to do. To be sure, the Spirit is a trinitarian person, but not quite in the same way as the Father and the Son are. They are personal subjects to whom we relate, and whom we confess, trust and approach, whereas the Spirit is the personal subject who enables this relating. Like floodlights to a cathedral, to use a well-known illustration, the Holy Spirit’s task is not to draw attention to himself, but to illuminate this primary relation of the Father and the Son (Packer 1984: 66). Indeed, we might go further and imagine the Holy Spirit simply to be the means, the influence by which God effects such a union. There is enough in the biblical witness to support such a pneumatology. Indeed, there are certain texts that seem to subsume the Spirit into the person of Christ, to the extent that we are left with a binitarian not trinitarian revelation.

We might want to adopt such a position ourselves. As Tom Smail confessed in *The Giving Gift*, which is surely as mature a pneumatology as you

might find in recent decades of charismatic renewal, such an approach, which featured in *Reflected Glory*, at least has the advantage of ensuring that charismatics controlled their excesses by seeking always to make their Spirit experiences relate to the person of Christ. By making the Spirit functionally subordinate to the person of Christ, it does at least ensure, with allusion to Irenaeus' image of Christ and the Spirit as the two hands of God, that the left hand of God knows what the right hand is doing. The disadvantage, however, of this conflation of Christ and the Spirit is the loss of freedom, breathing space we might call it, which comes when the person of Christ impinges so closely upon our own personhood. In the same way that a theology of the Spirit detached from the person of Christ can reduce to a spirit that is immanent to our humanity, so a christology neglectful of the distinct person of the Spirit can also end up with a notion of holiness that is strangely rigid. As Edward Irving was at pains to describe in his somewhat unorthodox christology, the holiness of Jesus is predicated not on his being the eternal Word made flesh but on his own reception of the Spirit (McFarlane (1996: 164-183). Hence, our own progress in sanctification—becoming more like Jesus—is not simply a matter of correct doctrine, but rather a dynamic relationship to the Spirit.

## Part Two

I hope it might be clear from these depictions of trinitarian relationship that whilst it is entirely appropriate to imagine the Holy Spirit as the God who is close to us, who is in you, it is also equally appropriate and important to conceive of this as both immanence and transcendence, lest the notion of closeness, which is so much the signature of charismatic worship, becomes synonymous with cosiness. As Colin Gunton points out, any notion of the Holy Spirit as simply divine immanence, or to put it more colloquially as the touchy feely side of God, is quickly dispelled by the fact that he presents in the scriptures as transcendent Lord (Gunton:1998). Contemporary worship would gain a great deal from this, not simply by balancing the note of intimacy in its choruses with a necessary otherness but, more importantly, by the way it understands the very act of gathering together. For if, as we are suggesting, the ministry of the Spirit is about participation into the trinitarian life of God, then worship becomes less an exercise in calling the Spirit down, but more the Spirit gathering us up into the heavenly worship that exists before God, whether we will it or not. The implications for leading worship in a congregational setting are considerable. As J.B. Torrance points out, worship conceived in this trinitarian way is relieved of the burden of making something happen, either by the worship leader or the congregation, and becomes instead a celebration of the givenness of gospel realities (Torrance 1996: 18-25).

A proper respect for transcendentals might also prove vital at a pastoral and ethical level too. After all, is not any spirit that has come to dwell in the life of the believer but, as Paul points out on specific occasions, the *Holy Spirit*. This appellation surfaces at key moments in the Pauline letters where the apostle is aware of a certain moral complacency. And although it seems inconceivable that immorality could feature so clearly in Spirit communities, in reality it is not that difficult to conceive. I know myself as a pastor that Spirit is a notoriously slippery word, and can be invoked to justify or rationalise a whole raft of dubious, highly subjective decisions. And whilst one does not want to discourage the immediacy that is so much a characteristic of revivalist religion, the reminder that he is the Holy Spirit guards us against such complacency, and ensures that charismata, even if it not to be subservient to ethics is at least consistent with it.

And finally, even if the sure evidence of a life in the Spirit is the cry, 'Abba' Father, it is worth pausing for a moment to examine what that might represent, because as much as it clearly denotes personal intimacy with God, on further consideration it might not be the kind of intimacy we imagine. To be sure, there is something startling, if not unprecedented about Jesus's use of the term, as Jeremias and others have noted. Clearly it was surprising enough in its familial tone for the New Testament writers to retain the original Aramaic. But to translate 'Abba' as 'Daddy', as occurs in so many modern choruses, and in popular Christian parlance, is not only a poor equivalent, but indicative of the very problem we are trying to address, namely the tendency for charismatic experientialism to degenerate into familiarity if not sentimentality. 'Abba' first and foremost is Jesus' word, and only ours by adoption. Furthermore, its cultural resonance is more akin to the address that you might find in more traditional communities where a word like 'Abba', or its equivalent is used well into adult life as a term of both intimacy and respect (Smail 1988: 48).

To put the matter as succinctly as we can: the God who draws close to us by the person of the Holy Spirit, draws us inexorably, thereby, into union with the transcendent other. The immanence of God, which is made known to us by the Holy Spirit, is also the transcendence of God. In short, the Spirit is not given for us to indulge our senses, to baptise our subjectivity, but rather to draw us, willingly but ecstatically, into that which is truly numinous, namely the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We see this integration of the personal and the numinous most supremely in prayer. We do not know what to pray, Paul remarks, which is a truism if ever there was. But instead of presenting a series of techniques by which we might manipulate divine activity, or exhorting the saints to greater excitement, as if fervour in itself carries a certain efficacy, Paul presents instead a most sublime vision of prayer as something to do with the interces-

sion of the Spirit in the very heart of a believer: inarticulate groanings of those who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, which echo the groanings of a world dislocated from its centre, and which ultimately finds its source in the groanings of the Spirit himself (Romans 8:22-17). As Paul develops this, in what must surely rate as one of the most sublime theological cameos in the Pauline corpus, it becomes apparent that prayer for Paul is the answer to prayer—the way in fact in which our frail humanity is drawn into the matrix of trinitarian persons and purpose.

The irony of course is that prayer is the place where we feel most keenly our distance from God. Where else but in prayer do we feel our ineptitude for speech? And yet, as P.T. Forsyth was at pains to say, it is in prayer, and prayer not so much as an activity but as a bent of the soul, that the Spirit draws us into the dual soliloquy of the Father and the Son. In prayer we are drawn into what Forsyth calls the fundamental movement of the world, discovering that our fragmentary inarticulate prayers are nothing less than the Spirit praying for us and through us, in accordance with the will of God. Our prayers, Forsyth exhorts, ‘will be taken up into the intercession of the Spirit stripped of its dross, its inadequacy made good, and presented as prayer should be. That is praying in the Holy Ghost. Where should you carry your burden but to the Father where Christ took the burden of all the world? We tell God, the heart searcher our heavy thoughts to escape brooding over them (Forsyth 2002: 73). He goes on: ‘When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, <Thou knewest my path> (Psalm 67:3). So Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us and gives our broken prayer divine effect (Romans 8:26)’.

Why God should value such prayers is of course the great mystery of divine providence. It appears to us that God could quite adequately govern the world without us. Instead, by a kind of divine causality, he draws us by the Spirit to pray, and the prayer we offer is not mere receptivity, not mere pressure, but what Forsyth calls a filial reciprocity: our praying being a participation in the trinitarian life of God. As every lover knows, love loves to be told what it already knows. And so, in a wonderful irony, prayer becomes the place where, to echo Paul, we know, or rather are fully known. In prayer—even the most simple petition—we relinquish our inveterate autonomy and open ourselves up to the eternal intercession of the Christ who prays in us by the Spirit.

A further irony that is worth noting, incidentally, relates to the gift of tongues, because if Paul is referring to glossolalia in Romans 8 as the way the Spirit assists our prayer, as some Pentecostal scholars are bound to suggest, then we arrive at the surprising conclusion that praying in tongues – something that was clearly part of Paul’s armoury of prayer—is not a sign of spiritual prowess, as so often it appears, but of weakness. Indeed, it is pre-



cisely our weakness, our sense of not knowing, that becomes for Paul the crucible for spiritual depth and personal relations. Contrary to the often exaggerated claims of celebrity preachers, and a prosperity gospel that sees its goal as the avoidance of suffering, we find instead, within the pages of the New Testament, a more cruciform shape to the spiritual life, and one in which the laments of the soul are as determinative for the people of God as the shouts of praise. As Spurgeon himself noted, ‘when my school room is darkest, I see the most’.

### Part Three

As I bring these reflections to a close, I want to say something here about the nature of personal relations within the Christian community and the contribution of the Holy Spirit in that enterprise, for although it is typical to conceive the work of the Spirit in personal terms, this is never at the expense of what after all is the main tenor of the biblical revelation, namely the formation of a people. Indeed, this communitarian dimension of faith strikes right at the heart of contemporary spirituality, if by spirituality we mean the autonomous Christian nurturing some private spirituality. Rather, Christian formation, that is, the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit, can only take place within the oftentimes egregious conditions of church life.

After all, how is one supposed to cultivate the virtue of long-suffering, which of course is God’s own virtue, and one of the markers of Spirit life, without the realities of community life? The simple answer is that it cannot. The ability to suffer long can only form if there is an awkward other to whom we must exercise long-suffering towards. At which point, we might want to instruct our enthusiastic catechumens to a greater realism concerning our life together. The church is not the ideal community of unmediated intimacy, so desirous of dreamers and visionaries. That way in fact lies destruction, as Bonhoeffer so rightly adduced (Bonhoeffer 1992:15-16). Rather, the church is the actual community, and in fact the primary context by which fellowship with the Holy Spirit is created and sustained. In fact, it could be argued that the true miracle of Pentecost was not so much glossolalia or even *xenolalia*, for that matter, nor the healings that ensue as the narrative progresses—we are used to these as charismatic markers—but the formation of *koinonia* among the believers, of whom it was said they ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

If this is the trajectory of the narrative then it leaves us with the somewhat paradoxical suggestion that the Holy Spirit is most personal to us, closest to us, as we draw close to one another in gathered community, and that it is the practice of hospitality, more specifically, the welcome of one another around the table, that is the epitome of what we mean when we talk about spiritual encounter. Central to it is not our human predilection of

exclusion, to borrow a term from Miroslav Volf, but the gospel imperative of embrace, because not only does the trajectory of the Pentecostal narrative move inwards, towards deeper fellowship, but outwards towards a richer catholicity. This is a table in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28), but all are one in Christ Jesus, and only as such can we claim with an integrity that the Holy Spirit is present. In fact, a community that demarcates, as so often has been the case in the history of the church, is a community that destroys, invariably substituting grace which lies at the heart of the eucharistic community with some form of penitential piety, or some badge by which we indicate that we belong.

The irony in charismatic renewal is that the denominating has formed so often around some aspect of charismatic activity, be it speaking in tongues, prophecy, or words of knowledge. Hence, the rubric surrounding baptism of the Spirit has so often led to a two-tier community in which there are those who have knowledge and those who don't. More recently, in what church growth strategists call the homogenous principle, the denominating has clustered not so much around charismatic prowess, less so theological difference, but rather around missiological stratagems, such as forming communities around a particular strata of society, such as young professionals, students and such like.

In terms of the effectiveness of mission, there is a lot to commend these kind of single-issue communities. It would be uncharitable to dismiss them as bogus Christian communities and places where the Holy Spirit is not at work. However, as much as they are a success missiologically, ecclesiologicaly they raise all kinds of serious questions. For if it is the case that a hallmark of the Holy Spirit's presence in the church is diversity as well as unity, the many as well as the one, in what sense, therefore, can a church predicated on the homogenous principle, a principle which has become so central to church growth strategists, claim with any integrity to be a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. As much as it is missiologically expedient for churches to develop around a particular strata of society, or a particular style of music, in some ways it represents the triumph of consumerism over *koinonia*, sociology over ecclesiology. After all, it costs nothing to form a community of like-minded people; it takes the Holy Spirit, however, to draw together people across the spectrum and to form a depth of Christian community that goes beyond mere association, mere contractual religion, and towards something like covenant loyalty.

Such community life is never unmediated. The idea that we can form intimacy in raw encounter belongs to a romantic vision of life rather than a biblical vision. As much as the Spirit draws close to us in personal relationships, these same relationships can only be properly conceived through

Christ and the Spirit. Only as we attend to a larger vision of ourselves, one that is formed through the worshipping life of the church, through word and sacrament, do we truly find each other. There is no such thing as unmediated relationships, just as there is no such thing as unmediated faith. Only through Christ and the Spirit can we access the Father, and only through the revelation of Christ and the Spirit can personal relationships properly form in our life together.

And so it is we come full circle in our reflections. It is with legitimacy that we understand the Holy Spirit to move in the terrain of personal experience, the God who is close to us, or even in us. But as we come to explore biblical, theologically and even philosophically what this might look like, we discover that this can never be reduced to mere expressionism, for as much as the Spirit moves in the terrain of the personal, the purpose of the Spirit is that we might transcend our subjectivity and enter into terrain that is communitarian, trinitarian and future oriented. The Spirit is the God who is close to us, but he is also the God who disturbs us, out of the narrow places of our privacy and into the large vistas of the kingdom of God.

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