

# Major Themes in the New Testament

## Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

GEORGE JOHNSTON

### I: THE SPIRIT AS DIVINE CREATIVE POWER

**S**PIRIT" in the New Testament carries with it all the thought of the Supernatural *Ruach* of God that we find in the Old Testament, but it is related now to the person and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we find in John 3:8 the familiar use of *pneuma* in the sense of *wind*, with overtones of *Spirit*, as in Ezekiel 37. It is a mysterious phenomenon to men, speaking of divine energy and freedom. When Jesus casts out evil spirits, he exhibits in himself the energy of God (Luke 11:20) and a strength that conquers sin and disease (Mark 1:25 f., 40 f.; 2:5 ff.; 3:27-29). It is not surprising that the early Church went even farther and ascribed the actual birth of Jesus to the same divine creative power (Matt. 1:20 ff.; Luke 1:35 ff.), and this surely emphasises a necessary element in our faith, whatever view we may hold of virginal conception.

The freedom of the Spirit means the probability of *miracle*, for the immediate presence of God in gracious power among men can produce remarkable phenomena. The apostolic writers speak of them as "signs and wonders" and consider them the normal accompaniment of evangelism (2 Cor. 12:12). Even conversion is the work of God (1 Cor. 12:3; John 6:37-45) for faith in Christ as the Son of God is made possible by the inward witness of the Spirit. On the other hand, because he is divine like the Logos, the Spirit may find his work fruitless. Perverse sinners, self-righteous men of religion, and even disobedient Christians may quench the Spirit, grieve the Spirit or reject his monitions. For the divine nature is for ever loving and patient, as we learn from the revelation of Christ. We may say, in the words of a young Swiss student, that Paul demythologised the current Old Testament conceptions of the Spirit when he insisted on honour, gentleness and brotherly love as hallmarks of a life directed by the Spirit of God. Nevertheless, the Spirit remains sovereign and is not to be confined to our systems.

The *creativity* of the Spirit that we find in Elihu's words in Job 33:4; 34:12-15, may be linked with other passages like Num. 11:25 f.; Prov. 1:23; Ex. 31:3-6; and the Wisdom of Solomon 7:22 ff. But to what extent is this found also in the New Testament? There is some evidence that Paul and John prefer to think of creation as the work of God mediated through the Logos, the Son who was made flesh in Jesus (1 Cor. 1:30; 8:6; Col. 1:15 ff.; John 1; and cf. Heb. 1:2). But there is enough to suggest that they would find it easy to associate creative activity also with the Spirit,

since the Spirit was present in Jesus (Luke 11:20; Mark 3:29; 13:11; John 4:34; 6:63; 20:22). The new life of the faithful is to include "wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:6 ff.), but this is quite different from the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 3:18 f.). The "truth" found through the Logos is taught by the Spirit of truth, because it proceeds from the realm of ultimate Reality (John 16:13). On the whole it would be true to say that the New Testament pays little attention to what is called "cultural creativity" and that we must supplement its teaching with that of the Old, if we would try to answer such questions as the following:

Does the creative Spirit of God work through the builders of planned and happy communities, through engineers of electronic marvels, and through peacemakers? May we find evidence of the Spirit outside the Church of Christ, in writers, craftsmen in paint, stone and marble, and in rulers, for example?

One might try to reply by saying that the use of "Spirit" in such a sentence as John 4:24, taken in continuity with the ideas inherited from Judaism, reminds us that the Godhead should be thought of in dynamic terms. Infinite power and majesty belong to him who lords it in love above the stars and suns of space (cf. Rom. 1:20, although Paul seldom impresses us as a man who felt any rapture amidst the beauties of Nature!). As Spirit, God is a pulsating source of infinite liveliness, creating and re-creating. In a sense his work is never done. He radiates vitality, joy, wisdom and love.

It would follow that creative artists and thinkers neither live nor operate apart from this transcendent and immanent Creator. If they have penetrated some way into the secrets of the universe, they will know with Einstein<sup>1</sup> that God is subtle but never malicious. If they are moved to perceive the Logos in Christ, they will understand that God is not capricious; holy, but not arbitrary in punishment; supernatural, and yet always involved with his world and his people. Since the fundamental problem of society concerns man's inability to apply creative energy and invention to good ends, the Gospel rightly stresses the redeeming work of the Spirit. The divine Reason is also the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world; and the Spirit of Truth proclaims through the Church the judgement and the succour of infinite love. (See John 16:7-15.)

Moreover, the Johannine teaching, that this creative Spirit is the Paraclete who comes from the Father of Jesus Christ and is therefore united in the Godhead with almighty love, truth and wisdom, affords some consolation to those who are troubled by the distressing accidents and chancy misadventures that accompany the birth of children in human families. For we can plead that he who came in Christ to save is present always to mend and renew. Like Paul we may cry out at the depth of the divine riches and wisdom and knowledge, because God is infinite and beyond comprehension. But with the same apostle we confess "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus

Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (Rom. 11:33, 36 and 1 Cor. 8:6).

## II: THE RISEN CHRIST AND THE PARACLETE

We may now pass on to think of the intimate relation between Christ and the Spirit, and then to the meaning of the Paraclete as the Spirit of truth.

In his discussion of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15, Paul asserts that "flesh" "glory" and "body" exist in different forms, so that Christians are not to imagine the natural organism of flesh and blood as identical with that which will be provided by way of a "body" for the life to come. The contrast is illustrated from the Heads who incorporated the old humanity and the new: Adam became a living *psyche*, but Jesus Christ, the last Adam who is from heaven, became a life-giving *pneuma*. This seems to mean that the resurrected Christ became a Spirit and the source of new vital potency; it is his image we are to bear beyond death when we at last inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:45-50).

What precisely does this ascription of "spirit" to Christ involve?

Paul was not indulging in mere rhetoric. He preached a living Lord who is the source of spiritual renewal, the fount of man's acceptance by a holy God as righteous (despite his sins and because of faith in Jesus as Lord), and the bestower of holiness and peace to those who are sacramentally incorporated into him (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 6:4, 11). Hence the Christian has a new life which is a walking by the power of the Spirit; the end of it will be life eternal and the transformation of our present humiliation (Col. 3:10; Gal. 5:16, 25; 6:8; Phil. 3:11, 21; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:1-5, 17). So the apostle can describe this life as a "participation in Spirit" or "communion in the Holy Spirit" (Phil. 2:1; 2 Cor. 13:14). As Deissmann and others have shown, it is immaterial to Paul whether we say that believers are "in Christ" or "in the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1-17 is sufficient evidence); both ideas suggest that we are already caught up into supernatural, divine realities. Spirit is not merely a way to describe the mode of the redeemed life; in act and nature the Spirit is personal, divine in character and effect (Rom. 8:12-27), and therefore the organ of revelation (1 Cor. 2:10-13).

Is it possible, in the light of all that could be adduced to parallel such language in terms of Jesus Christ, that 1 Cor. 15:45 refers to "the Spirit which Christ became by his resurrection"?<sup>2</sup> The answer must be, "Yes". 2 Cor. 3:15-18 would support this view. Paul may well have conceived of the exalted Lord as Spirit, without making an absolute identification with the Holy Spirit of God. It has often been remarked that his very vocabulary demonstrated his effort to distinguish between the risen Lord, whom he had seen in vision, and God in action within the Church's life; yet at the same time he associated the immanent power of deity with the supernatural glory of Jesus Christ. In so doing he prepared the way for the Fourth Evangelist who makes the trinitarian structure much clearer (John 14-16, 20). The Holy Spirit in Paul is the Paraclete in John, and in both

there is the closest possible link with the risen Christ. The Paraclete comes in Christ's name; Christ will send him from the Father (John 14:26; 15:26). Thus, at the moment of the Passion the Paraclete existed already with the heavenly Father, from whom the divine Logos himself had come. But the Paraclete did not enter the world of flesh until the Logos had accomplished his work (cf. John 7:39). In so dating the Paraclete's mission John seems to be controlled by the kerygma of the Christian history. We are to realize that the fruit of Jesus' ministry was the outpouring of spiritual power and the effective inauguration of the "new creation".

### III: THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

The Fourth Gospel further identifies the Paraclete as the "Spirit of truth", where truth stands for eternal Reality. It is also "the Holy Spirit" and as such made its entrance when the risen Christ breathed into his forgiven disciples, recreating them as "spirits" (John 20:22; cf. 14:17, 26). It is at this point (20:22) that we see how closely the evangelist links the risen Jesus and the Paraclete. And "truth" for John must also be related to Jesus Christ in its total significance. It is the Logos or Reason of God made flesh; his words are charged with life-giving force, but he is in himself the way, the truth, the heavenly manna that came down from heaven (John 6:35 ff., 63; 14:6). It is essential for the life eternal that one should "eat the flesh and drink the blood" of this Logos who is the Son of Man, and one may do so by believing in him as the Son of God and by feeding at his sacramental table (the reference to the Lord's Supper lies in the background of John 6:35 ff.; the insistence on the confession of the Incarnation re-appears in 1 John where docetic heretics are in mind). The Paraclete is to testify to Christ and his message (John 16:14), simply because the absolute Truth has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Cullmann says, the work of the Spirit is to help understanding of Jesus' life.<sup>3</sup> So, when the disciples after the crucifixion "remember" that this and that was said or done by the Master, we are to see the teaching Spirit illuminating their hearts and minds (cf. 2:17; 12:16). By his office the prayer of the Lord is answered, that his followers may be "consecrated in the truth", for consecration is produced by the Spirit of holiness and truth (John 17:17-19; cf. 1 Thess. 4:1-8).

There are implications in the fact that this work of the Spirit in helping the disciples to remember is linked to the O.T. Scripture. We may add also Luke 24:27 and John 5:39-47. The study of Scripture in our time is "scientific" in the sense that we desire to discover authentic words of and facts about Jesus Christ. But we learn from these passages that the Scripture is opened up to the understanding by the teaching Paraclete. The theologian may not, therefore, speculate on the truth apart from the recorded revelation of God *in Christ*; neither may the Biblical critic be allowed to rest content with textual or exegetical findings: for he too is called to grasp the theological truth that in Christ *God* is present, to reveal

and to save. But none of this goes on outside the beloved community in which the scholar lives and in which the Holy Spirit abides.

#### IV: SPIRITUAL LIFE AS ESCHATOLOGICAL FULFILMENT

The Christian faith asserts that in the man of Nazareth Jewish dreams and hopes came true. At the same time they are upset. For a Messiah who was not a new David or a greater Moses or a supreme High Priest, but rather a Servant who offered himself as a living sacrifice, is not at all what the Jews, as the People of God, expected; and a Kingdom that involves the rejection of Israel's "after the flesh" in favour of an Ecclesia of "Christian" Jews and Gentiles is one out of which the non-Christian Jew must contract. To that extent it is right to agree with von Dobschütz, that Jewish eschatology has been transmuted, or with Dodd and Jeremias that it is in process of being realised after a paradoxical manner. The fact remains that the Last Things are still Last; they are not yet here. Principalities of evil seem still to reign. Schism is within the Church, and not that alone: it is the scene of power-politics, fear, bitterness, self-love and other spiritual "weeds". We are left with the necessity of constructing a different eschatology than the Jewish, because the situation is radically different.

To do this it is not enough to think of Christ as a transient who may one day return (at an unknown hour, Mark 13:32; 1 Thess. 5:2). The risen Christ is an eternal presence who lives in the faithful (Gal. 2:20). Believers here and now enjoy "fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). The future reference is contained in such passages as Rom. 6:5; 8:11: those who died sacramentally in Baptism will "certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his". He is the corporate Adam in whom God's redeemed people will find their eternal glory and joy. But in so far as Adam now lives, all his people live; and the proof of this is that they have received the Spirit (Rom. 8:2, 6, 9-10). Already they are the children of God and therefore joint-heirs with Christ of the glory yet to come (Rom. 8:14-18; Gal. 3:26-29). Paul and John show us that the new life of sonship, even in the flesh, is spiritual: God "has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit as an earnest" (2 Cor. 1:22; cf. 5:5; Rom. 8:23); the friends of Jesus are branches in the Vine of God, they have been reborn from above by water and the Spirit, and thus they have blessed communion with the Father (John 1:12; 3:5; 14:21; 15:5 ff.). For this reason the new age of the Spirit, the era of the New Covenant, is quite different from that of Moses and the Law (John 1:17; Rom. 8:1-4; Heb. 6:4; 8:13). It would appear that Isaiah's prophecy is being fulfilled: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring" (44:3; cf. Ezek. 36:25 ff.). John makes much of the analogy between water and the Spirit (especially 4:14 and 7:37-39). However partial and incomplete, however ambiguous in this evil world may be the life of the Church it is "real" life; it proceeds from the eternal and invisible

world where God reigns; and the Spirit within the faithful is their assurance that the End cannot mean anything other than an enlargement of what they already possess (John 5:24–29; 6:40; 11:25). Thus the spiritual life of the Christian is eschatological fulfilment, in part at least.

This theme can be elaborated in terms of the “bread” of life as well as the “water”, and it too is linked to the work of the Spirit (John 6:63; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:29; 12:12 f., 27 where Paul develops his idea of the Body of Christ and its sacramental rite at the Supper).

The situation is, then, that in the Church on earth communicants are in partial enjoyment of the divine life. Christ is close to them, and the Paraclete is active among them. Their duty is to observe the commandments of love and to serve one another as Jesus served his disciples on the night of betrayal (John 15:10–12 and 13:1–11). Without knowing when or how the Father will complete his saving work at “the last day”, Christians are to declare his love and his redemptive purpose, not in their own wisdom but by the power of the Spirit. They are themselves not so much dying men as men stamped with an unearthly destiny. If their faith is always under strain and their vision fleeting, if there is constant tension and tribulation in this age (1 Peter 2:21; 4:12 ff.), they are to remember that the pattern of the Cross is the strange sign of what true life is, even in heaven: service, sacrifice, and love; and that the powers of the Age to Come operate now in those who have been consecrated by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:2; Heb. 6:5). “You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

All flesh is like grass  
and all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers, and the flower falls,  
but the word of the Lord abides forever.

That word is the good news which was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23–25, R.S.V.).

Hence, although the mature thought of the New Testament still looks forward in time to the Parousia at the End, the situation is very different from that of the Old Testament or normative Judaism: the latter awaits a Messiah who has not come; the former awaits a divine Saviour who has already come to be the Messiah of the Jews, but who is known to the believers of every land and kindred and tongue as One who is far greater than Messiah. The Christ who is expected to act as Judge and King at the consummation of the ages is the Son who was eternally the Logos in the bosom of the Father and the Son of Man who has entered into heaven after his passion and sacrifice. Again, the Jews looked forward, having Moses and the prophets; whereas the Christians look forward, having among them, in their hearts as individuals and in their Society as the Body of Christ, the divine Spirit, the teaching Paraclete, who defends them,

pleads for them, loves them. Paul may speak of the tribunal of Christ before which we must all appear (2 Cor. 5:10); John speaks of a judgement that has already taken place for the faithful (3:18 f.). Paul may say that "the Lord is at hand" (Phil. 4:5) and the author of 1 Peter that "the End of all things is at hand" (4:7); yet the New Testament ends with the longing that the Lord Jesus will come soon, as the seer hoped (Rev. 22:20). And that End is still not in sight. We must rest content with a hope that is guaranteed by the power of the Spirit that is transforming human life here and now, so that faithful and loving people are becoming Christlike; but we need not give up the conviction that in some sense there must be an End, a Goal, when God will complete his purpose in the creation, when he will recapitulate all things into Christ (Eph. 1:10). Meantime we are assured by Paul that our life is a movement from glory to glory and is hid with Christ in God (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:3). In this life the power of the Spirit works to bless us, who must glorify God that he is content to share his eternal being with his People.

NOTES: This paper was first read at a meeting of *Duodecim*, a theological society, in New York, November 1954.

1. See *The Drama of Albert Einstein* by Antonina Vallentin, pp. 300 ff.

2. G. Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by Princeton Seminary Faculty (1912), pp. 233 ff.

3. O. Cullmann, *Les Sacrements dans l'Évangile Johannique*, p. 17.