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Rôle of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper

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Introduction

Although liturgiologists have paid significant attention to the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Supper of our Lord¹ dogmatic works seem to have generally failed to give this matter sufficient attention.² It is the opinion of the present writer that this situation represents a serious devaluation of the rôle of the Spirit in the Supper; a situation that can only be redressed by understanding the Spirit as the positive content of the sacrament. It is the aim of this paper to establish that the Lord's Supper owes its efficacy entirely to the action of the Holy Spirit, as he sets about, in a particular way within his normal sanctifying work, to conform the saints to the image of Christ.

The Holy Spirit and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament

There appears to be no explicit link made between the Lord's Supper and the Holy Spirit's work in the New Testament. The one possible reference is 1 Cor. 12:13: 'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' (R.S.V.) The last part of this verse 'made to drink of one Spirit' (hēn pneuma epotisthēmen), is seen by some commentators to refer to a reception of the Spirit through the Church's common meal. The background for this interpretation is the manner in which in 1 Cor. 10:1–4 the privilege and disobedience of ancient Israel in the wilderness are described using the terminology of the sacraments of the New Testament.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the expressions (vv. 3-4) 'ate the same spiritual food' (pneumatikon brōma) and 'drank the same spiritual drink' (pneumatikon pōma) are borrowed from the terminology of the Lord's Supper current at that time in Corinth.³ Paul's emphasis upon the typological significance of the wilderness experience (v. 11) would be all the clearer to the Corinthians if this were so. And it serves him as the basis ('therefore, my beloved', v. 14) for his admonition on the irreconcilability of heathen sacrificial meals with the practice of the Lord's Supper.⁴ There is not enough in the expressions themselves however to attribute to Paul a eucharistic pneumatology, for pneumatikos can refer simply to something which comes from the sphere of God and has divine power.⁵ and, at any

rate, it is not Paul's intention here to provide this sort of information. It must be established therefore that a reference to the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 12:13b naturally follows that to baptism in v. 13a. but there are good reasons to think otherwise. First, the agrist tense of epotisthemen fits much better with a once for all event than with the repeated practice of the Supper.⁶ This event would seem to be baptism, for not only would this be a strengthening of the first part of the verse but it admirably fits a context in which the apostle is opposing tendencies of elitist enthusiasm. Any appeal at this point to 2 Cor. 3:17, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit', is misplaced. The context of this passage is not eucharistic, so that even if the presence of Jesus is equated with the Holy Spirit we have no additional reason to believe that 1 Cor. 12:13b refers to the Lord's Supper. Besides, it seems better to understand 2 Cor. 3 in terms of its Old Testament background in the book of Exodus, where the action referred to cannot be Christ's but Yahweh's.8 It appears then that the New Testament material on the Lord's Supper is of no assistance in helping us to understand the relevant rôle of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and the Presence of Jesus

Less directly, however, there is a line of thought present in the Pauline epistles which links the presence of Jesus to the Holy Spirit in a way which makes clear his rôle in the Supper.

The apostle frequently uses phrases of identical form to describe the relation of the Christian to Christ and the Spirit. The prolific 'in Christ' formula is paralleled by 'in the Spirit' (Rom. 8:9; 9:1; 1 Cor. 12:3, Eph. 2:18), 'Christ in you' (Rom. 8:10; Col. 1:27), by 'the Holy Spirit in you' (1 Cor. 6:19). In the space of three verses we read 'Spirit', 'Spirit of God', 'Spirit of Christ', 'Christ', used as though they were functionally identical (Rom. 8:9-12; cf. Phil. 1:19, 26). To put off the works of darkness means to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 13:13-14), to be free of the works of the flesh (much the same list of sins) is to exhibit 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:19ff.). Paul describes the Christian life sometimes in terms of a relationship with Christ (for example, Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:19ff.; Gal. 2:20f.; 4:6f.; Phil. 2:21; 3:8ff.) and sometimes as a relationship with the Spirit (for example, Rom. 8:11, 14ff.; 1 Cor. 2:4, 12f.; 2 Cor. 3:6, 5:5; Gal. 4:6).

There have been many attempts to explain this terminology, most however lack sufficient clarity to be useful: 'The Spirit is the method of Christ's presence's 'pneuma expresses the mode in which the exalted Lord is present and there is identification with him.'10 'The dynamic of the relationship between Spirit and Jesus can be expressed epigrammatically thus: as the Spirit was the "divinity" of Jesus, so Jesus became the personality of the Spirit'. 'Paul is describing the same basic experience, but in the one case he is

approaching it from the standpoint of Christ and in the other case from that of the Spirit through whom Christ is made present to the believer.'12 The real problem in trying to make sense of the New Testament data lies in the fact that at this point it is fundamentally an unreflective expression of an experience; not to give adequate attention to this fact can only lead to dogmatic confusion.¹³ It is an invalid step to move from experiential identity to ontological identification, and it is illicit to suppose that Paul took this step. The relationship between Christ, who for the believer in his experience is somehow identified with the Spirit of God, while maintaining his own identity¹⁴ — and this Spirit with us, can only be established by wider theological reflection than that which is afforded by consideration of the primary material at hand. I suggest that the key to this matter is to take the ascension seriously.

The 'Real Absence' of Jesus

The writers of the New Testament certainly believed that after his death Christ appeared to his disciples on a number of occasions in a bodily form that possessed properties both like and unlike those he had previously. According to the accounts, Jesus could be seen (for example Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:39-40), heard and touched (Matt. 28:11; Luke 24:39; John 20:27), that is he was clearly recognizable as the Jesus they had known before. 15 On the other hand Jesus is described as having super-natural properties — he is able to pass through a sealed tomb (Matt. 28:2, 6) and closed doors (John 20:19, 26), to appear and disappear in an instant (Luke 24:31, 36). Within the passages themselves the two sets of properties, the elements of continuity and discontinuity, do not seem to have been regarded as contradictory. Clearly, the possession of the latter abilities means the apostolic authors considered Jesus' body to be more than physical, but the notion that Jesus is no longer corporeal at all, but 'spirit' only. is explicitly rejected. 'A spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have' (Luke 24:39); ' he took it (fish) and ate before them' (Luke 24:42) that is to say, as a sign of his bodily reality. It is sometimes maintained that the evidence indicates that Jesus' post-Easter body 'was no longer bound by material or spatial limitations,' in an 'essential state of invisibility and therefore immateriality' and 'unfettered by the world of space and time.'16 These conclusions however. go beyond the data; there is nothing in it to suggest that Jesus could occupy more than one space-time locus at once. The risen Christ was no longer bound by material or spatial limitations in that he was able to move across them at will, but this is not the same as being outside them.¹⁷ And once we begin to conceive of the risen Christ as by nature invisible then his appearances to his disciples take on the status of visionary experiences, or at least docetic episodes, because his true reality cannot be known to sensory man. It is simpler, and truer to the evidence, to regard the various resurrection appearances as examples of 'transverse materialization' within a space-time continuum which Jesus shared with his disciples. That is, the risen Lord possessed the power to disembody and re-embody himself across locations in space; such an ability can account for all the phenomena associated with his resurrection. The major point I am insisting upon here is that we have no reason to think that the resurrected Christ could be in more than one place at once, flexibility vis-à-vis space-time is not the same as independence of space-time.

Have we any reason to believe that this changed after the ascension? The way the ascension is described in Acts 1:9-11 suggests a physical separation between Jesus and his disciples.¹⁹ After the ascension his appearances to Paul, Stephen and John are consistently said to be 'from heaven' (Acts 7:55-56; 9:3; 22:6; 26:13, 19) or possess a heavenly setting (Rev. 1:12-18). There has now entered into the picture a new element of separation between Jesus and his people; he is no longer with them bodily but is in his heavenly home; cf. 1 Cor. 15:48; Phil. 3:20-21. This impression is complemented by the repeated designation that Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Acts 5:3; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; 2:6; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:4). Even when due account is taken of the imperial implications of this imagery (Christ's sovereign authority) the impression remains that the New Testament writers actually thought of Christ as located in a place in spatio-temporal continuity with the world of their own experience.²⁰ Thus the ascension seems to mark the 'real absence' of a space-time limited Christ from the earth.

This conclusion is unacceptable to those theologians who wish to maintain a certain type of real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the presence of Christ according to his humanity. This view is strongly associated with Luther.

It is solely a question of revelation. He is everywhere, but you will not be able to grasp him unless he offers himself to you, and himself interprets the bread to you through the Word. You will not eat him unless he wishes to reveal himself to you.²¹

Luther saw the ubiquity of Christ's human nature as resulting from the incarnation, there being a full communication of the divine properties to it. Since it is possible to isolate the various properties only in thought, for in reality they all belong essentially to the being of God, we are left with an eternally incarnate Christ not only omnipresent but omniscient and so on. However, this is not only not the Christ of the Gospels, but also a manifest contradiction; 'the finite cannot receive the infinite.' Whilst this metaphysical point is taken by some to be true of the incarnate Christ it is rejected for the glorified Lord.

After the resurrection of Jesus the humanity of Jesus was veiled by His divinity, as previously His humanity had veiled His divinity... a new body, assumed into the glory of his Godhead... it cannot be restricted by place or size... This body belongs to the mystery, and the presence of Christ's body at the eucharist should be understood in accordance with the mystery of the Lord's resurrection appearances to His disciples.²²

There are several problems here. First, there is nothing in the New Testament evidence which demands such a radical conclusion. Jesus simply did not appear to more than one group of disciples at once after his resurrection (or ascension)! Secondly, the language used is reminiscent of monophysitism.²³ It is difficult to see in what meaningful way manhood could be predicated of a ubiquitous Christ. Creaturehood, and with it manhood, is surely defined by consignment within a space-time matrix in ontological dependency upon God.²⁴

The sort of change envisaged above amounts to nothing less than a complete divinization of Christ's humanity and so an end to his rôle as mediator for us before God. But, according to the New Testament, the *man* Christ Jesus retains this very rôle (1 Tim. 2:5). If the proponents of the ubiquity of Christ were consistent with their own position they would have to deny a body to Christ altogether for the distinguishing character of a body, that is, any body, not just a human body, is that it resides in a space.²⁵ It does not make sense to speak of a 'body' being everywhere. Ubiquitarianism seems to be caught in a dilemma, it cannot insist on the presence of Christ at many eucharists at once if it also wishes to maintain this presence as corporeal.

It remains now to specify the relationship between Christ, the Christian and the Holy Spirit in the action of the Lord's Supper.

The Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper

Although the Lord Jesus is circumscribed in space he is not limited in authority, but because of his redeeming work has become 'Lord' of the Spirit. It is he who sends the Spirit upon the people of God from his position of authority in heaven (John 15:26; 16:7 Acts 2:33). Thus it remains true that the crucified and glorified body of Christ 'provides the centre in which all the radial strands of sacramental doctrine meet.'26 Yet the body of Jesus is the pivot for the Spirit's sacramental operation, not its site, for this body remains in heaven. It can only be concluded then that the entire energy of the sacrament lies in the action of the Spirit.²⁷

The experiential identity remarked upon earlier between Christ and the Spirit is not a casual one. With respect to moral attributes Jesus and the Holy Spirit are identical, even if not the same. That is, in matters such as love and holiness we have no means of distinguishing between Christ and the Spirit: the love of Christ and the love of

the Spirit are qualitatively identical even if their subjects are not to be identified ontologically. As the Spirit comes to us he comes to us bearing, as the Spirit of God, the self-same moral character as Christ, the express image of God. It is therefore true to say that the Spirit is 'Christ to us',²⁸ providing we recognize this as a relational and not an ontological statement. Hence we may accurately confess that Christ is present to us after a 'spiritual manner' viz. by the Spirit.²⁹ Looked at in this way the Holy Communion is as much the sacrament of the Spirit as of the Lord, the former proximately, for it is he who is in direct relationship with us, the latter ultimately, since the Supper is his institution and he sends the Spirit. This account considerably simplifies our understanding of what happens at the Lord's Supper.

In the first place any attempt to understand the precise mode of the working of grace in the Supper, viz. the Spirit's action, is excluded, for this is just as incomprehensible as any of the works of God. It is pointless to speculate on the 'How?' of the Supper. This aside we are placed in a position of greater confidence to consider the Spirit's ends in the sacrament. As the Holy Spirit, his goal is to sanctify, and it seems better to say that he achieves this by the Supper rather than through it, for the grace he gives is not contained in the (unchanged) elements but is conveyed because of them.

It is the rôle of the Spirit to so concur with the sign, in terms of his operation in the believer, that the sign becomes associated with the thing signified, the death of Christ. The occasion of the presentation of the sign to us is one in which the Spirit is able to stir up a lively faith by which we understand ourselves to be in contemporaneous experience with the reconciling love of the cross, so that we are through faith drawn into its reconciling action. In fact, the believer is in contact with that power by which Jesus was able to offer himself up on his behalf, 'The eternal Spirit' (Heb. 9:14). The Spirit reproduces in the Christian the same character he produced in Christ, and this he does in a particular way within his normal sanctifying ministration by stimulating a realization of the significance of the central events of salvation.

It would be misleading to designate this view 'subjective', for the emphasis lies not upon the believer's power of recall, but upon the initiative of God the Spirit. The description 'personalist' is preferable since by denying any substantial change in the elements the entire emphasis is placed on the work of the personal Spirit in the human person. It may even be claimed that this is the ultimate in objectivity, for nothing can surpass the 'givenness' of the immutable God in his will to save. Likewise, the faith which makes contact with this grace which is the Spirit is itself his gift. The faith-grace continuum is rooted at both ends in the work of the faithful Spirit, thus both a stable and dynamic understanding of what happens in the Supper is present.

Finally, it is helpful to note the advantages of this pneumatological

model of the eucharist over Calvin's presentation, to which it has many affinities.³⁰ Calvin correctly saw that the body of Christ is bounded and contained in heaven, and that the communion of his body and blood must be effected by the power of the Holy Spirit. However, Calvin went on to speculate about the believer — Holy Spirit — ascended Christ link in a manner which I have avoided. He seemed to want to speak of the Holy Spirit not only as the agent of Christ in sanctification through the Supper but also as a kind of medium or bridge by which the believer and Christ are joined. 'The Spirit truly unites things separated by space . . . the Spirit of Christ is a kind of channel by which everything which Christ has and is, is derived to us . . . '; 'Christ in His body is far from us, but by His Spirit he dwells within us and draws us upwards to Himself in the heavens, in such wise as He pours out upon us the life-giving power of His flesh': 'I can see nothing absurd in saying that we are truly and really receiving the flesh and blood of Christ . . . in the hidden working of his Spirit;' 'The Spirit of God is the bond of participation.'31 Calvin's language about the believer being taken up to Christ and Christ coming down to the believer is more than metaphorical; he would seem to mean by it, and by participation in the body and blood of Christ, a real fellowship between the individual Christian on earth and Christ in heaven through the Supper and by the Spirit. If what I have argued previously is correct such fellowship is impossible and the accusation that Calvin's language is 'obscure and unintelligible' is vindicated.32

Calvin seems to be confusing the fellowship which the believer may have with the *Logos asarkos*, the (omnipresent) Word in his operation apart from the hypostatic union with the human nature of Christ, with the possibility of fellowship with the *Logos ensarkos*, the divine-human Person who is Jesus Christ and who is in heaven. If this difference is taken seriously, and it would seem to be compatible with Calvin's own Christology: a relationship occurs between pairs only, on the one hand between Christ and the Spirit, on the other between the believer and the Spirit.³³ So we return again to take with full seriousness the 'real absence' of Jesus from his people 'between the times' marked off by the ascension.

Conclusion

The preceding argument has implications for theology, liturgical practice and sacramental reception that can only be briefly touched upon here.

It may seem to many that the position argued for, viz. to make the Spirit the centre of the Lord's Supper, is in contradiction to the thrust both of the New Testament and of the history of systematic theology, both Catholic and Reformed. I believe that when due account is given to the experiential base of the relevant biblical utterances and

when these are considered in terms of the wider and normal work of the Spirit as expressed in the New Testament the former difficulty is met. As to the observation that theology has hesitated to see unreservedly the Spirit as the positive content of the sacrament this may be ascribed to various unfortunate historical developments,³⁴ the long history of polemics over the sacraments (with associated theological reactions), and an unfortunate tendency to come to general Christology through eucharistic theology. Although 'Occam's razor' may not always be a useful tool in Christian theology the position outlined above is much simpler and straightforward (and I think is expressly more dynamic) than most of the alternatives.

It is this dynamic element, in terms of being 'filled with the Spirit' because of the sacrament, that should perhaps have a more prominent place in liturgies.³⁵ This, however, is not a necessary implication of this paper, given that it is the will of the Spirit not to focus on himself but to emphasize the work of the Son to the glory of the Father.

Finally, it is my experience that many believers are confused about what happens at the Holy Communion. To teach that the Spirit is the power and presence of the Sacrament is to place the Lord's Supper within a framework most are familiar with, that is to say that what happens at the eucharist is not qualitatively different from the day to day walk 'in the Spirit', to which the scriptures exhort us. Thus I consider the pneumatological model sketched above has advantages at many levels.

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NOTES

- 1 For example, J. H. McKenna, Eucharist and Holy Spirit (Grand Wakering: Mayhew-McCrimmon) 1975.
- 2 Louis Berkhof, for instance, refers to the Holy Spirit four times only, in his chapter on the Lord's Supper.
 - Systematic Theology (London: Banner of Truth; 1974) pp. 651, 654.
- 3 Certainly this is how the expressions would have been taken in the community addressed by the Didache; 10:3 pneumatikên trophên kai poton ('spiritual food and drink') refers to the eucharistic gifts just received.
- 4 H. Ridderbos, Paul (tr. J. deWitt, London: S.P.C.K. 1977) p. 419. Cf. L. Goppelt, poma, in T.D.N.T., 6, pp. 145-148 and H. Conzelmann, I Corinthians (tr. J. W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) pp. 212, 217.
- 5 Cf. the 'spiritual house' in 1 Pet. 2:5.
- 6 C. K. Barrett, I Corinthians (London, Black, 1968) p. 289.
- 7 The repeated references to 'all' in this chapter (vv. 6, 11, 13, 26, 29, 30) is strong evidence for this. And on the matter of an internal elitist structure at Corinth, see D. Georgi, *1 Corinthians (I.B.D.* Supplementary Volume, Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) pp. 180–183.

- 8 J. G. Davies, *The Spirit, the Church, and the Sacraments* (London: Faith, 1954) p. 38, *contra* Ridderbos, *Paul*, p. 420.
- 9 R. C. Moberly, Atonement and Personality (London: John Murray, 1913) p. 272.
- 10 R. Grundmann, dunami, dunamis, in T.D.N.T. 2, pp. 284-317; p. 311.
- 11 J. D. G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit (London: S.C.M. Press, 1975) p. 325.
- 12 C. Brown, Might, in The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976) vol. 2, p. 605.
- 13 James Dunn is one who seems to appreciate this in his more recent criticisms of reductive Christologies. 'Rediscovering the Spirit', Exp.T., 94, 1, 1982, pp. 9-18.
- 14 E.g. Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 Tim. 2:5.
- 15 Where the contrary appears to be the case, for example Luke 24:13, it is clear that such opacity is due to the purposeful action of God upon the vision of the disciples rather than any change in the appearance of Jesus. 'their eyes were kept from recognising him' (Luke 24:16).
- 16 M. J. Harris, Raised Immortal (Basingstoke: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1983) pp. 53-57.
- 17 In this sense 'unfettered' is acceptable if it means existentially 'unoppressed' by those conditions of space and time in which fallen creatures find themselves entrapped.
- 18 This position is compatible with the body of Jesus retaining a material form once it is recalled that matter is almost infinitely divisible and that the personal identity of Christ across space, whether or not the same matter was involved, would be assured by the continuity of his 'soul' or 'mind'. This view in no way contradicts 1 Cor. 15:50a: 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God', providing we accept the view popularized by Jeremias that what the text excludes from participation in the eschatological kingdom is *untransformed* living humanity. 'Flesh and Blood Cannot Inherit the Kingdom of God', N.T.S., 2 (1955-56) pp. 151-159.
- 19 However symbolically we may like to treat the presence of the cloud and an upward departure.
- 20 Cf. Phil 2:10; Rev. 5:3, 13 where the three-tiered ancient cosmology is accepted unquestioningly.
- 21 Quoted in D. Bonhoeffer, Christology (London: Collins, 1966) p. 57.
- 22 M. Thurian, The Eucharistic Memorial, Part 2, The New Testament, tr. J. G. Davies; London: Lutterworth, 1961 pp. 116-117. Cf. C. Gore, The Body of Christ (London: John Murray, 1915) p. 127, p. 129; G. Martelet, The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World (R. Hague, London: Collins, 1976) pp. 143-146.
- 23 'the divine nature remains while the humanity is swallowed up by it' Theodoret, Eranistes, 2 (cited in J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) p. 331.
- 24 Cf. E. Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, (Dogmatics, vol. 2, tr. D. Wyon, London: Lutterworth, 1952) p. 15.
- 25 Cf. Augustine, Confessions, 7,1; D. C. Long, 'The Philosophical Concept of a Human Body', Phil. Rev., 73 (1964) pp. 321-337.
- 26 N. Clark, An Approach To The Theology Of The Sacraments (London, S.C.M. Press, 1958) p. 78.
- 27 A way around this conclusion would be to ascribe the grace of the sacrament to the Person of the Logos. This, however, would place the Lord's Supper outside the Holy Spirit's normal sanctifying work and make a division within the means of grace equivalent to ascribing a special sacramental grace to the Supper. There would seem to be no positive reason for resorting to this expedient.
- 28 The reverse statement would also be true if we were in the immediate presence of the Lord.
- 29 I take this to be a legitimate way of adhering to Article 28 of the Thirty-nine Articles, 'The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner.'

- 30 Calvin, The Institutes of The Christian Religion, 4, 17: 10, 12, etc.
- 31 Calvin, Institutes 4, 17: 10, 12; Corpus Reformatoren 9, 33, quoted in W. Niesel, The Theology of Calvin (tr. H. Knight, London: Lutterworth, 1956) p. 226; Letter to Bucer, 27th of December 1562, quoted in F. Wendel, Calvin, tr. P. Mairet, London: Collins, 1963) p. 352; Johannes Calvin Opera Selecta 1: 530, quoted in K. McDonnell, John Calvin, The Church, and The Eucharist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) p. 262.
- 32 D. Waterland, The Doctrine of The Eucharist (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896) p. 183.
- 33 Another valid criticism of Calvin's eucharistic doctrine is that it de-personalizes the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Godhead cannot appropriately be called 'a kind of channel' or a unifying force. Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, pp. 117-118.
- 34 Such as the way that the work of the Holy Spirit became subordinated to the authority of the Church, at least in the Latin West.
- 35 An Australian Prayer Book p. 148, does contain the expression 'Renew us by your Holy Spirit', but this is so embedded in other material as to hardly function as a genuine epiclesis upon the assembled people, which would recognize the central rôle of the Spirit and remind the congregation of their dependency upon his work for sanctification.