

Reformation
& Revival



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For as God alone can properly bear witness to His own words, so those words cannot obtain full credit in the heart until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit who spoke by the mouth of the prophets must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely entrusted.

John Calvin

Religious muddle around us is frantic and furious. How urgently we need, in these days, to get clear about the Holy Spirit!

J. I. Packer

Wanted: Apathetic Lutherans and Calvinists (No Experience Required)

Michael S. Horton

About seventeen years ago, my brother, then an assistant football coach at Arizona State University, introduced me to Danny White, who was at the time the star quarterback for the Sun Devils. I was only twelve years old and in awe of White. Meeting him was one of those moments when you are aware of every movement you make, of every nervous gesture. As we walked toward him on the football field where he was running, I would feel my feet become lead. Fear gripped me and I almost wanted to go back, but there was no turning back now. With a dry throat and clumsy handshake I met White—just when my brother announced that he needed to take care of some business with the trainer. So here we were, Danny White and this awkward teenager who was unusually short on words. But Danny immediately broke the tension when he said, “Hey, Horts, how about a few passes?” “What’s he talking about?” I wondered, concerning what would be a fairly straightforward invitation were I not so nervous. “You mean passes to a game?” “No,” he replied, “I mean throwing some passes here on the field for awhile.” For the next twenty minutes or so there we were, Danny White and Mike Horton, throwing the ball around and getting to know each other—not just as a fan gets to know a hero by following his career, but as one person gets to know another.

Since then, I have had the opportunity to meet some other people who make me feel pretty nervous: other sports stars, actors, writers, and a few foreign dignitaries. But no meeting presents a greater challenge than when we meet God in the person of the Holy Spirit. It is a wonderful opportunity, to be sure, but it is also a challenge. We do just fine in the stands, shaking our heads at the unbelievable skill and energy of the Holy Spirit, and we follow His work closely through the years. But to actually meet Him? To get to know Him, not just as an awe-struck fan meets a celebrity, but as two friends out on the field together? We often find

such intimacy beyond what we can (or should even attempt to) reach. But it is at God's invitation that we leave the stands, walk out to the field, and befriend Him through the person of the Holy Spirit.

God the Father longs to have a relationship with us. He loved the world so much that "He gave His one and only Son" so long ago to save us. When God the Son took on flesh, suffered, died, and rose again, He brought us everlasting peace with God. If it were not for the Holy Spirit, we would still be up in the stands, unrelated to God as anything other than an admiring fan. It is through God the Holy Spirit that the Father's initiative in Christ—adoption and reconciliation—is finally fulfilled. It is He who brings us into the benefits planned for us by the Father and purchased for us by the Son.

The Reformation tradition, while eschewing the fanaticism of "those who think they've swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all" (Luther's phrase), recovered the legitimate biblical teaching concerning the Spirit by focusing their lens once again on His role as the one who reveals Christ, illumines our souls to understand the Word, and enables us to believe it and to repent of everything that stands up to challenge it. In fact, Calvin has been called "the theologian of the Holy Spirit," not, of course, because he instructed the third person of the Trinity, but because so much of his emphasis falls on the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us into union with Christ and communicating to us the benefits of that union. In the remainder of this article, I want to challenge us all to return to the classical doctrine of the Trinity as we attempt to recover what we who claim to be heirs of the Reformation have lost concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit in our day.

Back to the Trinity

There is only one God. On that Christians and Jews (as

well as Muslims) are agreed. But the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet, there are not three Gods, but one. The biblical writers do not explain this apparent contradiction, but affirm it nonetheless. In the second century, the church father Tertullian came up with the phrase, one in essence, three in person and the term *trinitas* (trinity) was employed for the first time to explain the relationship of those two affirmations: three persons (tri); one God (unity).

And yet, this staggering mystery has proved easier to affirm in public worship than in personal faith. In every age the church seems to carve up the Trinity and emphasize one person of the Godhead above the others. Sometimes this is done to redress imbalances, but it often results in other imbalances.

In our day, many hyper-Calvinists are so fascinated with the sovereignty of God that the person and work of the Son and the Holy Spirit get short shrift, while many hyper-Lutherans and Barthians risk embracing a form of Christomonism, in which the Father and the Spirit are footnotes to the person and work of Christ. Like the sovereignty of God for hyper-Calvinists, justification for hyper-Lutherans can become not only the central doctrine (after all, it must occupy that spot for all evangelicals), but the *only* doctrine in the system, divesting the biblical message of its fullness, driving the Father and the Spirit into the shadows, and leaving the flock unbalanced and malnourished.

In the meantime, the charismatic movement has brought much attention to the reality of the third person of the Godhead, while often underplaying the study of the divine attributes and the objective character of Christ's person and work. It's not doctrine that concerns most charismatics, as it concerns most Calvinists and Lutherans, but experience. So, the Holy Spirit becomes the central trinitarian

figure. Just as the Holy Spirit's person and work can be ignored when we emphasize only the objective side of salvation (the Father and Son's work outside of us in history), so also it is true that the Father's and Son's saving work can be pushed aside in an obsession with the real and alleged experiences and gifts of the Holy Spirit. But for us Reformation Christians, emphasizing the objective character of salvation in the face of so much subjective introspection and emotionalism, we risk keeping the work of Christ external and "outside us." What the Reformers meant by emphasizing Christ's saving work "outside" and "external" to us was that our justification does not refer to inner renewal by the Spirit or the life of Christ within us, but to the once-and-for-all work of Christ for us. Nevertheless, as Calvin wrote, "It is not enough to have Christ working outside of us for our salvation unless this gift becomes ours and is brought into us by the Holy Spirit." There must be a spiritual union with Christ if we are to receive the blessings. There must be faith if we are to be justified, sanctified, and glorified, and this faith we have by virtue of our union with Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What we desperately need, then, is a return to a practical, real-life, realization of the doctrine of the Trinity in our daily thinking: God the Father so loved the world that He gave Christ to His people and His people to Christ; then the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit. If the person and work of any member of the Trinity are overlooked or underplayed then to that degree we will be unbalanced Christians.

The Shy Member of the Trinity

The Holy Spirit, often called the "shy member of the Trinity" because He does not draw attention to Himself, but chiefly to Christ, is not, therefore, an impersonal "force" or appendage to the Godhead, but the vibrant, life-giving,

renewing partner of the Father and the Son, whose essence He shares. As the Father has assigned to the Son a name which is above every other name, so Jesus Himself declared, "It is good that I go, for if I go I will send the Comforter." In other words, Jesus measures the importance of the Holy Spirit's coming by the fact that it will compensate for the loss of His leaving. But our Lord further states, "It is He who testifies concerning Me." The Holy Spirit is essential in the redemptive mission, but He does not "blow His own horn." Rather, He trumpets the glories of Christ's person and work. I worry that the charismatic movement, generally speaking, misses this chief role of the Holy Spirit by trying to make Him the center of attention. The Holy Spirit refuses to be center stage, and any group or movement that seeks to put Him there gravely misses the point of His mission.

But if our Reformation tradition has erred, especially of late—and it has—it has been on the side of denying experience, subjectivity, emotion, and the application of redemption. Sanctification, inner renewal, life in the Spirit, victory over sin—because these have been so emphasized, twisted, disfigured, misinterpreted and misapplied in our day, we risk becoming cynical about some very holy matters, quenching the same Spirit who brought us everything Christ purchased for us. While we find it easy (and too often delightful) to apply to charismatics the apostle Paul's lament, "They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge," can anything be said in favor of knowledge without zeal? In fact, which is the more inexcusable offense: serving God in spite of poor theology, or ignoring Him in spite of better?

In every great move of God in His church, reformation (doctrinal purification) and revival (spiritual renewal and awakening) have gone hand-in-hand. In the Reformation, Luther was hardly afraid of the Holy Spirit. The German

Reformer wrote,

Without the Holy Spirit hearts are either hardened in sins or they despair.... Now, this is the article which must ever be and remain in operation; for creation is an established fact, and redemption, too, is finished. But the Holy Spirit carries on His work without ceasing until the Last Day....

In Calvin's crest there is a hand holding out a heart, with the inscription, "Behold, I offer you my heart, promptly and sincerely." The divorce between doctrine and piety, the mind and the heart, characteristic of both orthodox Reformation folk today on one side and pietists and charismatics on the other, is a course for disaster, not for either reformation or revival.

Reformation without revival can change the way we think, but it will never transform our attitudes, feelings, and actions. It will be a short-lived mid flight correction. Revival without reformation cannot happen in any case, for revival is the sovereign work of the Spirit of God, and He will not bless with revival a church that refuses to conform its teaching and preaching to the Word of God. The First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century was great because it called the colonies back to the Reformation truths and encouraged people to make those truths their own in an experiential, personal way. Combining the mind and the heart, Edwards, Whitefield, and others used the Word of God to bring the whole person into confrontation with the truth and presence of God's Spirit.

Conclusion

The Heidelberg Catechism has the right idea. After every major doctrine, it asks, "How does this comfort you?" Sometimes we get so caught up in defending particular doctrines and frustrated at being told so often, "But doctrine isn't practical," that we stop trying to answer that

question, "How does this comfort you?" Our own tradition calls us back to go beyond rehearsing doctrinal formulae and formal terms—not to ignore them, but to go beyond them, to take these great truths on board and use them in daily life. Further, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answers that the chief end of man is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Glorify, sure. That's a word we orthodox folk can understand. But enjoy? That's a bit too emotional. To experience God is a delight that only children enjoy. Like an awestruck fan, it's more comfortable to glorify God from the stands than to enjoy Him on the field. But let's not settle for anything less than God's very best.

Author

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