

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY II

THEOLOGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

EMBRACING THE FEMININE SIDE OF GOD

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Introduction

Who, or what, is the Holy Spirit? And what exactly does the Holy Spirit do? This has long been a topic of debate in the church of God. In order to delve into this topic, we must start with the basics. In Hebrew the word for spirit is ruach, meaning “breath” or “wind”. The Old Testament is full of references to the Spirit of God, working and moving among humanity and falling “upon” them. In Greek the word is pneuma, which also means “breath”, and the

adjective “holy” is added. (Thorsen 215). The New Testament reveals the Holy Spirit as a member of the Godhead, and gives more clarity on the work he accomplishes. John the Baptist claims that the messiah will baptize people “with the Holy Spirit and fire”. (Matt 3:11).

The Person of the Holy Spirit

In studying the New Testament we find the Holy Spirit is actually not a “the” at all, or an “it” but a person! A member of the Trinity, our holy God three-in-one.

The Holy Spirit in Scripture

In the Old Testament the Spirit of God is revealed as working in and through people, often enabling them for special tasks or roles. Such as Moses, “At the very beginning of Israelite religion we find the charisma, the special individual endowment of a person; and to such an extent is the whole structure based upon it, that without it it would be inconceivable.” (Dunning 389). In the New Testament the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove at his baptism, then Jesus was filled with the Spirit who anointed, guided, and empowered him. (Thorsen 116). Jesus reveals the Holy Spirit to his followers as the “advocate” which means helper, counselor or comforter in John 14. The Holy Spirit is given many other names or roles but notably Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17), Spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15) and Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11). (Thorsen 116).

In Greek and Hebrew the Holy Spirit is described using feminine language. Thorsen argues that avoiding gender terms will reduce the Holy Spirit to an “impersonal and immanent religious force”. However, since both Jesus and the Father are described using male terms, we know that “God ultimately transcends the distinction between male and female” (in other words, God transcends gender), and Scripture primarily uses female language to describe the Holy Spirit I feel that it would be just as fair, perhaps more reasonable, to just assign female terms to the Holy Spirit. (Thorsen 217). It brings balance to our predominantly male language referring to God which doesn’t properly reflect the gender neutral nature of God, the fact that both male and female are made in God’s image, and the diversity of the people of God. Women have little to no connection to Godly femininity because in English we avoid feminine language surrounding God, even though the ancient

scriptures did not. It was more rare, but that can easily be explained considering that the Scriptures were written in, by and for ancient Patriarchal societies. Their way of relating to authority was through male imagery. In light of this, it's actually more surprising that God is described using feminine language in the Scriptures at all. Perhaps, something we should take more note of. Nazarene pastor and author Tara Beth says, "While a nurturing mother is the furthest thing from our minds when we think of 'leader', Scripture is full of rich imagery describing God with maternal and nurturing traits." She goes on to say, "While culture might paint maternal traits as something to be removed from leadership, Scripture flips this upside down and shows them as a strength." (Leach 6, 8). There's nothing strange or shameful about using female language to describe God. Scripture does it, so we can do it. (Note: I'm going to be using female pronouns to describe the Holy Spirit from this point on).

The Holy Spirit in Creeds

The early churches attempted to nail down some of the characteristics of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in creeds for sake of Christian orthodoxy. For example the Nicene creed, which affirms belief in the Holy Spirit, the Lordship of, the creative life-giving work of, as well as her unity with the Father and Son in worship and glory, and her work in prophecy. (Thorsen 217), The Apostles creed became more popular in Christian usage because it is shorter, however it merely affirms belief in the Holy Spirit. "No doubt, this reflects a diminished amount of attention given to both the person and work of the Holy Spirit!" (Thorsen 219).

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Who the Holy Spirit is only answers part of the question regarding this most elusive of doctrines. What exactly is the role of the Holy Spirit, in other words what does she do? There is plenty of debate within this part of the discussion, but starting with Scripture, and working from a Nazarene perspective, we can begin to uncover some of the mystery. It's worth acknowledging that there is certainly a lot about the Holy Spirit Christians around the world disagree on, especially if you begin to dive into spiritual gifts, but there are plenty of tenets within the faith where we can agree.

Salvation

The Holy Spirit plays an active role in our salvation. The Scripture shows that she works in at least four ways for our salvation.

Awakening (which leads to repentance and faith); (2) Witness/Assurance; (3) Regeneration; and (4) Sanctification. (Dunning 418, 429, 436, 442).

The Holy Spirit draws us to repentance by awakening in us a desire for God and an awareness of our sin and need for a savior. She testifies within us, to our spirit, the assurance of our salvation and has sealed us for redemption. (Rom 8:16, Acts 2:33, 15:8, Heb 2:4, Eph 4:30, 1 Cor 12:3). Her resurrecting power, which raised Christ from the dead, creates new life in us, and she continues the work of salvation through ongoing sanctification. (Rom 8:11, 15:16, Titus 3:5,). She also equips the saints for the work of the gospel with boldness, power and spiritual gifts distributed according to her will. (Acts 1:8, 4:31, 20:28, 1 Cor 12:4-11). It is good to keep in mind that the Holy Spirit is indeed active in salvation and the church of Christ, as our lecturer asserts “the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is an integral part of our understanding of salvation and of the church.” (Austin, Lecture 1, emphasis added).

The Christian Life

The Spirit of God is active in our everyday Christian life. The Scripture tells us that she helps us understand God’s word, produces fruit in us (the fruit of the Spirit -namely, love), convicts us of sin, and equips us for ministry with Spiritual gifts. “Intimate and ever present, the Holy Spirit serves to comfort, encourage and serve as our advocate, interceding on our behalf, guiding us to truth, and empowering our lives with divine grace.” (Thorsen 232). It is important to make a distinction here between the gift of the Holy Spirit (salvation or ‘grace’) and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (the various gifts, or Greek charismata, distributed by the Spirit to empower believers for the “common” good -1 Cor 12:7, 11).

Conclusion

There is so much more that could be said. Of course, we can never fully understand the vastness and complexity of God, instead we can humbly join with the writer of Job in saying, “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (Job 26:14).

In his book *Forgotten God*, Francis Chan says, “There is a big gap between what we read in Scripture about the Holy Spirit and how most believers and churches operate today.” (Chan 16). I think the most important thing to conclude with is the assertion that we need to make sure we acknowledge the Spirit of God in our midst, that we honor and worship her, and that we yield to her power and moving. This is the only way to reach the world with the gospel, as she is ultimately the one that does the work. This is the only way to live as a Christian, as the Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to do so. As pastors we need to be especially careful to remember the Holy Spirit, acknowledge her and invite her to move in our churches and services, yielding our own agendas.

In closing, Chan powerfully goes on to say, “I believe that this missing something is actually a missing Someone—namely, the Holy Spirit. Without Him, people operate in their own strength and only accomplish human-size results. The world is not moved by love or actions that are of human creation. And the church is not empowered to live differently from any other gathering of people without the Holy Spirit. But when believers live in the power of the Spirit, the evidence in their lives is supernatural. The church cannot help but be different, and the world cannot help but notice.” (Chan 16-17).

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