

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN CREATION

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These lectures focus on pneumatology, a topic of interest and importance to the whole church. As the end of the century approaches, we should consider the Spirit. Pope John Paul II writes: "The church's mind and heart turn to the Holy Spirit as this 20th century draws to a close and the third millennium since the coming of Jesus Christ into the world approaches and as we look towards the great jubilee with which the church will celebrate the event" ("On the Holy Spirit" (1986) p. 69). We also join Pope John XXIII in his prayer before the Second Vatican Council: "Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in our day as by a new Pentecost." Surely we all long to experience the presence of the Spirit more fully and trace her ways more adequately.¹

Of all doctrines, pneumatology is most promising of fresh discoveries, because it has suffered neglect relative to other topics of theology. It did not receive the attention given to Christology (for example) and several roles of the Spirit have been minimised. Theologically, there are truths to recover. More credit is due the Spirit than we have generally given. The topic suits me well as a pilgrim type of theologian, who likes to look for missing pieces, experiment with new paradigms, and search for fresh insights. Be assured (however) that my goal is not to supplant other insights but to augment the total supply and enrich our existing understanding.

It is not only in theology that the Spirit has suffered neglect of course. There has been suspicion of the Spirit and fear of renewal as something posing a threat to the ordered life of the church. But this has backfired and fostered today a widespread hunger to experience the Spirit in deeper ways. People long to get beyond formalism to reality and beyond objectivity to a vital experience of transforming love. This desire is embodied in forms of Pentecostalism, where new

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experiences of the Spirit also call for investigation. Both theologically and pastorally then, the time is ripe for tracking the Spirit better and making discoveries.

In these lectures, I focus on two doctrines from the standpoint of the Spirit—creation and redemption—and offer insights that arise from taking this approach. First, we consider the Spirit moving over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2) and (second) the Spirit bringing about the birth of Jesus for redemption (Luke 1:35). Methodologically, I find it productive of fresh insight to view doctrinal categories from different standpoints, as viewing a diamond from different directions reveals various facets of it. To speak more plainly, the canon of Scripture is abundantly rich and yields its treasures to experimentation and playful construction. Not only does Scripture root us in historic revelation, it also opens up a richness of interpretation which is practically inexhaustible. It establishes boundaries but also permits fresh discovery. On the one hand, the canon conserves truth and binds us but, on the other hand, it also sets out a field of play and surprises us with new insight. Is this not part of what Jesus meant: "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52).²

Before beginning with the Spirit and creation, let me risk a word about gender with reference to Spirit. Though not wanting to distract, it is a matter of importance. Although it is awkward to use feminine pronouns for Father and Son (for obvious reasons), one could easily do so in reference to Spirit, where the Hebrew term and many of the images are feminine. As an Aramaic speaker, Jesus himself would have used a grammatically feminine term. Most of us prefer to use a personal pronoun (he or she) rather than "it" which, though true to the Greek, is impersonal. Normally of course we use "he" along with tradition (Spirit in Latin is grammatically masculine), even though it is weakly supported by biblical usage. Might we not consider using "she"? Doing so would call attention to facets of the Spirit's work which appear feminine—Spirit as life giver, birthing, comforting, God's loving breath, etc. and could enrich religious experience by allowing us to access the Spirit's feminine side.

What drives my interest is the need today to find scripturally sound ways of using feminine language for God in the face of a predominately masculine practice. Speaking of Spirit in feminine ways might be a way for evangelicals who respect the Bible and trinitarian language to make a contribution to this debate. A number of worthy theologians make this suggestion in books on the Spirit: for example, Yves Congar, Jürgen Moltmann, Thomas Finger, John J. O'Donnell, and F. X. Durrwell. It is not a move free of controversy, however. Contemplating the politics of it, InterVarsity Press advised against it in *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Spirit* (1996). There must have been a calculation as to which group among its readers is larger—the group wanting to make moves toward greater inclusion or the group nervous about making concessions of any kind to feminism?

Returning to my theme, these lectures look to the Spirit as source of creation and new creation and enquire into points of significance. Spirit breathes life into our nostrils (creation) and sets us free from sin and death (redemption). Spirit is the source of creation, the outflow of divine ecstatic love, and Spirit is the source of redemption, being bond of love in God and the one uniting us to God. In creation, the Spirit forms

a human community to echo the relationality of the Trinity and in redemption, the Spirit restores broken community through the atoning journey of Jesus Christ. Let us consider what insights arise from considering the cosmic and salvific operations of the Spirit.

NEGLECT OF THE COSMIC DIMENSION

There has been neglect of the cosmic dimension of the Spirit's operations, I think. So much more attention has been given to the Spirit's work in redemption than the Spirit's work in creation. In Lederle's words, we have made the Spirit into "an ornament of piety." We have read the Bible for its spiritual truth and neglected the material dimensions of its message. We have not emphasized that the Spirit who gives us life in Christ Jesus first gave life to our mortal bodies. Neglect of the cosmic dimension does harm. It minimizes the divine indwelling of the whole world, it reduces salvation to half size by attending to disembodied souls, it fosters forgetfulness about God's concern for ecology, etc. Neglect of the cosmic functions of the Spirit has consequences—let us recover them.³

RECOVERY OF THE COSMIC DIMENSION

In some ways Scripture itself encourages this neglect by its own heavy concentration on the role of the Spirit in redemption. John can write: "For as yet there was no Spirit (or, the Spirit had not yet been given) because Jesus was not yet glorified." (John 7:39) He is referring (I suppose) to the Spirit of the end-times as promised by the prophets. But one could easily get the wrong impression, if they did not read the Bible more profoundly.

The Nicene Creed attests the cosmic dimension when it declares faith in the Spirit as "Lord and giver of life." It names the Spirit as the divine source and well spring of life in all its variety. Spirit is the power of creation and (therefore) the power of resurrection. Spirit produces both cosmic and eschatological fruits. Through the Spirit, the love of God is at work to bring to completion the program of creation and redemption. If the Father functions as the source of being and the Son bears the claim of God into the world, the Spirit's function is to complete the task of creation so that the community of the triune God comes into fullness. Spirit is the dynamic both by which God brings creation into existence and by which it reaches the goal of new creation. Stanley Grenz writes: "The eschatological creator Spirit is the source of life in creation. As he continually renews the natural world, he guarantees the eschatological renewal of the cosmos in the new heaven and new earth."⁴ I myself view creation as an overflow caused by the ecstasy of love in God which moves God to burst out beyond himself and make himself a gift to another.

There are biblical foundations for these ideas. Creation unfolded under the presidency of the Spirit, who hovered over the primeval waters and turned chaos into cosmos (Gen. 1:2). God breathed into Adam's nostrils so that he became a living person (Gen. 2:7). Elihu says: "The Spirit has made me and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." (Job 33:4) The Psalmist declares: "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:30). The Scripture says: "By

the word of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps. 33:6). Jesus in summary calls Spirit life giver (John 6:63). These and other texts indicate that the Spirit is encountered in creation itself—in its vitality, its radiance, its joy, and its love. While it is true that the Bible says less about the cosmic functions than it does about the redemptive functions, it is because the cosmic functions are presupposed. For the biblical writers as well as for us, hope for new creation is intelligible because of the gift of creation in the first place. Spirit is Lord and giver of life in both realms. The Spirit is concerned about creation in all its dimensions, not only with the esoteric (private), but also with the exoteric (public).⁵

SIGNIFICANCE OF RECOVERING THE COSMIC DIMENSION

What does recognising the cosmic dimension of the Spirit's work allow one to see? First, it allows us to have a broad and generous vision of the presence of God within creation, since the Spirit is the source of life in the whole world. It suggests that, wherever life is awakened, wherever reality reaches beyond itself, wherever there is beauty and truth, Spirit is there. It corrects the narrowness with which we tend to view Spirit activities and points us to her universal activity in the world and in cultures. It calls into question a narrow association of the Spirit only with salvation or only with the church or only with special revelation. It encourages us to be mindful of God's involvement with creation down to the last detail and to respect every place as a kind of hallowed ground. It leads us to expect to experience God in the whole of life and lends meaning and mystery to everything.

Seeing the Spirit as Lord and giver of life makes possible a positive vision of reality. It helps us focus on the divine mystery which enlivens, graces, and renews life, everywhere in every way. It breaks with our restricting the Spirit to exclusive zones and realms and signals the presence of God in the whole world. It invites us to celebrate the presence of One in whom we live and move and have our being, who is not at all far from us but very near, and who is present with his creatures in every situation. The Psalmist gets it right when he asks: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" (Ps. 139:7) Here is a vision of the love of God filling the universe and the Spirit-breath of God breathing love at the heart of the world.

One might say that this echoes ideas associated with liberal theologians (e.g., William Newton Clarke and William Adams Brown). Indeed it does but not at the price of sound theology. The fact that we can say such things from a trinitarian standpoint is an advance. It even helps us understand liberals better and supplies a bridge between us. Liberalism is a theology which focuses on divine immanence in the world and it likes to see continuity between God and nature. My point here is that recovering the cosmic functions of the Spirit helps us all do that.

I think Barth knew this and was a little anxious about the Spirit and experience on that account. For him, liberalism was not something he wanted to get too close to. But to his credit, he sensed at the end of his life that he had not handled the Spirit and experience very well. A similar anxiety exists among evangelicals who fear the loss of transcendence but seldom the loss of immanence. They too tend to be nervous about the Spirit, be reluctant to acknowledge prevenient grace, be afraid of the deeper

meanings of Scripture, be paranoid about any sort of process or evolution, etc. They need to get over their fears of liberalism and exercise their own authority in biblical interpretation.⁶

Second (and more briefly) the universal presence of the Spirit helps us understand the sacramental principle. It explains how features of nature can mediate the presence of God: how we meet God in the beauty of the sunset, in moments of joy and sadness, in times of hope and yearning, in periods of suffering and struggle. Recognizing the cosmic functions of the Spirit and natural sacramentality can especially help nonliturgical Protestants (like this Baptist) overcome spirit/matter dualism and come to an appreciation of the churchly sacraments. We meet the Spirit in the concreteness of the world and in embodied life. Spirit is not ghostly, numinous, lacking in concreteness. It loves sound and colour, ecstasy and play. A feature of Orthodoxy that strikes Protestants most is its sensory extravaganza, the sights and sounds of the sacred, based in a sacramental mentality, and love of the Spirit.

Third, these cosmic functions of the Spirit help us detect continuity in God's work of creation and redemption. Evangelicals have a strong tendency, not only to neglect the cosmic operations of the Spirit, but to divorce and detach them from the works of grace. They balk at thinking of them positively, as having any salvific significance, as if the God of love were author of redemption but not creation. They have a narrow perspective on God's saving operations in the world. They lose sight of the beneficial, preparatory role played by the Spirit by way of its cosmic functions. If being Christocentric means thinking that God only begins to be gracious when Christ arrived, then one can be too Christocentric.⁷

God's cosmic breath establishes continuity between creation and redemption. It makes the triune God ground of our being as well as our new being and roots creation itself in God's grace. The world came to exist because of God's desire to communicate love, not because he wanted to put Adam on trial in a covenant of works. By the Spirit, God fills the universe with his loving self and where sin abounds grace abounds all the more (Rom. 5:20). The Spirit is the source both of our transient life and of our eternal life. Creation is oriented toward a goal which will surpass its origins and is being led by the Spirit to its consummation. She is engaged, not only in preserving and sustaining the world, but in preparing it for new creation. When Wesleyans speak of prevenient grace, are they not referring to the Spirit at work in the whole world? That the grace revealed in Jesus is the grace which has informed the Spirit's work from the beginning? The Spirit of life is present before the coming of Christ and outside Christian communities.

Evangelicals often experience difficulty acknowledging a gracious work of God before or apart from Christ and (therefore) envisage little opportunity of salvation for most of the race despite God's declared love for it. They take a restricted interpretation of the formula: "Outside the church, there is no salvation." They take it to mean: "Outside the church, there is no grace." They not only say that God is not obligated to save sinners (which is true) but add that God does nothing to help those outside the church (which is false). It may be that this harshness of outlook results (in part) from overlooking the work of the Spirit and hence the grace of God in the cosmic realm.

In this connection, I prefer the Nicene Creed without the filioque clause. I fear that it may have contributed to a diminished appreciation of the cosmic dimension of the Spirit's work. For it is easily taken to mean that the work of the Spirit is limited to the realm of the Son. It can be read to be saying that there is no holy presence and no divine love where Jesus is not yet known. It may have contributed to a loss of the sense that the whole world is a sphere of God's operations and to a loss of a universal vision of grace.

Maintaining continuity is not easy for the Spirit. Liberalism emphasized a gradual triumph of good and missed the darker truth that there is a deep bias toward evil resulting from prideful rebellion against God, which has resulted in the world falling under the power of sin. The world is not easy to restore, even for the Spirit, because there are incredible powers of darkness to be overcome. To bring creation to consummation, Spirit suffers with it in its bondage to decay and its tendency to close in upon itself. Nevertheless, God does not abandon the creature and the Spirit persists in healing broken relationships, keeping the future open, and fostering hope. In spite of our sin, God's love does not let us go.

Fourth, the cosmic operations of the Spirit may shed light upon developments in the natural world and help us relate theologically to issues of origins. It can help us understand how God relates to the world we learn about from modern science, a world of irreducible complexities.⁸ Spirit needs to be brought into discussions about origins, though neither evolutionists nor creationists want to do so as far as I can tell. The former are allergic to any teleology and the latter satisfied with divine interventions at the beginning and maybe sporadically afterward but do not envisage a steady guiding action over billions of years. Even the creationists do not see nature as a sphere of Spirit activity, as superintending the long process of God's continuing creation. This is one reason for the tragedy that theology and science scarcely speak to one another nowadays. Apologetics is recovering teleology; when will theology recover Spirit guided process?⁹ Incidentally, it would also throw a bridge over to process theology by its conceiving of a gentle divine persuasion operating in the world but it would do so on a solidly trinitarian basis.

One could have a Spirit paradigm of creation based in the cosmic dimensions of its operations. It would give a welcome option for those uncomfortable with creationism and evolutionism, a concept of continuing creation by the Spirit's power. We could envision the power of God immanently at work throughout the cosmos and the divine life ceaselessly energizing the world. We could speak of an inner dynamism in nature over aeons of time, of an inspiration that lifts the creature up beyond its natural limits. We need to take a leaf out of Pannenberg's book who speaks of the Spirit as a field of power that pervades the universe, as the principle to which all creatures owe their life, movement, and activity, and as a power working creatively in the processes of natural events.¹⁰

Fifth, the cosmic dimension also gives a sense of the purposes of God in creation. If the goal of the creation is to echo trinitarian relationships on the creaturely level, it would be natural for the Spirit, who is knowledgeable of these relationships, to be summoning forth a human creature capable of implementing them. The divine Spirit calls

forth the human spirit, a spirit capable of receiving and returning love, capable of personal give-and-take relationships with God. Only a divine Spirit would be capable of making this happen. What an amazing contrivance in the natural order was required to produce such a creature. It was possible because the Spirit knows all there is to know about relationality and because the Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. Bringing forth the human spirit was surely the Spirit's finest (if risky) achievement. It witnesses to what the universe is all about.

Sixth, light may be shed upon ecology from the standpoint of the Spirit and its cosmic operations. In view of its work within nature, Spirit is the supreme ecologist, who formed the ecosystem which we inhabit, human and nonhuman. Therefore, ecology is of concern to her, as it ought to be to us. Spirit calls us to an ecological consciousness. The world is not just something to be mastered and subdued but something to be respected and cared for. We depend for our existence on the natural order and are part of it. It is the Spirit's project and our very home and not just an object to be exploited. Spirit calls us to a finer appreciation of God's world and to a respect for the ecology which she has shaped and in which we exist.¹¹

The Spirit groans along with creation because it has become entangled in a web of exploitation and abuse. Paul describes nature as groaning like a woman in childbirth, as longing for liberation from death and decay (Rom. 8:21). Knowing this is a further summons to Christian involvement. The Spirit not only formed and shaped our habitable space but is grieved at the violence toward what has been created. The destruction of nature is hurtful to the God who formed it. The Spirit grieves at the despoliation of nature and keeps our hopes alive in the midst of suffering. She calls us to live in solidarity with a groaning and expectant creation.

Our hope is that the Spirit will redeem ecology in the new creation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is proleptic, not only of our resurrection, but of the liberation of creation itself from its bondage to decay. We await the coming of God and the transformation of all things in God's kingdom of glory. We await the overcoming of futility and the redemption of the universe.¹²

CONCLUSION

Approaching the doctrine of creation from the standpoint of the Spirit is fruitful. Overcoming neglect allows truths to surface and receive better emphasis. Spirit is the serendipitous power of creativity, which flings out the world in an ecstasy of love and stimulates within it an echo of divine relationality. In the next lecture we turn to the redemptive work of the Spirit, who unites us to God through the participatory journey of Jesus Christ and brings us into the house of love.

Notes

1. On John Paul's encyclical, see Clark H. Pinnock, "The Great Jubilee," *God and Man: Perspectives on Christianity in the 20th Century*, edited by Michael Bauman (Hillsdale College Press, 1995), pp. 91-101.

2. On the issue of canon and its contribution to both continuity and change, Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitation: Tradition and Theological Construction* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994).

3. The phrase "an ornament of piety" belongs to H. I. Lederle, *Treasures Old and New: Interpretations of "Spirit Baptism" in the Charismatic Renewal Movement* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 238. Concerning ecology, indifference would be challenged by a better reading of the biblical message: H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) and Robert B. Fowler, *The Greening of Protestant Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
4. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 492.
5. These issues are handled by Woffhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 133-43 and *Systematic Theology II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 7; and by Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God "The Cosmic Spirit"* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 98-103.
6. Regarding Barth's struggle, Peter J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), pp. v-viii. On the liberal vision, Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 209-13. For a stunted vision of the Spirit by an evangelical, W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, fifth edition, 1964).
7. A book of mine which addresses this problem: *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
8. Evolutionists like Dawkins are more and more confronted by complexities which confound their neat materialistic picture: compare Michael Behe, *Darwin's Blotch Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
9. Apologetically, it is evident to many observers that the universe is very finely tuned and remarkable for its ability to produce more by way of complexity than one might have expected from a purely natural order: Richard L. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, revised edition, 1991), appendix B.
10. Woffhart Pannenberg, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 43-52, *Systematic Theology II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 76-136. Jürgen Moltmann has similar ideas: *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 206-14.
11. Compare the references made in note three to H. Paul Santmire and Robert Booth Fowler and their concern for a better ecological theology.
12. Roger E. Olson, "Resurrection, Cosmic Liberation, and Christian Earth Keeping" *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993), pp. 123-32.