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HILARY OF POITIERS' VIEW OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Joey Newton

Hilary of Poitiers was a significant defender of Nicene orthodoxy in the fourth century. This article focuses on his contribution to the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. What is particularly fascinating is that Hilary's most profound contribution was made in a prayer rather than a lengthy argument as such.

Hilary of Poitiers is generally recognized as the bridge between Western and Eastern Christianity in the development of Trinitarian theology during the fourth century.¹ The ongoing controversy surrounding the creed of Nicea (325) that was kept alive by the tenacious defenders of Arian theology was the context in which Hilary formed his theology and wrote his key theological work, *De Trinitate*.² Hilary's purpose was to refute decisively the Arian teaching of Christ as a created being and the *homoiousian* teaching that Christ is not fully equal to the Father in his deity. The final section of *De Trinitate* (12.52–57) is a prayer that pulls together Hilary's primary points concerning the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This paper considers the final three sections of that prayer, paying special attention to Hilary's understanding of the Spirit in relation to Father and Son and his work within believers, thus demonstrating that Hilary had a fuller sense of the Holy Spirit than is sometimes afforded him.

¹ The various suggestions for his importance undergird the scope of his influence. For example, John Lawyer asserts the language of Hilary and his systematic approach to Trinitarian discussion was crucial in the development of Trinitarian theology in the West (cf. John Lawyer, 'The First Celtic Theologian: Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity,' *Fides et Historia*, no. 38 vol. 2 [Summer/Fall 2006], p. 1). Robert Wilken suggests it is Hilary's focus on the resurrection in understanding the divine economy that distinguishes him among ancient writers on the Trinity (Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christianity: Seeking the Face of God*, [Yale University Press: 2003], pp. 90-93). Tarmo Toon argues Hilary's connection between name and nature was his key contribution to Latin Trinitarian theology (Tarmo Toon, 'Hilary of Poitiers' *De Trinitate*, and the Name(s) of God,' *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 64 [2010], p. 457). These suggestions provide a representative example of Hilary's significance in the development of Trinitarian theology during the fourth century.

² Hilary wrote *De Trinitate* over a period of five years, 355–360, during his exile.

Hilary's Confession of the Trinity

The attitude of devotion permeates Hilary's writings and finds one of its most beautiful expressions as he devotes his concluding thoughts in *De Trinitate* to the Holy Spirit. By doing this, Hilary ends the final book as the first, with a focus on the Spirit and the exaltation of the singular glory of God: Father, Son, and Spirit. Though a prayer, Hilary states in summary the substance of his view of the Trinity, which he has explained and defended throughout the work: the Father alone is unbegotten and the eternal source of the Godhead; the Son is 'only-begotten,' eternally the Son by reason of his birth, uncreated, yet a Son because from the Father; the Spirit is uncreated and proceeds from the Father through the Son. These three equally and fully comprise the one essence of the Godhead, equal in power and glory.

Hilary is often criticized for his imprecise language in *De Trinitate* regarding the Holy Spirit.³ This observation has some merit, but it is important to note *De Trinitate* was hammered out during the Arian controversy that primarily attacked the deity of the Son, which is Hilary's main focus. The language of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (381), which clarified the orthodox understanding of the Holy Spirit, was prepared by the Cappadocians who hammered out their theology of the Holy Spirit in debate with the Macedonians (also known as Pneumatomachi or 'Spirit Fighters').⁴ Hilary's vocabulary, though less precise than that of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, is abundantly clear to establish a robust theology of the Holy Spirit and place him in the trajectory of the later Western addition of the *filioque* clause.

Hilary's Language of Procession

Since the Arian heresy taught that the Holy Spirit was the 'first creature of the Son,'⁵ Hilary begins his final section with an unequivocal statement that the Spirit is 'uncreated.' This places him, ontologically, on par with the 'only-begotten' Son, whose equality as God has been the burden of the entire work. Hilary's diligence to mark the Son as 'only-begotten'

³ W. Sanday and E.W. Watson, 'The Theology of St. Hilary of Poitiers,' *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899; repr., Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, Mass.: 1994), 9: p. lxxxiii).

⁴ These were possibly followers of the bishop of Constantinople, Macedonius, who claimed that the Holy Spirit, though eternal, was not fully God. Eustathius, one from their number, is recorded as saying, 'I can neither admit that the Holy Spirit is God, nor can I dare affirm him to be a creature' (Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.45, trans. by A.C. Zenos, [NPNF²] 2:74).

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3: p. 668.

and refusal ‘to say that the Holy Spirit was begotten,’⁶ arises from his desire to remain within the bounds of Scripture and protect the Son’s unique relation to the Father. Unique to the Spirit is that he ‘proceeds from the [the Father] and is sent through [the Son].’⁷ This language of procession, though important to Hilary’s Trinitarian thought, is not well defined, although he makes significant strides in the immediate context, noting that procession includes the ‘power of His nature...subsist[ing] eternally’ within the Godhead, yet, as ‘derived from Thee through Thy only-begotten.’⁸ Hilary earlier established a link between the idea of procession from the Father in relation to both the Spirit and the Son in 6.35 and 12.41, which may display a nascent understanding of double procession (*filioque*), but at the very least, and significantly, strengthens the ontological unity of the Spirit and the Son.

Procession and Sending

The nature of this procession from the Father through the Son is expounded in book 8 and linked to the Son’s sending the Spirit (8.19). He begins with the promise of the Spirit who will be sent by the Son (John 15:26), then quickly moves to his key passage: John 16:13–15. From here Hilary argues that the Son, Spirit and Father are equal on the ground that each gives and receives all that the others are and have. The Father gives all of who he is to the Son and the Son gives all of who he is, which includes all that the Father is, to the Spirit. Thus, the unity and equality of their nature is confirmed in the Son for he receives all things from the Father, and in the Spirit who receives all things from the Son and so from the Father. Earlier, in 9.73, Hilary stated that: ‘The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God,’ and so receives all things ‘because they are God’s. All things that belong to the Father are the Spirit’s.’ Earlier, in an equally magnificent statement, Hilary says, ‘He [the Spirit] it is through Whom all things exist, and from Whom are all things, and that He is the Spirit of God, God’s gift to the faithful.’⁹ Furthermore, ‘He is joined with Father and Son in our confession of the faith, and cannot be excluded from a true confession of Father and Son; take away a part, and the whole faith is marred.’¹⁰ Thus,

⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233). Hilary appears to use the language of double procession in 2.29 in the translation of E.W. Watson, ‘Proceeding, as He does, from Father and Son.’ However, Gregg Allison prefers the translation, ‘we are bound to confess him [the Holy Spirit], proceeding from Father and Son as authors (Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 2011], p. 439).

⁹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.29 (NPNF² 9: p. 60).

¹⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.29 (NPNF² 9: p. 60).

Hilary places no limitations on his language when speaking about the Spirit as God.

He expressed the same thing even more clearly in 8.43, 'When He says that He has what the Father has, He means that He has the Father's self.'¹¹ He then asks, if 'to receive from the Son is the same thing as to proceed from the Father,' which he implies it is. While the language of procession is reserved for the Father, the argumentation of unity of nature based on the requirement of equality in receiving and sending, indicates, or at least lays the groundwork for, this procession to be a work of both the Father and the Son, for it is the Son who sends the Spirit from the Father. In light of this argument, the statement 'from the Father through the Son' becomes an even clearer affirmation of deity, and, possibly, another proleptic statement of double procession.

The Spirit's Equality and Distinction

Hilary further links the Spirit's 'uncreated(ness)' to the 'power of His nature, which subsists eternally, derived from Thee through Thine only-begotten.'¹² The term 'derived' links to procession, while the term 'subsists' firmly constitutes the Spirit as a full possessor of the divine substance. So too does his eternity, for he 'eternally subsists.' This is an important adverb, since Hilary earlier asserted eternity as a necessary component to understanding the Son's begottenness in terms of equality with God. Furthermore, in 11.6 he said of the Son, 'Though He had a real body, He subsisted in the nature of God, and though He subsisted in the nature of God, He abode in a real body.'¹³ This is to say, while the person of the Son exists in flesh, he was still equally and fully God. Therefore, as with the Son, so with the Spirit, who subsists fully as God, yet is distinct as the Holy Spirit. For Hilary, subsistence in nature and distinction in person, or being, are simultaneous realities for Father, Son, and Spirit. This is important, for, as with eternity, it forms yet another ontological link between the Spirit and the Son, while maintaining the Spirit's distinction of person. The Holy Spirit abides as God without loss of identity. However, the distinction of the Spirit within the Godhead is most strikingly brought out by what he does within the Tri-unity of God and in the believer.

¹¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 8.43 (NPNF² 9: p. 150).

¹² Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

¹³ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 11.6 (NPNF² 9: p. 204).

The Spirit's Activity within the Trinity

Within the Godhead the Spirit 'searches and knows Thy deep things' and 'penetrates into Thee,' even measuring 'the depth of Thy boundless majesty.'¹⁴ The background is 1 Cor 2:10, and the point is to demonstrate the full deity of the Spirit by his activity within the Trinity. It takes one who is infinite to explore the depths of infinity; thus, the one who penetrates and searches God is equal to God, is God. Hilary underscores this with the delightful statement, 'nor is anything strange to Thee, which dwells in Thee through its searching power.'¹⁵ These abilities clearly give him the attributes of God, namely that of infinity in relation to knowledge (omniscience), power (omnipotence), and space (omnipresence).¹⁶ Hilary's language is unambiguous—the Spirit stands in eternal relation to the Father and Son and functions as only God can, as equal, yet distinct.

This distinction is critical, for Hilary's earlier language could seem to blur the Spirit's uniqueness within the Godhead.¹⁷ For example, in book 8, he appears to make the Spirit synonymous with the Father and Son when he says that the name 'Spirit of God' can refer to the person of the Father, the Son, or the 'Paraclete' (8.24, citing: Luke 4:18, Matt 12:28; 3:17; Acts 2:16–17). While it is true that at first glance this seems to blur the Spirit's distinctiveness, his argument is moving in quite a different direction. He is, rather, demonstrating the equality of the Spirit's nature as God, not abolishing his distinction. Thus, the Holy Spirit is the 'Spirit of God' and the 'Spirit of Christ' because he is one with them in nature. In Hilary's own words,

Since the nature dwells in us as the nature of one substantive Being, we must regard the nature of the Son as identical with that of the Father, since the Holy Spirit Who is both the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God is proved to be a Being of one nature...all things that the Father hath are the Son's, and for this cause He Who receives from Him is the Spirit of God, but at the same time the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit is a Being of the nature of the Son, but the same Being is the nature of the Father.¹⁸

¹⁴ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

¹⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

¹⁶ E.P. Meijering considers the infinity of God to be the '*Leitmotiv*' of Hilary's work (E.P. Meijering, *Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity*, Vol. VI of *Philosophia Patrum*, eds. J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. Van Winden [Leiden: Brill, 1982], p. 183).

¹⁷ This marks a significant progress for Hilary, who, in his on commentary Matthew sees the *spiritus*, primarily as 'the divine substance shared by the Father and Son' (Paul C. Burns, 'The Christology in Hilary of Poitiers' Commentary on Matthew,' *Studia Ephemeridis 'Augustinianum'* 16, [Institutum Patristicum, Roma: 1981], p. 69).

¹⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 8.26 (NPNF² 9: p. 145).

Thus, 'When the Father or the Son are called 'Spirit' this is not indication that the Spirit is not an entity of His own, it indicates the invisibility and omnipresence of the whole divine Being.'¹⁹ Consequently, it is the Spirit as 'Being' that marks him as *distinct* within the *singular* nature of God. Lawyer pushes this distinction even further, noting that far from making the Spirit blend into the Father and Son, Hilary's language is more precise on this point than of Augustine, who seems to relegate the Holy Spirit to the bond of love between Father and Son.²⁰

The same tendency to speak of the Spirit as the nature of God without clear distinction is also manifest in his discussion of 1 Cor 12 and the gifts, beginning in 8.28. However, if Hilary's view of the Spirit is taken as a whole and clearer statements are allowed to function paradigmatically, then his imprecise language in some parts becomes clearer in terms of his view of the Spirit within the Tri-unity of God. Thus, Hilary is not legitimately left open to the charge of having an anemic and disjointed view of the Holy Spirit, though his expression lacks the precision and development that would become necessary. However, in Hilary's context, he displays a remarkably robust understanding of the Spirit consistent with the language that biblical orthodoxy would later require.

One final example of Hilary's interchangeable language for the Spirit as the nature of God, or a distinct person within the Godhead is found in book 2. In 2.31 Hilary examines the statement that 'God is Spirit' and those who worship must worship 'in spirit and truth.' Hilary perceives the danger of misunderstanding and notes up front, 'We must bear this [context of passage] in mind lest, on the strength of the words, *God is Spirit*, we deny not only the Name, but also the work and the gift of the Holy Ghost.'²¹ After a brief discussion of the passage, he concludes: 'These who are to worship God the Spirit in the Spirit shall have the One for the means, the Other for the object, of their reverence: for Each of the Two stands in a different relation to the worshipper. The words, *God is Spirit*, do not alter the fact that the Holy Spirit has a Name of His own.' Hilary is careful to remove the charge of his opponents who deny the reality of the Holy Spirit as a distinct being. In his defence, Beckwith notes that Hilary's argument in book 2 has been augmented in his determination to refute the 'modalist and the subordinationist theologies of the 350's,' and to refute 'Photinus of Sirmium's monarchian theology and adoptionist Christology.'²² These changes reflect not only a polemical bent in Hilary, but a growth in his own understanding of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Meijering, *Hilary*, p. 115.

²⁰ Lawyer, 'The First Celtic Theologian,' p. 18.

²¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.31 (NPNF² 9: p. 60).

²² Carl L. Beckwith, 'Hilary of Poitiers on the Trinity: From De Fide to De Trinitate' in *Oxford Early Christian Studies*, gen. eds. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 125.

So, while the language of Scripture allows for ‘Spirit’ to refer God’s nature, or the person, Hilary is careful to maintain the distinction and not let the person be subsumed into nature alone. Therefore, he speaks, at times, of the Spirit as the nature of God (‘for God is Spirit’), but never allows for the elimination of the Spirit’s distinctiveness as did his opponents. All of this comes together in Hilary’s final prayer as he speaks of the Spirit in wonderfully intimate terms.²³ Thus, he, who is equal to God (‘eternally subsist’), is God and acts as only God can, searching and knowing, ‘Thy deep things’ and ‘Thy boundless majesty.’

The Spirit and the Believer

Hilary speaks in strikingly personal language of the equality, distinctiveness, and gloriously personal work of the Spirit as made evident by his work in the life of the believer. In his concluding prayer Hilary acknowledges the Spirit as the ‘Intercessor for me [who] speaks to Thee words I cannot utter’ and the source of his regeneration. This language encompasses his earlier identification of the Spirit as the ‘Gift’ to believers. He is also the ‘Gift’ available to all men, though not all men receive him, nor, thereby, his benefits. This is devastating to fallen man’s ability to arrive at truth, for the Holy Spirit is essential to understanding anything, truly, about God. On this point, Beckwith comments,

In discussing natural reason’s potential for theological knowledge, Hilary advances a distinction between the natural capacity we all possess to apprehend God and the kind of knowledge derived from our natural reason. Although we possess the faculty necessary to apprehend that God exists, we will never achieve a certain and right knowledge of the Trinity and the saving work of God if we are not engaged by the Holy Spirit.²⁴

In Hilary’s own words, he exhorts,

Let us...therefore make use of this great benefit, and seek for personal experience of this most needful Gift...We receive Him...that we may

²³ The tendency to refer to the Spirit at times with impersonal pronouns (‘it,’ or ‘that’) and other times personal pronouns (‘He’ ‘His’), displays immaturity of thought, not deficiency of the faith. However, in this concluding section, a prayer, the impersonal ‘It’ gives way to the exclusive use of personal pronouns ‘He,’ ‘His,’ and ‘Him’ (which he will use 13x in 12.55–57). In light of this, Hilary cannot be legitimately charged with thinking of the Spirit only, or primarily as impersonal nature, or as the power of God alone. Though, at times, the discussion may move his language in the direction of the impersonal ‘It,’ his truest thoughts are surely revealed in how he relates to God in the intimacy of prayer.

²⁴ Beckwith, ‘Hilary,’ p. 181.

know...the soul of man, unless through faith it have appropriated the gift of the Spirit, will have the innate faculty of apprehending God, but be destitute of the light of knowledge.²⁵

Therefore, the Holy Spirit, though offered to all, is the 'Gift' to believers uniquely, enabling them to see the glory of God in Christ. He is the source of their 'perfect hope,' their 'enjoyment of God,' and their 'bond of union' with the Father and Son (cf. 2.1). Also, that the Spirit performs the works of God is significant in demonstrating his divine nature, for only God can do the works of God. Yet, Hilary's reverence for the Spirit is not simply a response to his deity, but is borne from the intimate relationship he shares with the one who is so personally involved in his salvation.

It is the life-giving work of the Spirit that enables Hilary to think and speak with understanding and reverent faith. However, the ultimate cause of this receiving is left open to some debate. In earlier sections of *De Trinitate* Hilary speaks of the Spirit as available to all men, but given only to those with the 'willingness to receive [it],'²⁶ which implies the freedom of man in choosing. He expresses a similar thought in 12.57: 'Let me win the favour of Thy Holy Spirit.'²⁷ However, his language in 12.56 also speaks of the freedom of the Spirit, for 'my own consciousness had no part in causing this new birth.' Immediately following this statement Hilary speaks of this same Spirit as he who *freely* 'speaks when...what... and where He will,'²⁸ which points to his sovereignty as one who freely granted him life-giving grace. This is the very reality Jesus pointed to in John 3:7-8, which Hilary had just quoted. Consequently, Hilary appears to affirm both man's need to receive the Spirit and the necessity of the Spirit's antecedent work of regeneration. Thus, the Spirit retains his status as sole Giver of life, for which Hilary worships him.

A second work of the Spirit is as 'Intercessor' for the believer;²⁹ he is the one who 'speaks to Thee words I could not utter,'³⁰ even 'pleads for me.'³¹ Hilary is surely picking up on Paul's language of 'groaning' in Romans 8:26 and clearly assigning relationship and emotion to the Spirit, who is in intimate fellowship with the Father, Son, and the believer. This also demonstrates attributes of deity, as one who knows all the thoughts, desires, prayers, and circumstances of God's people everywhere, and communicates them perfectly to the Father and Son according to the will

²⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.35 (NPNF² 9: p. 61).

²⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.35 (NPNF² 9: p. 61).

²⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.57 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

²⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.56 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

²⁹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.55 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.56 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

of God. In other words, that he is ‘Intercessor’ requires distinctiveness; that he is ‘Intercessor’ for all believers requires omnipresence and omniscience. Hilary captures this divine glory of his person and work in the simple words, ‘The Spirit has no limits.’³²

The Spirit also displays exertion of will as he who ‘speaks when He will, and what He will, and where He will,’³³ yet within the one perfect divine will of the Father. Hilary is not asserting independence of will, but the intention of personhood within a paradigm of unity of essence and distinction of person in the Godhead. The Spirit is not, then, a third god acting with God, nor the impersonal nature of God, but God the Holy Spirit who is one with Father and Son in eternal intimate fellowship, acting distinctly, yet in perfect harmony.

Inconsistencies of language and lack of clarity in places aside, Hilary displays a robust view of the Holy Spirit. He is clearly God—equal as God in every way sharing fully in the single divine essence. He is a person clearly distinct from the Father and Son, and yet in perfect union with them. He is the power unto salvation, sanctification, and preservation of believers. He is ‘Thy Spirit,’³⁴ whom Hilary knows as the third member of the Trinity and confessed ‘when I was baptized in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’³⁵ He is the one Hilary knows well in the intimacy of salvation and the experience of faith.

Indeed, the majestic place of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son is breathtaking in Trinitarian glory. His intimate role and fulness in the life of Christ and now the believer is stunning. The historical context of Arianism established the parameters of discussion and compelled Hilary’s emphasis on the Father and Son. History would have to wait for Basil of Caesarea to stand against the later Pneumatological attacks of the Arians and those of the *pneumatomachoi*—Spirit fighters—to give the church its first full-scale treatment *On the Holy Spirit*. Nonetheless, Hilary’s theology of the Spirit is robust in his own context and fully consistent with the later works of the Cappadocians and the statement of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381). In fact, Sanday goes so far to say, ‘there is reason to believe that he would have stated the doctrine of the Procession in the Western, not in the Eastern, form.’³⁶ It is not possible to know precisely how Hilary would have stood in those debates, for an author must be treated in his own right according to what he has written, although what is written argues strongly in favour of the conjecture of Sanday. In either case, the heart of Hilary’s mention of the Spirit in *De*

³² Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.56 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³³ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.56 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³⁴ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.57 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³⁵ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.57 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³⁶ Sanday, ‘Theology,’ lxxxiv; the quote is taken from Baltzer, *Theologie des hl. Hilarius*, 51.

Trinitate is best captured in his own words: 'Let me, in short, adore Thee our Father, and Thy Son together with Thee; let me win the favour of Thy Holy Spirit, Who is from Thee, through Thy Only-begotten.'³⁷ This is worship of the Spirit and the Father and the Son, constrained within the bounds of Scripture, and in accordance with a 'pious faith undefiled.'³⁸ In this way, Hilary serves the church in both doctrine and life, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Son, to the glory of God Three in One.

JOEY NEWTON is a pastor of Newtown Bible Church in Connecticut and PhD student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

³⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.57 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).

³⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 12.57 (NPNF² 9: p. 233).