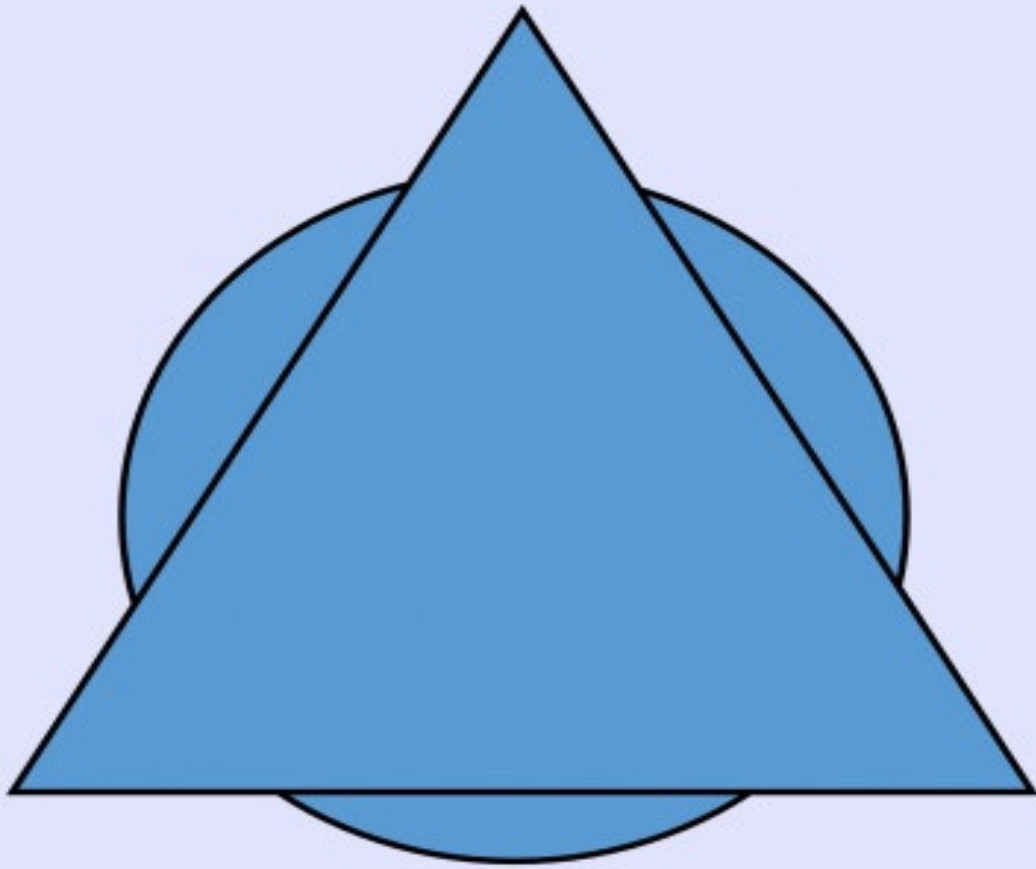


A Theology of the Holy Spirit



Gary W. Deddo



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

A Theology of the Holy Spirit

By Gary W. Deddo

Copyright 2016 Grace Communion International

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

[Part 4](#)

[Part 5](#)

[Part 6](#)

[Part 7](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Grace Communion Seminary](#)

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Part 1

Seeking to understand and know the Holy Spirit is a wonderful and rewarding endeavor. It ties in with every aspect of the Christian faith and life. But if there was ever a topic we are likely never to get to the bottom of, this one would qualify. The very name of this divine Person, the Holy Spirit, already tells us that we're in pretty deep. But we have a good amount of insight given to us by biblical revelation that can inform our understanding and help us stay away from pure speculation. God has seen fit to reveal himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and has provided and preserved teaching about the Holy Spirit. Because he wants us to know, trust and worship him, we by faith can dare to pursue understanding on that basis. But we proceed only by God's grace.

In this essay, we will only touch on a few key points that address questions that are, first, foundational to our faith in the Holy Spirit and, second, are of more immediate importance given current discussions and debates. It is our prayer that this essay will also help keep further explorations and other discussions in perspective. It is not possible in a short space to offer anything near a comprehensive view, so regard this as more of a beginning than an ending.

Jesus instructs Nicodemus

I'd like to start by recalling a passage from the Gospel of John. I'm referring to the story of Nicodemus. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, trying to explain to him something foundational regarding the nature and work of the Spirit. Jesus says to him, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." He continues,

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." The

wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:5-8)

Nicodemus wants to understand how God works. Jesus tells him that God works with us by the Holy Spirit. But Nicodemus is not satisfied with that answer. He wants to know, if he can, how the Spirit works! Jesus' answer to that "how" question amounts to his saying: How the Spirit works is like trying to talk about how the wind works. We see the effects, but we know very little about it, not even where it was a few moments ago or where it will end up going a few moments later! The Spirit is not predictable or controllable by us. We don't and can't have an answer as to how the Spirit works, the mechanics of it.

Apparently the "how" question is the wrong one to ask. Given Jesus' reply to Nicodemus, we can assume that it's not necessary for us to know, either, even to receive the benefits of the working of the Spirit! Jesus' "no-explanation" answer makes sense. How can we possibly put into words, concepts and ideas something about the Spirit, given that it is like the wind? You can't predict its movement or say much about it except that "it blows where it wills." The Spirit has a mind of his own! I think that's part of our experience. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills. We did not necessarily see it coming and don't necessarily see where it's going. So it is with the Spirit.

Focus on the biblical teaching

Why not stop right there? In some cases I think that might be the right thing to do. There is a lot of speculation taking place, especially about how the Spirit works. However, we are given other words and descriptions in biblical revelation that refer to the Holy Spirit. But not surprisingly, they don't tell us how the Spirit works nor especially how to bring the Spirit under

our control or how we can influence or predict the working of the Spirit. Rather, most of what we are given relates to the nature and purpose and character of the Spirit, not the mechanics of his working. All sorts of problems can be avoided if we simply pay attention to what biblical revelation actually tells us and resist using what we discover in ways that disregard Jesus' own teaching on the limits of our knowledge of the Holy Spirit's wind-like working.

Sometimes people think the Holy Spirit gets less attention than deserved—the short end of the stick, as we say, or short shrift. The complaint that the Spirit is under-represented can be heard both at the levels of theological discussion as well as at the daily and practical level of church life. That's a perfectly good concern to raise. We should be aware and take to heart all we are told regarding the Spirit. Neglecting any part of biblical witness is not a good idea. Faith seeks whatever understanding of the Spirit we are given, as in any other part of the Christian faith. But we can ask the counter question as well: Is it true that in practice and preaching we don't properly emphasize the Holy Spirit? If so, in what ways do we fail to give the Spirit sufficient attention? And, what measure or criteria can we use to evaluate whether we have under- (or over-) emphasized the Holy Spirit?

Whether we give full attention is best gauged by the norm of biblical teaching. We can look to Scripture to weigh its own emphasis on the Spirit relative to other matters. We can also consider the full range of insights it presents us. Then we can compare our own emphasis and range of teaching to the pattern and proportion found there. While we will not be able to conclude with something like a numerical measurement, I think there will be many indicators in biblical teaching that can greatly assist us in our process of discernment. We can also borrow understanding on this matter from teachers of the church down through the ages, including our present time, as it seems

in alignment with biblical revelation considered as a whole.

If there is some kind of deficit, then we'll also need to explore how best to correct that lack. We'll need to discern this issue as well, because there are various ways to correct for it. But some are not as useful or faithful as others. Some purported correctives promoted in recent times have seemed not only speculative but harmful to the health of the Body of Christ. What the Bible teaches can help us discern how best to make any kind of corrective action called for.

What are the basics of revelation about the Holy Spirit?

Recall that any theology built on biblical revelation must seek first and foremost to answer the question of “who” the God of the Bible is, for that is the central concern and controlling topic of the whole Bible. Biblical revelation is not geared nearly as much to answer the questions of how or why, where or when. So our understanding must begin by seeking to know first who the Holy Spirit is.

Let's begin with a review of the most basic truths we have been given about the Holy Spirit. Most fundamentally we are told about the Spirit's relationship with the Father and the Son. Those relationships identify who the Spirit of God is. Who is the Spirit? The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Spirit is one with the Father and one with the Son. Jesus is conceived by the Spirit, he has the Spirit for us and he ministers in and by the Spirit even in his atoning work on the cross. Jesus and the Father send the Spirit to us. The Spirit takes us to the Father through the Son. By the Spirit we are united to Christ so that we share in his life, life in fellowship and communion with the Father. And we share, by the Spirit, in Jesus' ongoing ministry in the church and in the world.

Notice that what Jesus teaches Nicodemus (and us) fits the overall pattern of revelation about the Spirit throughout Scripture. Nicodemus wanted to

know how a person can be “born again” (or it could be translated, “born from above”). But Jesus’ response indicates that such “how” questions can’t be answered in connection with the Spirit! Nicodemus is not told how the Spirit blows to bring us new life. Rather, Jesus’ answer to his “how” question identifies the “Who” behind the “how.” But Jesus does describe in a comprehensive way the effect of the working of the Spirit, namely, bringing us a new kind of life that comes from God. The Gospel of John goes on to shed even more light on the relationship of the Spirit to Jesus and to the Father, which includes the interrelationship of their missions and ministries. These relationships are especially prominent in chapters 13-17. The central concern throughout this Gospel remains their conjoint relationships. They are inseparable, always being together and always working together.

One in being—united in act

Borrowing now from the more developed doctrine of the Trinity, we can say in summary that the three divine Persons of the Trinity are “one in being.” This technical phrase helps us remember there are not three Gods, but only one. The Spirit is not a separate God that has his own independent mind, his own action, his own plan, and his own purpose. The Spirit is joined in one being and therefore joined in one mind, action, plan and purpose with the Father and the Son. Even the name “Holy Spirit” indicates to us the unity of the Spirit with Father and Son, since only God has the name “Holy.”

The point here is not to let our minds think about the Holy Spirit as an independent operator. That’s one of the biggest mistakes people make. Always remember, whatever the Spirit does, wherever the Spirit is at work, that Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, because they are one in being. They do not act separately, apart from one another. They act out of one shared mind, heart and purpose in unity with each other. St. Augustine famously summarized this in the fourth century: “All the works of God are

inseparable.”

A number of special phrases have been used down through the ages to convey the oneness or unity of the Persons besides saying that they are “one in being.” They are said to “co-exist.” They “co-inhere” in one another. They “in-exist” one another or they “mutually in-dwell” one another, they “co-envelop” one another or they “mutually interpenetrate” each other. Their oneness of being has been expressed by saying that the whole God is present in each of the divine Persons. The whole God is present in the Father. The whole God is present in the Son. The whole God is present in the Spirit. That’s to say: they’re one in being even though they’re distinguishable in person. An early creed sums it up this way: the Triune God is a Unity in Trinity and a Trinity in Unity.

Sharing all divine attributes

This means that the Holy Spirit is fully and completely divine and has from all eternity all the attributes that the Father and the Son have. The Spirit is not subordinate or less than the others. All that you can say of the Father, such as being omniscient, holy, omnipotent, eternal, and even being a Creator, can all be said of the Spirit (and can all be said of the Son). Dividing up among the Persons the attributes of God and the actions of God towards creation is ruled out because they are one in being.

That’s a hard rule for us to follow because we have developed poor habits of thinking and speaking in the church and likely were never taught otherwise. We also like to divide things up and align certain attributes or actions with the Father and others with the Son or the Holy Spirit. A typical way we do this is by saying the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Spirit perfects or sanctifies. We might think the Father is just and holy in comparison to the Son, who is merciful and gracious. But taking such a division of labor in a strict way would be an inaccurate, even misleading way

to speak of God. The distinct Persons of the Trinity do not have separate jobs or wear different hats or play different roles that they accomplish by themselves. God acts as the one being that God is. His being does not fragment in mind, will, purpose or in action.

Therefore, everything you can say about the eternal nature and character of the Father, you can say about the Son and you can say about the Holy Spirit. They are each all-powerful, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, good, merciful, righteous and holy. They are all to be worshiped together because they're one in being. So we can say of our worship—we worship the Father through the Son

and in the Spirit. Or, we pray to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. And we proclaim that the Father has redeemed us through the Son and in the Spirit. The whole God is our Savior!

The unity of the being (and therefore of the action, character and attributes of God) is one of the most fundamental things to hold on to and to watch out for when we go on to say other things about the Spirit. We want to avoid talking as if the divine Persons are separate, wear different hats, have divergent purposes or as if they're operating independently of one another. Simply remembering they're one in being will prevent a lot of problems down the theological road.

Next, we'll look at some of the distinctions in the united acts of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Part 2

One in being, distinct in Person

As noted in part one of this series, it's important to avoid thinking that the divine Persons have divergent purposes or that they operate independently of one another. The Triune God is *one in being*, and the three Divine Persons are *one in act*. Whether in creation, redemption or in the perfecting of the creation, the Persons act together as the one God. We see this in the many Scriptures where the Persons are linked in a particular act (work) of God. However, there are times when Scripture shows the Persons working in distinct ways. For example, the Son becomes incarnate in a way that is distinct from the Father and the Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit descends and indwells the believing church in a way that is distinct from the Father and the Son.

Even when two or three of the Persons are shown to be joined in a particular act of God, there often is a distinction as to their particular role in that act. Scripture seems to indicate that each Person is involved in a particular way in every act that the Persons do together. Each, from their own "angle," contributes in a unique way to the unified act. We could say that one Person "takes the lead" in certain actions: the Father in creation, the Son in atonement, the Spirit in the perfecting of creation. To speak of such distinctions in this way is fine, so long as we don't think of the Persons as acting separately or as being out of phase with one another in what is a conjoint act. In formal theology this is called the doctrine of *appropriation*. An act can be "appropriated" to the Person of the Trinity who takes the lead, as long as the other two are not regarded as having nothing to do with it, but are co-involved, each in their own way.

We should not think that the distinction, in their contribution to an act

external to their triune being, is what *makes* or *constitutes* their being as distinct in their Persons. The error here is to think, for instance, that being the Creator is what makes the Father different in Person from the Son, or that being Incarnate is what makes the Son different in Person from the Father. No, rather the Father is the Father and the Son the Son and the Spirit the Spirit whether or not they perform any actions external to their own triune being. They are distinguished by their internal relationships, not by their external actions. The being of God does not depend on his relationship to something that is external to God, to something that is not God.

As long as we don't leave the Son and the Spirit behind, we can say the Father leads in creation. We can say the Son leads in our redemption. But if we think the Father is absent or has a different view, attitude, purpose or intention for the cross than does the Son, then we have split the Trinity apart, placed them at odds with one another! Even in Jesus' earthly life, we need to remember that he only does what he sees the Father doing. He only says what the Father is saying. They're saying things together. They're doing things together. They're never separate because they're one in being.

It is proper to say the Son takes the lead and that only the Son is incarnate. We can affirm that the Son physically suffers on the cross and not the Father or Spirit. Not being incarnate in our humanity, they cannot physically suffer and die. But if we think the Father was absent or the Spirit was gone on vacation and wasn't around when Jesus was on the cross, then we've strayed way off the theological path. The Spirit and the Father were present with Jesus, each in their own non-incarnate way. Jesus said, "Father into your hands, I commend my spirit." In the book of Hebrews we read, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to worship the living God" (9:14). They're all acting together in

Christ's redeeming work. Yes, we can say one leads. But don't let them fall apart just because one is leading.

The Spirit perfects, but he perfects human beings with the perfection that is accomplished by Christ. The Spirit shares with us the holiness and the sanctification of Jesus in our humanity. He doesn't give us a spiritualized or divine perfection, a non-bodily, nonhuman existence. Rather, the Spirit joins us to Christ's glorified human body, mind and soul.

The Spirit makes us to share in Jesus' self-sanctification. The work of the Spirit is not separate from the work of the Son, but the Spirit leads in dwelling in us now. We can talk about the ways the Spirit leads, but we shouldn't think of the Spirit as branching off and saying, "Father and Son, you've done a good job over there, but now I've got to go do something over here that you don't have anything to do with. It's my turn to do my own thing." To think in that way is a mistake. That could happen only if God wasn't one in being and was three beings—*tritheism!* We don't want to go there.

We can distinguish between the various contributions the Father, the Son and the Spirit make by the way they take their lead, but we don't want to separate them or place them in any kind of opposition or in tension with each other. We don't want to say that their differing contributions to what they accomplish together are what make them distinct in Person from all eternity. We can *distinguish* but we should not *separate*. The divine Persons are one in being and distinct in Person, not only in their internal and eternal being, but also in terms of what they do towards creation, in creation, redemption and consummation.

Projecting on God

Why do we get tripped up in this? There are a number of reasons, but one of them is that we tend to think of God in ways we think of ourselves. We

start with ourselves and then try to get to our understanding of God. Think of how we usually distinguish ourselves from each other. How do I know I'm not you and you're not me? I note: you have a different body. You're over there and I'm over here. You do this but I do that. You live there but I live here. You think that's funny, but I don't. I want X, but you want Y. We're different in all these ways, and that's how we know we are distinct persons.

So we can project this perspective on God and think that's how the Father, Son and Spirit are distinguished. The Father is over here, the Spirit's over there. The Father wants A and the Son wants B. They each have different jobs to do. We try to distinguish them from each other in the same way we distinguish ourselves. But God is not a creature like we are, so we can't just take the idea of how we distinguish ourselves and apply it in the same way to God. Thinking that way would work only if God were a creature.

Names and relations

The essential way we have been given to distinguish between the divine Persons is by means of their different names: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The different names reveal a difference of their Persons. That is also why we believe there are three, not four or two. We are given three names, not two or seven. The names we are given are revelatory of real distinctions in God, otherwise they wouldn't be revelatory! They are not just arbitrary words, concepts, ideas, or conventional labels. So we address God in worship, in prayer, by means of these three names. In doing this we follow Jesus' example and instruction. He uses these names in his relationship to the Father and Spirit and directs us to do so as well. For example, he instructs us: "Pray like this: Our Father in heaven..."

Those names also represent and reveal unique relationships. The Father has a different relationship with the Son than the Son has with the Father. The

Spirit has a different relationship to the Father than does the Son. The names identify and reveal to us unique relationships. Following biblical teaching, we can also find distinct designations for the different relationships.

Corresponding to the Father is the relationship of begetting to the Son. Begetting is the special term used to describe more particularly how the Son comes from the Father. The Father begets the Son. Begetting indicates a certain kind of relationship. In the early church they recognized that begetting is different from making. What is made is of a different kind of thing than the maker. But what is begotten is of the identical kind of being. So we say that the Son is begotten, indicating a unique kind of relationship to the Father. The Son is distinct from the Father but of the identical kind of being, namely, divine, fully God. The Son doesn't beget the Father and the Father isn't begotten by the Son. They each have a different relationship with each other, and that difference of relationship (which is eternal and internal to God) is what makes them distinct from one another. So we say that the Father begets (is not begotten of the Son) and we say that the Son is begotten (does not beget the Father).

The unique names and relationships identify who the Persons are. They are who they are in relationship with each other. Without the relationships with each other, they would not be who they are. They are not interchangeable. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father. Being the begetter and being the begotten one are different and not reversible. There's a direction to the relationships, and we can't reverse them. We can't say the Son begets the Father. The Son has always been the begotten Son. The Father has always begotten the Son. The Son is eternally the Son, and the Father, eternally Father. That's why we can identify them as the divine Persons of Father and Son.

But the words/names don't explain everything. They represent what we

have to go on, and they explain what the names do and don't mean as far as we can tell. In the case of the Father and Son, we have to rule out (or "think away," as Athanasius said) some aspects of the meaning of the words begotten or begetting as used of human creatures. Among creatures these words include the idea of a time sequence. But when it comes to God, the aspect of time doesn't apply. God is eternal and so are the divine Persons. The Father generates (begets) the Son from all eternity. Time sequence doesn't apply to God. There never was a time when the Son was not. The Son was always the begotten Son of the Father, which is to say the Son is eternally the Son and the Father is eternally the Father, begetting the Son. The discipline of theology is to discern where and how words when used to refer to God must be used differently from how they are used of creatures. This task would be impossible if we did not have biblical revelation to lead us.

The Holy Spirit proceeds or spirates

What about the Spirit? There's always been the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has eternal relationships with the Father and the Son. We use a special word to talk about those relationships. The New Testament gives us a clue as to one word good to use. We say the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and, or through, the Son (John 15:26). Another word has also been used down through the ages to indicate that unique relationship: "spirates."

These words indicate unique and non-interchangeable relationship. The name and relationship indicate who the Spirit is. The Spirit would not be the Spirit without spirating from the Father and the Son. The Father and Son wouldn't be Father and Son without the Spirit proceeding. The relationship of the Spirit is essential to who the Spirit is and so to who the Triune God is. God wouldn't be God without the Person of the Holy Spirit.

We likely want to ask, "How does that work? How does a 'procession' "

work in God?” We don’t know. We can’t say exactly how it is different from begetting or being begotten. Along with the name, Holy Spirit, the word simply indicates that there is a unique kind of relationship of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, one that is different from the relationship of the Son to the Father. It indicates that the Spirit is *from* the Father and *through* the Son in a way that the Son and Father do not proceed from the Spirit and are not the Spirit. With this unique relationship, the Spirit is not interchangeable with the other Persons. It means that the Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit. We affirm in this way that God has always been a Trinity. There never was a time when God was not Triune.

In summary, the three divine Persons eternally exist in unique relationships, and that is what is essential to their being distinct Persons. That’s it: they have unique relations. Each one has a different relationship with the others. We don’t know how to explain what all that means, but we use unique words because there are unique relations. That’s also why we address them according to their unique names that correspond with the relations.

The Father is the Father, not the Son. The Son is the Son, not the Father. The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son. We have unique names to indicate the unique persons and they have unique relationships and they’re not interchangeable. In these ways we honor what we are given by Jesus and through Scripture as if what we are given is revelatory, as if God has actually fulfilled his will and desire to make himself known to us so that we now have accurate and faithful ways to speak about and know God.

When God through Jesus says, to address him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit we’re being told something real and accurate about God. We’re getting to know God as Jesus knows the Father and Spirit. He’s sharing with us his insider knowledge of God so we too can know and trust the whole triune

God. Recall John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” The triune name identifies who God is, which God we’re speaking of, and even what kind of God, God is. God is the Triune God. That’s the only God that is or has ever been. God is Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is the Father. The Son is the Son. The Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Don’t separate them — they’re one in being. In that way we avoid the misunderstanding/heresy that has been called tritheism. But don’t collapse them into one Person with no relationships; they’re distinct in Person. In that way we avoid the opposite misunderstanding/heresy that has been called modalism.

Endnote: We are attempting to take what we are given in biblical revelation and see what understanding can come of it. There will always be much more, and what we come up with can be further refined, corrected and sometimes even done away with. It’s always faith seeking understanding. We do this seeking in fellowship with the rest of the church down through the ages for some additional guidance, inspiration and insight.

The doctrine of appropriation held down through the ages is that the various acts of God towards creation can be appropriated to one or the other of the divine Persons. One way of thinking of this appropriation is to think of one Person “taking the lead” in any particular act of God, such as creation. However, “taking the lead” should not be taken in a temporal way, as if there is a time interval. There isn’t. The Persons act as one. There is no temporal before and after in God between the Persons, and no separation of the Persons. They are one in being and one in act. But the kind of oneness they have does not seem to rule out some kind of difference in their united contribution to those united acts as conveyed in biblical revelation.

So saying one “takes the lead” is not meant to prompt the question of “when” the Father did X compared to “when” the Son did X or Y. That would (wrongly) be assuming a temporal order, which is ruled out, as is any idea of the divine Persons acting independently.

The distinction of the Father and Son’s contribution to creation is conveyed in biblical terms by the idea of creation being “through” the Son. “Through” suggests another agent working, one through another. That is, the Father works “through” the Son in creating. The word “through” doesn’t make sense if there is only one agent acting, the Son. God speaking creation into existence in Genesis gives the same sense that aligns with what is said in John 1 concerning the Son being the Word of God the Father. God (the Father) and the Word are united and distinct at the same time. The Father speaks—he speaks through his Word (his Son). The result is creation.

So it's verses like these that suggest the Father and Son work in a structured or ordered way in creating—and that they don't work separately. The idea of "through" can be represented by the idea of "taking the lead" towards creation; the Father through the Son. But it's not meant to be taken in a temporal way nor should it be taken to mean a separation in act. In that way the more fundamental understandings of the Trinity are at least not undone.

But if the doctrine of appropriation (with its idea of "taking the lead") is found to not be useful, not much is lost if it is left out or made of little use. The doctrine requires careful use because it can be misunderstood.

Part 3

The Triune God: one in being, three distinct Divine Persons

Earlier, we saw that God is one in being and yet exists eternally as three distinct Divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In seeking to communicate this truth about God, some use the catch-phrase, one-in-three and three-in-one. Though it's not wrong, it can be misleading if people understand it to mean that God is both three and one of the exact same thing. But God is not one and three beings; nor is he one and three Persons. The "oneness" and the "threeness" of God refer to two aspects of who God is. "One" refers to God's one being while "three" refers to the three Divine Persons.

To more accurately convey this truth, I recommend this statement: God is one in being and three in Divine Persons. Now let's unpack that statement and begin to focus on the main topic of this essay: the Divine Person known as the Holy Spirit.

Three Divine Persons

When we say "three Divine Persons," we don't mean "persons" exactly like you and me. We humans are created in the image of God, but God is not an image of us. Divine Persons are not exactly the same as human persons. If God was three persons exactly like we are, then God would be three beings, since human persons are separate beings. When speaking about God, we're not using the word "person" in exactly the same way we do about ourselves.

Recall that the discipline of theology is to make sure we don't talk about God as if God was a creature. We have to avoid projecting human ideas on God. This discipline of theology takes a while for people to catch on to, but that is why we're teaching people to think about God according to God's nature, not to think about God, for example, as a big human being in the sky!

In speaking of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as Divine (not human) Persons, we are affirming that these personal names and personal relationships between them reveal to us the reality of God. God knows himself as Father, Son and Spirit. There are real and eternal relationships in God. Elsewhere in Scripture these relationships are also characterized as a mutual knowing, loving, glorifying and oneness.

What we think about human persons in living, loving and holy relationship with each other does, to a certain degree, reflect the truth about God. God is more like a community of three human persons than like any other created thing. Or, it would be better to switch this around and say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the original and real Persons, and since we are somewhat like them, we can borrow the term “person” to speak of ourselves as individual human creatures! God is not more like a single, lonely, isolated individual. He is not, as the philosopher Leibnitz declared, a Monad!

Perichoresis and triunity

Reflecting on the unity and distinction of the Divine Persons, some down through the ages have thought of the church as imaging the Trinity: one in Christ, yet many members. But the church does not and cannot have the same kind of unity as do the three Divine Persons. Their unity is their oneness of being. Our unity cannot match that. The kind of unity that God has is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is a unity so unique that early church teachers eventually coined a word to represent that one-of-a-kind divine unity. That word is *perichoresis*. This Greek word is often not translated because it has a unique meaning that can't be translated easily. It means, most literally, to envelope one another or to make space for one another. It has also been translated as mutually indwelling each other, or having a co-inherence in each other, or in-existing in one another.

The language of perichoresis represents Jesus' teaching that he is "in the Father and the Father is in [him]" (John 14:11). It is also just what we see lived out in the Gospels as we watch and hear Jesus in his dynamic relationship with the Father and the Spirit. This unique unity has been also explained by saying that the whole of God, all three Persons, are present in each of the Persons. Each, though fully God in being, is distinct in Person so that there is a real relationship and exchange going on from all eternity between the three Divine Persons. As one fairly early creed (The Athanasian Creed) summed it up: the unity of God is a Trinity and the Trinity of God is a Unity. We can try to put this truth into a single word: triunity.

Everything we can say about the Father we can say about the Son and we can say about the Spirit except that they are not each other. Why? Because they mutually indwell one another and are equally God, sharing all the divine attributes together as one God. They have an absolutely unique kind of unity so that they are distinct in Divine Person but united in being. Unlike creatures, the unity of being doesn't undo the difference of Person, and the distinction of Person doesn't undo the unity of being. Remembering this will help us get our language squared away so that we don't grossly misrepresent God.

What kind of God?

The meaning of what we're saying here about God is, of course, deep and profound. It's beyond our most descriptive words, for words are incapable of fully explaining the nature of God. The early church understood that the purpose of words (as in our doctrinal formulations) was to protect the mystery of God's nature, not explain it away. Nevertheless our words about God are important, as far as they go, in faithfully identifying who God is. When carefully stated in the context of all of Scripture, they show us something significant about the kind of God this God is. They point to the

fact that God has his being by being a fellowship, a communion of Divine Persons. Along with the biblical writers, we can sum up the quality of those relationships as all being forms of love. Begetting, being begotten and proceeding are all relationships of loving exchange.

This is why we can say with John, “God is love.” We can see what Jesus means and why he says he loves the Father and the Father has loved him from all eternity. It makes sense then that Jesus tells us that as the Father has loved him, so he loves us. Further, as he has loved us, so we ought to love one another. No wonder then that the ways of the people of God can be comprehensively summed up in the two commands to love God and love neighbor.

Those relationships, internal and eternal to God, are filled with holy loving. God is a fellowship kind of God—a communion kind of God. God is not just a lonely being floating out there from all eternity “looking for someone to love.” God is the fullness of holy love, the fullness of fellowship and communion. Bringing it all together, we can say the Father and Son have their fellowship and communion in the Spirit.

This God of love, fellowship and communion is very different than an isolated individual God who can’t love until there’s something else outside of God to love. The Triune God is very different from a god who exists with no internal and eternal relationships, one in whom there is no exchange, no giving and receiving, in whom there is no reciprocity of knowing, loving and glorifying of one another. Such a god would be very different from the God we come to know through Jesus Christ, according to Scripture.

To summarize: the Christian God is a fellowship, a communion. God the Trinity has his being by being in relationships of holy loving. Those relationships are eternally begetting, being begotten and proceeding—each a unique form of holy, loving exchange. Those are the key words that we have

to point to this amazing reality of who God is.

Those are the essentials to remember if we're going to talk about the Holy Spirit. We have to remember who the Spirit is. If the Spirit first exists in relationship with the Father and the Son, then that's the first thing, not the Spirit's relationship to us or our relationship to the Spirit. Those come afterwards. There was a time when nothing other than God existed and the Holy Spirit was perfectly happy being the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Spirit doesn't need us to be the Spirit. There was a time when there was no creation. God was then the fullness of fellowship in Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. While we want to talk about the Spirit's relationship to us, we should remember that that's a secondary matter. The being of the Spirit is being one with the Father and the Son.

Having completed an introduction to Trinitarian doctrine, what can we go on to say about the Holy Spirit?

Who is the Holy Spirit?

Who is the Spirit? The simplest answer is that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. That means that whenever we speak of the Father and Son, or hear about them in the Scripture, since God is one in being, the Spirit is also involved in some way, whether we know it or not or explicitly say so. The Spirit always has something to do with the Father and Son. We don't always remember this connection, and we probably should make it more explicit more often. So, when speaking of the Father or the Son we do not exclude the Spirit, because the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Reference to the Son involves the Spirit and the other way around. We can't talk about the Holy Spirit apart from the Son because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son.

If we assume we can think of one without the other, we're misrepresenting who the Spirit is, because the Spirit has his being, he is the

Person he is, by being in an essential relationship to the Father and Son. We don't always spell this out, but nevertheless we should remember to make the connections. A full understanding will always seek to grasp each of the divine Persons in their relationships with each other.

The who, not how of the Spirit

Seeking further understanding, we often look for answers to “how” questions. This is particularly the case when the topic is the Holy Spirit. We ask “how” questions like, How does God operate his providence over all of history and nature and everything else? Or, How did Jesus become united to a human nature? Or, How did God save us? Or, How does God perfect us? Or, How does God communicate his word and will to us? Or How do we receive the gifts and fruit of the Spirit or the help of the Spirit in prayer?

Many of the “how” questions about God are actually answered by a “who” answer, which points to the Spirit. The answer to “how” God does something often is, simply, “by the Spirit.” Such a “who” answer, although naming one of the Triune Persons, often is regarded as insufficient. The follow-up questions reveal why. We want to know the mechanisms, the machinery. We want to know the chain of cause and effect. Somehow we have come to believe that simply identifying the agent responsible for what takes place does not constitute an intelligible answer. So we press on to the “how” question. But often in Scripture, the only answer given to a “how” question, is simply the identification of the agency of the Holy Spirit. We are simply told who does something and in many cases, that is the full extent of the explanation. Question: How? Answer: By the Holy Spirit! We can know the “who,” without knowing the “how”!

Did Jesus tell Nicodemus the mechanism of how one becomes born from above? Did he offer him a technique? Did he list a bunch of rules that if we do this and that and the other, then bingo, it happens? No. He explained that,

because the Spirit works more like the wind, no explanation like that can be given. The working of the Spirit can't be controlled or predicted by us. That's the nature of the Spirit — both who he is and how he works!

Many of our questions, especially those regarding the Christian life, are answered simply by identifying the agency of the Holy Spirit. And that's it. But we always seem to want more, that involves some mechanism, technique or steps. We feel that there needs to be some combination of conditions filled in order to get the Spirit to work. There is quite a bit of teaching in Christian circles these days that speculates and even invents techniques and methods to fill in the gap between what biblical revelation teaches and what we, like Nicodemus, often want—answers to our “how” questions that specify exactly what conditions we need to fill to get the Spirit to work, or work more effectively. However, shouldn't we stop where Scripture stops rather than carry on with mere speculations?

Many of the current controversies or differences of emphasis between various teachings and ministries actually have to do with their lining up behind a favorite technique or mechanism or a particular list of conditions needed to get what we're looking for from the Spirit. The arguments and controversies are most often over which teaching offers the best “how to.” But if we go down that road, we've already forgotten most of who the Spirit is. On that path we can easily be tempted to start asking all kinds of questions. Some can mistakenly assume God can be divided up. So the question arises, “Can you have the Spirit without having the Son?” Or, “Can you have the Son without having the Spirit?”

Others assume that the presence and blessing of the Spirit comes not by grace but by technique or by fulfilling certain conditions, and so they ask, “What steps do we need to take before we can effectively have and use the gifts of the Spirit?” But such an approach makes the grace of the Holy Spirit

dependent on our works, our efforts! The result is that we then approach the Spirit by works rather than by faith in God's grace! We replay the same error that Paul wrote the church in Galatia about.

“By the Spirit of the Father and Son” answers these “how” questions. We can try to use all kinds of Bible verses to work out answers to these questions and controversies. But the problem with that approach is that the nature and character of the Holy Spirit is forgotten, even lost. For example, if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in being, can you then have one without the other? No, you can't, not in an exclusive way. You can't have one completely without the other. The unity of the Persons in action is indicated in biblical revelation where we are told that no one truly proclaims Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). We are told that when the Spirit of sonship comes upon us, we cry out “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). God doesn't split up, with the Son heading off saying, “Goodbye, Spirit. I hope you catch up later.” God is one in being but also God is one in action. They act and work together.

Many if not most current controversies have forgotten some of the most fundamental things about who God the Holy Spirit is. Our thoughts can then head in all sorts of wrong directions, and we end up speculating in order to answer misguided questions. We grab random Bible verses and try to throw them together to come up with an answer. As a result, different groups ended up gravitating toward certain verses to prove their points. But in doing so, they left behind the more fundamental teaching that points to the reality of who the Spirit is. The fundamental thing, the answer to the “who” question regarding the Spirit, is often forgotten, and so the answers promoted are inconsistent with the deeper, more central truth of the Spirit, who is one in being and one in working with the Father and the Son and who ministers by grace.

Biblical revelation about the ministry of the Spirit is often presented in connection with the mention of at least one other Divine Person. Scripture tells us that only the Holy Spirit can break into a person's pride and enable them to recognize that Jesus is their Lord and Savior, come in the flesh as one of us (1 John 4:2). It tells us that we only have the Spirit because he is sent by the Son, from the Father (John 15:26). It also says that if anyone is convicted by the message of the gospel, it is because the Spirit is at work (1 Thessalonians 1:3-5). Scripture declares that Jesus sends the Spirit to bring persons to an acknowledgment of sin and the need for judgment and righteousness (John 16:8).

When the "Spirit of sonship" comes upon us, we cry out "Abba, Father," Paul tells us (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). Why do we cry out "Abba, Father"? If we know who the Spirit is, the answer is clear —because God is one in being and one in action. That's amazing! The whole Trinity is involved in that one simple and profound cry of our hearts. When the Spirit acts, he doesn't act apart from the Father but with the Son, too—he brings our worship all together.

So when Jesus says "Go out and baptize them in the name" (singular) and then gives them the one name: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," we should not be surprised. The name we're given matches the reality: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the one name of God. A simple way to say this is that God is the Father-Son-Holy-Spirit-God, as if it's one name instead of three names, because it really isn't three separate names, but a threefold-name. We're baptized into the one Name of the three Divine Persons. Jesus' instruction makes sense if that's who God is, and therefore that's how he acts and has his being as the Triune God—one in being and three in Divine Persons.

All our thinking about the Holy Spirit needs to be contained within these Trinitarian boundaries. That will help us interpret Scripture properly and also

see more deeply into Scripture so that we come to know the reality of who the Spirit is ever more profoundly. Good theology doesn't take us away from Scripture—it helps us see how it comes together even more coherently. Good theology doesn't answer every question we might have, but it does answer the questions God most wants us to grasp and proclaim. So, we want to help others read Scripture, interpret Scripture and bring all the pieces of Scripture together.

In the next section, we'll look further at the importance of the Holy Spirit.

Part 4

The importance of the Spirit

Why the need to talk about the Spirit beyond simply acknowledging him? First, because a disconnection between the Divine Persons can develop in our understandings of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Many churches end up emphasizing and talking almost exclusively about the Father. Others restrict their focus to the Son, while others have a tendency to put the spotlight on the Spirit. Such understandings are fragmented, but that doesn't mean God is fragmented. Misunderstandings can trip us up in our faith and in our lived relationship to God. We want our understanding to be faithful and coherent with the truth of God as all three persons, not dividing them up.

As faith seeks understanding, we aim to improve our understanding so that it more faithfully matches the reality. You can recognize and interact with things better when you have improved understanding. As we gain a clearer understanding of the Spirit in relationship to the Father and Son, we'll better recognize the ministry of the Spirit. We can more joyfully and peacefully join in with the Spirit when our understanding matches who the Spirit is and then how we're involved in what the Spirit is doing.

What theological understanding of the Spirit can offer

Theological work aims to fix things on our side, not fix things on God's side. We can grow in understanding even if the reality is not changed by our better grasp. If we have misunderstandings, it will be good to clear them up. As the Holy Spirit is working, it is far better to be aware of that work compared to being unaware. But our better understanding does not make something real or change the nature of the Spirit's working. God does not all of a sudden become the Holy Spirit when we recognize the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not tied up, unable to do anything until we figure him out. That

would be like saying the wind is tied up until we can figure it out. No, the Spirit still works, but we may not recognize it. And by recognizing it we may more fully participate, we become more involved, become more in tune with the truth and reality of who God is. So we're trying to make sure our understanding matches the truth about who God is, such as the Spirit has been revealed to us.

Our understanding may be fragmented, but God is not fragmented. Our understanding of the working in the ministry of the Spirit may be fragmented, but that doesn't mean the actual working of the Spirit is fragmented. We're not controlling God by our understanding. If that were the case, then God would be dependent on us. We want to sort this all out and let our understanding be as full as it can be.

How do we fix the problem of a lack of awareness and understanding of the Spirit? How do we bring our understanding of the ministry of the Spirit up to speed in a way that recognizes the Spirit is one of the three Divine Persons of the Trinity? Some are concerned about the need to speak proportionately about the Holy Spirit, giving the Holy Spirit equal time or equal emphasis. What's behind that concern?

There are situations where our faith and understanding of the Spirit is lacking, and so lags behind the Father and Son. Wherever we find this situation, it ought to be set right. We should become familiar with all that's been revealed to us about the Spirit and then pass that on to others. In those cases, additional teaching and focus on the Spirit is called for (although this should never be the exclusive focus). In that way our faith and knowledge of the Spirit will become better aligned with the other Divine Persons.

Objections to pursuing the Holy Spirit

In pursuing this kind of correction, we may run into some obstacles that contributed to the unbalanced situation in the first place. For example, some

persons might not be interested in the Spirit and so have neglected the topic. Hopefully they will come around and see that the Holy Spirit is no less important than the Father and Son.

Others may not want to know or have much to do with the Holy Spirit because the Spirit seems kind of, well, spooky. We usually don't want to be around ghosts, especially one you can't control or that you can't identify or you can't nail down, can't make a part of your program and who is like the wind (or maybe a typhoon!).

Some people may be avoiding the Spirit because they have worries. That's not the best reason not to have an interest in the Holy Spirit. Their fears may be based in part (or perhaps in whole) on ignorance or misinformation about the nature of the power and working of the Holy Spirit. Those who have misgivings may not have a good grasp on who the Holy Spirit is. The Spirit isn't like a ghost or something to be fearful of in the sense that it might do us harm.

Helping people know that the Spirit is Holy, is good, is crucial. The best way to do this is to emphasize regularly that the Spirit has the same character and purpose as Jesus. There is no slippage in mind, attitude, or aim between the two. The best way to identify the working of the Spirit is to compare it to what we know about Jesus. It is his Spirit. If it doesn't feel, sound, taste and work like Jesus, then it is not his Spirit. Knowing Jesus is how we best discern the spirits, that is, which is the Holy Spirit.

Some could think the Spirit is now irrelevant to our current situation or no longer available to us, at least as in the days of the early church. That would be another poor reason to have little or no interest in the Spirit. While it's acceptable to raise questions about the working of the Spirit today, there is no biblical teaching designed to inform us that the Spirit cannot or will not continue to work as in the days of the early church. This does not mean that

the Spirit cannot adjust the mode of his ministry as, in his wisdom, he sees fit from time to time and place to place. He can in his sovereign grace make adjustments. However, there is no reason that the Spirit could not continue to work today as in the days of the New Testament. That is up to the Spirit.

Those who dogmatically conclude that the Spirit does not work and cannot work in the same manner have argued from their own experience, and on that basis they have selected and interpreted Scripture to explain their lack of experiencing the working of the Spirit. But such arguments do not have binding authority in the church—and especially upon the Spirit! It might simply be that the Spirit at some times and places chooses to work behind the scenes, mostly undetected even perhaps by Christians—and that's why the church's experience of the Spirit is not evenly distributed all the time.

Thinking that the ministry and manifestation of the Spirit depends on us, what we do, what condition we're in, what we want, or on our level of understanding, is to put the cart way before the horse. If the Spirit depends on us in these ways, then the Spirit does not (cannot?) minister by grace. The ministry of the Spirit is being regarded as a reward for works. Whatever the Spirit does and however he works, it is all of grace. We do not condition the Spirit to act. The Spirit is faithful whether or not we are.

Some are concerned about abuses and misrepresentations of the Spirit. There are legitimate reasons for folks to be cautious or concerned. There have been, since the days of the New Testament, abuses, misuses and misleading teaching about the Spirit. There are many cases where an emphasis on the Holy Spirit has contributed to conflict and church splits. There have been deceitful things said and done in the name of the Holy Spirit. In connection with an emphasis on the Spirit, some things have occurred that are bizarre and in some cases even abusive. Are these good reasons to neglect the Spirit? No. Any good thing can be misused. As an ancient maxim states: abuse does

not rule out proper use.

If these things can be guarded against, all the while coming to understand and welcome the ministry of the Spirit, I think the way can be clear to address any imbalance. But checks and balances, spiritual discipline and discernment need to be in place provided by wise pastors and elders ministering under the authority of the whole teaching of Scripture. That is a legitimate requirement to guard against spiritual pride and abuse, disunity and division. There are real dangers.

Equal proportions?

Given all that, setting up a goal of equality of emphasis or parity of focus on the three Divine Persons is not the best way to go about making a healthy correction if there is an imbalance or ignorance about the Spirit. There are valid reasons why there necessarily always will be a certain kind of faithful disproportion or inequality of emphasis or focus on the Spirit compared to the other two Persons of the Trinity. The reason has to do with the nature and character of the Spirit.

There are good reasons why the church down through the ages has had less to say and did not give equal concentration or time to the Spirit. Here are some good reasons why the Spirit will not get equal time or focus in our level of explanation or concentration of attention.

First, there is less biblical information about the Holy Spirit. In the Gospels there are plenty of references to the Spirit, but many more concerning Jesus and his relationship with the Father. Jesus speaks of the Spirit and not just as side comments. The Spirit is an essential element to his message and life, and is not less important. But he talks and tells much more in detail about the Father and his relationship with him.

The same goes for Paul's epistles. There is plenty of important teaching there about the Spirit and living in relationship with the Spirit. But there as

well, we find significantly more discussion and detail about the person and work of the Son and his connection to the Father. The disproportionate detailed treatment does not signal an inequality of importance, since it is clear that faith in the Holy Spirit and his ministry is not only important, but vitally connected to the ministry of Jesus.

In the Old Testament there are significant references to the Spirit, including landmark prophecies about the Spirit in Joel and Ezekiel. Yet, throughout the Old Testament there is far more consideration given to God the creator, covenant maker and deliverer of Israel. Again, this disproportion does not indicate that the Spirit is less important. We simply are given less detailed information about this important subject.

Though the Father and Spirit are named together in Scripture, we are given little detail about their relationship. The Spirit is said to “proceed” from the Father and is “sent” from the Father in the Son’s name. We find their actions described in a way that indicates they are coordinated with each other. When Jesus acts he does so in or by the Spirit, including on the cross (Hebrews 9:14). But we do not have a detailed description of the Spirit’s interaction with the Father like we find for the Son, for instance, in Jesus’ prayer in John 17.

Given the whole of biblical revelation, we do not have near as much written about the Spirit as we do about God the Father and the Son. Though the information given is unequal, disproportional, that is no excuse not to pay careful attention to the insight we are given about the Spirit. That may be a problem that needs to be corrected. Perhaps we should give more care to what has been made available to us. But if our speech and understanding are going to remain dependent upon biblical revelation, then we shouldn’t be surprised that our considerations will follow the same unequal pattern. So having less to say does not necessarily demonstrate neglect or fear or

disinterest in the Spirit.

Misguided attempts at correction

Given that the Scripture revelation is disproportional, we could artificially try to give the Spirit “equal time” by extending what we say through the fabrication of long chains of argumentation leading to various conclusions. But such speculations about the Spirit, even if they start with a bit of Scripture, can offer nothing secure, since logical inferences (even from some true starting point) are never necessarily true. In fact, that’s where a lot of heresy and bad teaching about the Spirit comes from.

Some preachers and teachers have taken a few biblical verses and then made strings of logical arguments from them, often not paying attention to other biblical teaching regarding the Spirit. But the conclusions reached in that way are speculative. In reaching them a lot had to added, such as making someone’s experience (and their understanding of it!) normative for all Christians, in order to establish a purportedly doctrinal statement. But all that additional information, and the logical chains developed on them, do not amount to reliable Christian doctrine.

So giving the Spirit more attention by generating more information than we actually have been given is not a recommended or reliable procedure. But sometimes a desire to rebalance things and give greater emphasis to the Spirit has resulted in such practices. We should not follow suit.

Why is less revealed about the Spirit?

Is there some reason why there is unequal information about the Holy Spirit in Scripture? It seems to me the disproportion ought to be expected because of what we do find out about the Spirit. Given the very nature of the Spirit and the nature of his work, it makes sense that there is less to say concretely and authoritatively about the Spirit than the Father or the Son.

First, the Spirit is not incarnate. We don’t have an embodied revelation of

the Holy Spirit. The Spirit remains undetectable himself, but is identified indirectly by the effects of his working (like the wind). The Holy Spirit doesn't show up on the incarnate stage of history like Jesus does. The Son is the only triune Person who becomes incarnate. There's no incarnate description of the Spirit. That's the main reason why we have a lot more to say about the Son. The purpose of his coming in human form was to be the self-revelation of God. He is the Word of God to us.

The Spirit doesn't have his own incarnation. The Spirit doesn't have his own independent word. Jesus is the Logos, the intelligibility, the communication, the living interpretation of God to us. Without the incarnate life and teaching of Jesus, we would know far less about the Spirit, for the Son reveals not only himself, but the Father and the Spirit to us. The Incarnate Son takes us to the Father and sends us the Spirit, so we approach the Spirit through the mediation of the Son.

Even when the Spirit is active within creation, he doesn't establish his own revelation and doesn't convey his own self-explanation. The Spirit remains the Spirit. He remains unincarnate while present to and within creation. The Spirit's remaining unincarnate serves a positive purpose. It prevents us from reducing God simply to a creature or thinking that we can understand God entirely in terms of creaturely realities. It preserves the transcendence, the spirituality of God. God is not a creature, so we cannot explain God as if God were a creature subject to creaturely ways and limitations. We cannot simply read back onto God the incarnated nature of Jesus.

Some people mistakenly think that when the Son of God took on human form, the Father (or God) turned into a human, a creature. There are two mistakes in that. First, it was the Son of God who became incarnate, not the Father (nor the Spirit). Second, the Son of God did not cease being the

eternal, divine, Son of God when he took on human being. He remained what he was but also added to himself a fully human nature and lived a human life. He didn't stop being something he was and turn into something else, a man. Early church teachers put it this way: "The eternal Son of God, remaining what he was, assumed also a human nature to himself." You can recognize this kind of confusion when, considering the possibility of the incarnation, people ask, "Then who is running the universe?"

How the eternal Son of God can be incarnate in human form is a mystery. We can't imagine how such a change of that order could be true for human beings. But remember: God is not a creature. Admittedly, it is easier to think of Jesus' incarnation as his turning into what he was not and ceasing to be what he was. If A becomes B, then it ceases to be A. It's now B. That's easy to think, because that's how most creaturely things work. However, such thinking just doesn't apply to the truth about who the Son of God is. He remains what he was, the eternal Son of God, assuming a human nature as well.

The Spirit never took on a human nature himself. If you ask, "How was Jesus conceived in the womb of Mary?" The answer is, by the Spirit. The agency of the Spirit is the answer to the "how" question. But this answer doesn't tell us the mechanisms involved. No mention of DNA or what happened with the chromosomes. We don't get that type of explanation. Instead, we are told who the agent was. He knows how! I suppose if we asked the Spirit and he thought it was important for us to know, the Spirit could explain it to us if we were educated and intelligent enough to grasp it. But apparently, it's far more important to know *by whom* it occurred rather than how.

But we learn something about the Spirit in this event. The Spirit can interact in time and space, with flesh and blood, without being incarnate

himself. The Spirit is able to be present and active at the deepest levels of creaturely existence, down to the DNA and chromosomes if need be. The Spirit is not absent but able to be present to creation. That's one way God can work within creation—by the Spirit. Recognizing that God is the Spirit and the Spirit is God and he remains the Holy Spirit prevents us from thinking of God as merely being a creature. The Spirit doesn't have to be incarnate to have a ministry to us. As Jesus said, he is sending another Comforter who was with us, but will be in us (John 14:17).

There is another reason why there is a disproportion in the amount of information we have about the Spirit in the biblical portrayal. This distinction is not one of importance, but of the extent of the revelation. If what we say and teach about the Spirit depends on that revelation, then this will make a difference in how much we can say and how much we can understand about the Spirit. This second reason has to do with the character of the Spirit and of his ministry. It seems that the purpose and character of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to always direct attention away from, not bring it to himself. The ministry of the Spirit, Jesus tells us, is to direct us to Jesus (John 15:26). He doesn't come with his own independent message, but bears witness to the truth spoken by the Son. The Spirit does not glorify himself, but he glorifies Jesus by taking his words and declaring them to us (John 16:13-14). That is the glory of the Spirit!

The Holy Spirit isn't saying, "Jesus, you've had the microphone for plenty of time. Now, it's my turn to tell people about myself." No. When the Holy Spirit "gets the microphone," what does he announce? He helps us recall all that Jesus taught, the truth that he taught. He, perhaps annoyingly, passes up his opportunity to shed light on himself. The Holy Spirit doesn't draw attention to himself. Rather, he points away from himself. Why? Because that's his ministry, so that we see who Jesus is, who reveals to us the

Father. The early church put it this way: The Holy Spirit is like light. He shines light on the face of Jesus, who has a flesh-and-blood human face. When the Holy Spirit's light shines on the face of Jesus, what do we see mirrored in the face of Jesus? The face of the Father. Isn't that a beautiful thing?

The Holy Spirit doesn't say, "Hey, look at me. I'm the light. I'm shining. Can't you see how bright I am?" Not at all. The reason for the Spirit's shining is so that when we look at the face of Jesus, we see the face of the Father. That's the point of the light. The light doesn't draw attention to itself.

That doesn't mean the Spirit's not important, but the contrary! If the light didn't shine, what would result? We wouldn't see the face of the Father in the face of the Son. There wouldn't even be a face of the Son incarnate if the Spirit hadn't been involved in the conception of the Son in the womb of Mary. The Spirit has a coordinated but different mission and ministry than the Son. But that ministry would be compromised and would not demonstrate the true nature and character of the Spirit if it drew attention to itself.

One theologian has said, if you add the biblical picture up, the Spirit is the "shy one" of the Trinity or the "retiring one." We could even say the Holy Spirit displays the humility of God, because he serves the Father and the Son. Theologian Thomas Torrance brings out this point regarding the character of the Spirit. Relatively speaking, he stays in the background.

Should we conclude that the Holy Spirit serves the Father and Son rather than himself? Absolutely. We'd be somewhat impoverished if we didn't know that. We are learning something about the Spirit when we see that he doesn't draw attention to himself! Whenever we find revelation concerning the Spirit, we discover more references to the Father and the Son. The Spirit actually promotes the disproportion of detailed understanding about the Triune Persons, because that's the ministry of the Spirit. The Spirit says,

“You saw the face of the Father and the face of the Son. Wonderful. That’s what I do. That’s why I’m here.”

In the next section, we’ll look at the Spirit’s work in the church and in the lives of individual believers.

Part 5

The Spirit in relationship to the church

What is the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the church, in the life of the believer? Think of times when we repent, as a whole church or as individuals. Our repentance is the result of the ministry of the Spirit, who brings us the conviction of sin. Why does anyone ever repent and not hang on to their pride and remain in self-justification mode all their existence? Because the Holy Spirit works. We don't see the Holy Spirit working in a direct way. Most of the work of the Holy Spirit is deep and internal to persons, speaking with their spirits, as Paul put it (1 Corinthians 2:9-11). We don't see the Holy Spirit acting, but we see the results of the working of the Holy Spirit, like the wind.

So we see evidences of the ministry of the Spirit. When we're hearing God speaking his word, when we're seeing the face of the Father in the face of the Son, when we're repenting, when we're grasping the Word of God, when we're interpreting the Scripture as God intends, then we're experiencing the effects of the Spirit. But we don't see the gears turning—we don't watch the machine running. We see the results, the outcome. Most of the work of the Holy Spirit is invisible to us. What we see is the result, the effect. The Spirit seems to deliberately not draw attention to himself. He is the shy one, the humble one, the retiring one, or as T.F. Torrance put it, the "self-effacing one." He doesn't show us his own face. The Spirit is not worried about that. Each person of the Trinity gives glory to the others. The Spirit has his own way of giving glory.

Even in the names of the Divine Persons, we find an asymmetry. Father and Son are mutually referential terms that speak of a concrete Father-Son relationship. Thus these terms are easier to think about than is Holy Spirit,

which does not lend itself as easily to being described using creaturely terms. Has the Holy Spirit been short-changed once again? Maybe not. Perhaps that's how it's supposed to be. Maybe being given that name is not a mistake. Maybe the name, the Holy Spirit, is given in order to prevent us from trying to nail down his identity in the same way we might the Father and Son. Perhaps that "inequality" is meant to lead us to identify with and pay primary attention first to the Father and Son. Perhaps by being named Holy Spirit, we are kept from reducing the Father and Son to creaturely definitions, thinking God is Father and Son in just the way human beings are. After all, Scripture can refer to the whole God as Spirit. The Holy Spirit reminds us of the transcendence, the sovereignty, the irreducibility of God to an idol made by human hands or minds and imaginations.

Given the pattern and content of biblical revelation about the Spirit, we should not expect to be able to have as much to say, or be able to say in as much detail as we can say about the Father and the Son. Though we see some disproportion, it does not indicate inequality of importance among the Divine Persons.

Why not correct by focusing on the Spirit?

If we have under-represented the Spirit up to this point, not making use of what we have been given to go on, why not take time to shift our focus of attention to the Spirit—attempting to bring about a proper balance? Why not attempt to make up for lost time, giving the Spirit his turn on stage, even if just a temporary one? The danger to watch out for in attempting to correct in this way is giving the Spirit independent consideration, in isolation from the revelation of the Son and of the Father in him.

Why is this a problem? Because the Spirit doesn't have an independent ministry. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to deliver to us all the benefits of the work of Christ—the benefits he accomplished as the Son of the Father, sent

from him and returning to him that we might know him. This work of the Spirit can't be grasped apart from the working of the Father and Son. The working of the Father and Son must include sooner or later an appreciation for the "behind the scenes" working of the Spirit. So the best way is to move in our understanding from the Son to the Father and then in a more focused way to the Spirit, bringing all three into coordination.

To be a little facetious, it isn't as if the Spirit says, "Jesus, you did that awesome work on the cross. You took your turn and accomplished that great task. I know everyone will praise you for it, but now it's my time to get some attention. I'm going to take my turn to accomplish my own mission, and so make my own addition to what you've done."

That kind of thinking regards God as dividing up his work and will into a division of labor, each separate from the others. But the will and working of God can't be sliced up that way. That splits God into parts and separate roles or tasks, as creatures might have. It obscures the oneness of God in being and in action. A simple way to point to the unity of the working of God—while allowing for distinction of contribution to the one whole work—is to say that what Christ has done for us according to the will of the Father, the Holy Spirit does in us. That's about the simplest way you can put it, not that more couldn't be said, and probably should be said.

When we say that the Spirit takes all of what Christ has done for us in his humanity and delivers it to us, does that amount to little or nothing? No, not at all. From the Holy Spirit's point of view, that's everything! The Holy Spirit cannot accomplish his deepest work except on the basis of what Jesus, the Son Incarnate, accomplished for us in the name of the Father. They are one God. They are all together Savior. The Father sends the Son. The Son sends the Spirit. This was all done so we might have the life of the whole Triune God over us, with us and in us.

As T.F. Torrance has expressed it, it seems that rebellious human beings can share in God's kind of life (eternal life) only after it has been worked out in such a way that it can fit us fallen creatures. We first need to be reconciled to God and, second, have our human nature regenerated, sanctified, made new. That's what God accomplished in the incarnate Son, who assumed our human nature. He reconciled and transformed it, perfecting our human nature, so that the Holy Spirit could indwell us and make us share in Jesus' sanctified humanity. The Holy Spirit could not come and take up residence in us ("indwell" is the old theological word) until the Son has completed his incarnate work in our fallen humanity.

We're not leaving out the Holy Spirit when we say that the Spirit takes what the Son has done and delivers and builds it into us. It would be senseless for the Spirit to say, "I need my own ministry apart from the Son." They're one in being. They're one in act. They're one in mind, one in heart, perfectly coordinated in their ministry to give us a share in God's own life, and each contributes in his own way.

The whole God is Savior God—Father, Son and Spirit. The Spirit leads in working out in us what Christ has accomplished for us in his humanity. That's a marvel. The Spirit works in us in unique ways. That is why Jesus says it's an advantage that another Comforter come to us, to deliver to us and within us his life, by the indwelling of the Spirit—the Spirit who is the Spirit of Jesus, the One who has accomplished everything for us in his human nature.

You can see the problem if, wanting to give the Spirit equal time, we were to say, "Yes, Jesus did this, but the Spirit does that," then focus on "that" as if it were an independent mission. But there is no independent mission—the Father, Son and Spirit always work together in an ordered and coordinated fashion. That insight ought to guide our thinking, our explanations, our

preaching and teaching about the Spirit. Describing their joint mission requires referring to one another, because the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father. That's who the Holy Spirit is. The working of the Spirit is to work out in us what the Son has done for us. That's an amazing, glorious thing.

Unique manifestations of the working of God by the Spirit

There are particular manifestations of the Spirit's work—times and ways in which he is active at the leading edge, as it were, of what the Triune God is doing. The Spirit's relationship to creation, after Christ's incarnate ministry, is dynamic and variable, rather than static, fixed or mechanical. His ministry is personal and relational. This was seen at Pentecost when the Spirit came down. No human agency initiated, conditioned or controlled that event. No believer set it up, orchestrated it, or made it more or less likely to occur. Rather, Jesus had promised its fulfillment in the name of the Father. His work, promise and sending is what pre-conditioned that mighty, longed-for event pointed to by the prophets. Jesus indicated that this would be at the Father's initiative, according to his timing. The church was simply to wait.

Why at that particular time? Because Christ in his earthly form had finished his dimension of the saving work that God was accomplishing. The Spirit was promised by the Son, and perfectly coordinated, he showed up on time. But notice what happened when the Spirit descended. The people started talking about the great and mighty things that God had done to accomplish their salvation in Jesus. They didn't just focus on the amazing event they had just experienced! They related to each other in new and amazing ways, just as the Spirit was working in them in new ways. But they didn't just focus on the Spirit, or their experience of the Spirit. Their view was larger, much more comprehensive of all that God had done, was doing and would do.

Pentecost is a primary example of a manifestation of the working of the Spirit that is dynamic, variable, not static, not fixed, not mechanical, but personal and relational. In Paul's admonitions to not quench the Spirit or not grieve the Spirit and to be continually filled with the Spirit, we also see anticipation of a dynamic interaction with the Holy Spirit. Paul is not thinking of a situation in which the switch to the Holy Spirit is sometimes in the "on" position and at other times in the "off" position. In Paul's view, the Spirit is never completely absent as though he were a billion miles away, having nothing to do with anything and then immediately near and causing everything to happen, almost magically. The Spirit does not operate in that way. Instead, there is a dynamic interaction between God's people and the Spirit. He can be present in a wide array of ways, or at least in a range of ways that have a wide array of effects we can notice.

"Being continually filled with the Spirit" is a good way to understand the places in his letters where Paul talks about our relationship with the Spirit. The Spirit should not be approached as if he's a vending machine: put in the right coins, push the right button and get your soda or your candy bar or something else. No, it's not contractual or automatic. The relationship is not simply a matter of being "on" or "off." It's not a mechanical relationship. It is dynamic. It's like the wind blowing.

Let's look at another aspect of the manifestation of the working of the Spirit in the church—the gifts of the Spirit. These too involve dynamic interactions. Paul encourages believers to use them in certain ways: let the person with the gift of giving, he says, give with liberality; those who give aid, with zeal; those who do acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Romans 12:6-8). Gifts can be used well or misused. They are to be received and then used well, rightly, faithfully. That is a dynamic process, not a magical chain of effects impersonally sparked.

It's easier to think of the working of the Spirit in mechanical terms, especially if we think of the Spirit as an "it"—an impersonal power or energy, like electricity. Just on or off; here but not there; near or far. But God is not like that. We could say that the Spirit, especially, is not like that!

There is a particular dynamic to living in the Spirit. The Spirit is living and moving—acting as an intelligent agent; interacting with us in a deep and personal way—even acting in ways of which we aren't aware. Often, by the time we become aware, the Spirit may have already moved on to another thing. We'll likely recognize his activity and proclaim, "The Spirit was working and we were blessed!" But by the time we do, the Spirit may already have moved on to another "project." The Spirit is active and moving!

There is a variability, a change, a dynamic, an ebb and flow to the activity and manifestation and interaction with the Spirit in relationship to the church and in relationship to the world. We ought not think of the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force, a vending machine or conveyor belt. Another way we can think mistakenly of the Spirit is as a genie or a magician. In this case we approach the Spirit thinking, "If I'm going to be blessed by the Spirit, I'll have to do things just right. I'm going to have to rub the lamp exactly three times and say just the right words and then the power of the spirit-genie will work." But that's an impersonal, mechanical approach that is just as misguided as the idea that we must take the initiative, believing that the working of the Spirit is unlocked (or not) by us. Unfortunately it's not difficult to find erroneous teachings like this—ones suggesting that we should act towards the Holy Spirit as if "it" was a magical power, much like a genie. To get the Spirit to work we have to fulfill certain conditions just right—then (like magic!) the Spirit is set free to accomplish his ministry on our behalf.

The special techniques promoted by some for activating the Spirit don't

involve rubbing a lamp. Other conditions are laid out, some sequence of events under our control are specified in order to “prime the pump” or to “release the Spirit” to work. If the Spirit doesn’t show up, the explanation will be: “You didn’t get things quite right. You weren’t sincere enough. You didn’t have enough faith. You weren’t humble enough. You were stuck in your head and thinking too much. You didn’t ‘let go’ enough to ‘let God.’” In essence, such explanations say the spirit-genie is not going to come out because you said “abracadabro” instead of “abracadabra.” Or you said it with the wrong accent! Or..., or..., or.... Any number of conditions might be specified. Each teacher of such false views will specialize in describing and prescribing exactly which conditions are called for.

These wrong-headed approaches put us in charge, making the Spirit dependent upon us with little to say for himself. Such approaches make our relationship with the Spirit one that is legal (contractual), mechanical and conditional. Like a genie or some mechanical power, the Spirit has no more choice in the matter than electricity has when you plug in your TV or turn on your lights. Imagined here is a cause-effect relationship from us to the Spirit. Only when the conditions are just right can the Spirit do its work, and when the conditions are set just right, apparently the Spirit is unable to decide, “No, I’m not going to do your bidding!” We set the agenda and the Spirit somehow comes under obligation to us!

Unfortunately, we can think about the Spirit in these impersonal ways—as an “it” rather than the very personal God that he is. Sadly, we can easily find teachers who lead us in those wrong directions. But we don’t need to go down those dead-end paths. We can have more faithful understandings that stay more closely tied to the actual teaching about the nature and character of the Spirit in relationship to the Father and Son as made known in Scripture and experienced in the church of the New Testament times.

Next, we will look at various issues related to the Holy Spirit's continuing ministry.

Part 6

The Spirit and sovereign grace

There are two words I like to use to powerfully remind us about the personal nature and dynamic relationship we have with God the Spirit, and they apply equally to the Father and the Son. Those words are sovereign grace. How do these words help us faithfully grasp the character of the Spirit's working towards us? Sovereign means that the Holy Spirit works as he wills according to his own nature. We're talking about God the Spirit. He is just as personal as God the Father and God the Son—not less personal and not an abstract machine, magic, electricity or some impersonal force. The Spirit is sovereign.

The Holy Spirit is a personal agent. He has a will. We could say “he has a brain.” He acts as the sovereign God. We can't forget the sovereignty of God and start thinking that we're moving the levers connected to the Holy Spirit who is under our control like a vending machine or electricity or a genie. Thinking and acting in that way amounts to denying the Spirit's sovereignty. It makes me sovereign over an impersonal power. In that mode, I simply want to know: How can I get control of this power and make good use of it? What steps, what techniques, what conditions do I need to fulfill to get it to work?

The error of Simon

Those who foster such an approach to the Spirit would do well to remember a story from the book of Acts. Simon the sorcerer became a convert, but as soon as he found out about this awesome power of the Holy Spirit, he wanted to purchase it from Peter. Buy it! Why did he approach the Spirit in that way? He was formerly a magician. Apparently, his magician mind hadn't been sanctified yet. He didn't know the nature and character of

this Holy Spirit. He thought like a magician: “What power! Power for good. If only I could get hold of it like the power I had as a magician. Then, I could do miracles for the glory of God!”

Simon was still thinking like a magician, looking to possess and control the power of the Spirit. He had changed, in that he desired a different power, but he hadn't yet changed his approach to power. He switched loyalty to the Holy Spirit, but he approached the Holy Spirit in the same way he did evil power. His mind had not yet been converted. He was repudiated by Peter with some very sharp words: “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!” He was told to repent immediately because God's power cannot be used or controlled by us (Acts 8:14-24).

This is one of the first heresies reported in the New Testament besides denying the divinity of Jesus and his being raised from the dead. This heresy is the desire to control the Holy Spirit as if he were an impersonal power and not sovereign Holy God. Such a view does not regard the Spirit as free to blow where he wills, as one who works according to sovereign grace.

When the character and mind of the Holy Spirit is not taken into account, the door is left open for us to think we can shape the Spirit into our own image and use him/it for our own purposes. However, when known in relationship to the Son and the Father, that door is closed. Simon needed to see, “This is the Spirit of the Father and the Son,” not just an impersonal power. The Spirit shares God's sovereign and freely-given grace. There is nothing impersonal about the power of the Spirit. We could say the Spirit is the most personal and the most sovereign working of God, not only around us but in us!

The problem with Simon Magus was he wanted to *use* the Spirit. It wasn't that he wanted to use it for evil things. He saw the apostles healing people.

He said, “I want to have that power.” What was wrong was his approach to the Spirit, his understanding of who the Spirit is. He wanted to use the power to serve like the apostles, but his desire was to possess and control, to manipulate or to think that the Spirit needed to be conditioned or appeased to bless. That was to think of the Holy Spirit as if he were really an evil spirit.

Thinking he needed to or even could buy the Spirit misrepresents the nature and the character of the Holy Spirit who is at work with the apostles. The apostles received the Spirit as a gift of sovereign grace. You could not buy the Spirit any more than you could purchase God’s grace. They had a different kind of relationship with the Holy Spirit than Simon was imagining. They must have been shocked when he came to them and asked, “Can I buy some of that power?” They realized that he was thinking like he used to—thinking of the Spirit in the same way as his former magical powers. They recognized that Simon was entirely wrong. The Holy Spirit is not just another magical power. This was a huge lesson the church needed to learn at the beginning. It still is a lesson we need to learn!

For us to take to heart that lesson is important, since the desire to control the Spirit never completely disappears. The story reminds us of who the Holy Spirit is in relationship to the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is sovereign and not under our control. The Holy Spirit is also gracious, because he doesn’t need to be cajoled, conditioned or manipulated into working. Nor does he need to be persuaded. He’s not locked up in some kind of transcendent bottle, waiting for us to get him out. The grace of the Spirit is moving before we even ask or think of it. His ministry is one of sovereign grace, as are those of the Son and the Father—the Father, Son and Spirit are one in being and one in action. If we have to condition or persuade or somehow exert some influence on the Spirit to get him to work, then the Spirit no longer is operating out of sovereign grace.

It's possible to be just as legalistic and contractual towards the Spirit as towards the Father or the Sabbath or salvation. It's possible for some to claim that the blessings of the Spirit are conditioned by us, are dependent on us. A magical or impersonal view of the Spirit is a form of law- or rule-based relationship. But the gracious work of the Holy Spirit is a continuation of the gracious working of the Father and the Son. The Spirit always works graciously.

How should we approach the Spirit?

That brings up the question as to whether it makes any difference how we approach the Spirit. The answer is yes! But whatever difference is made cannot amount to changing the sovereign grace of the Spirit into its opposite! The difference is in our reception, awareness and participation in what the Spirit is graciously and sovereignly doing. We can resist the Spirit. We can participate or not. We can be more or less ready to recognize and receive the full benefits of the Spirit. But the Spirit is not dependent on us to initiate and make the first move. The Spirit ministers to enable us to do things, even overcoming our resistance as he shares with us Christ's own responses to the Spirit in our place and on our behalf. The Spirit moves us, frees us, guides us, and we can then respond.

We can describe ways we can participate and ways to grow in our understanding and in our recognition of the ministry of the Spirit. When we recognize the ways of the Spirit, we'll respond: "That was the work of the Holy Spirit. It is amazing. Praise God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit! That was a marvel of sovereign grace we just saw manifested among us."

We can participate more fully and be filled with the Holy Spirit's glory, or we can resist or avoid it. If we resist, we are resisting a gracious work—one that is freely-given, like Christ's gracious work. We shouldn't think about participating in the life of the Spirit as if it's not freely-given grace that

comes from God's sovereignty. When we seek to participate more fully, and through prayer seek to be filled with the Spirit, we are not conditioning the Spirit's working. We're not earning his blessing and presence. We're especially not "channeling it"—not manipulating, controlling or determining the Spirit's working or manifestations.

These are important things to remember, since we ought always to affirm the gracious sovereignty of the Spirit. This understanding will prevent us from committing heresy, from flipping over into that false view, since there will always be temptations to go in that direction. We like techniques and we like to make God predictable. When we're in big trouble, we often feel a need to bring some kind of pressure on God to act in this situation. Perhaps we're desperate. Or maybe we're curious to discover some technique or formula or to identify some pattern or secret where we hold the key.

Especially in times of desperation, we want God to be more like a magical and impersonal power. Sometimes God's sovereignty doesn't align with our will, our speed or our immediate needs. At such times, we're tempted to be like Simon Magus, saying to ourselves, "I just want to know the formula, God, because something needs to happen here and you're not doing it!" At that point, evil temptation can enter our minds and suggest: "God didn't show up! You know why? Because it's up to you and you're missing it. If only you knew the formula. If only you were holy enough. If only you were sincere enough. If only your expectations were high enough. If only your church was more united. If only you read the Bible more. If only...if only...if only x, y or z had been done, then God would show up!" But every "if only" makes *us* the key – it says that grace isn't grace after all. Each "if only" throws us back on ourselves and undermines our trust, our faith in God. Each is a method to purchase blessings, not participation in the sovereign grace of God.

Working in the Spirit is of the same character as the saving work of

Christ. We receive it in the same way, by trusting God to freely give it to us. There are ways to participate with what the Spirit is doing, but the Spirit will never relinquish his sovereignty nor cease to be gracious and somehow become conditional and set up a legal relationship with us. But we can be tempted, and certain teachings tend to push us in that direction.

What's it like to participate with the Spirit?

Who the Spirit is carries a number of implications we can draw out with the help of other insights from the biblical revelation. Let's explore our participation in this gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification. The first thing is that the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit is transforming us, sanctifying us and enabling us to share in that new nature Christ shares with us. This is primarily a work in us. Transformation into Christ-likeness is key. Christian maturity is of central concern in New Testament teaching. The Christian life is presented there as one of continual growth in faith, in hope and in love for God and life lived out towards others. There are many obstacles to be overcome or avoided in taking that journey of spiritual maturity and health.

These obstacles are not just internal temptations but also external pressures, ways of living, habits, even mindsets that are not engendered by the Spirit but by "the world, the flesh and the devil." It's an uphill battle. It is a fight of faith. It is not easy, but it can be joyful and peaceful. It involves dying to the old self over and over again and being raised up in newness of life, being restored. The Christian life involves repentance and renewed faith, hope and love. It involves forgiving and asking forgiveness. The Spirit enables us to share more and more in the new life we have in Christ, so that we live in daily union and communion with him, dying and being raised up every day. He, our crucified and risen Lord, is the center of our life.

Fruit and gifts. There is a good amount of information on the Holy Spirit

involving both the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. These indicate something of the shape of the Spirit's ministry. The Spirit is a "Giving Gift," as one theologian put it. When we hear of gifts, we often think of abilities or capacities to do something, to serve in certain ways. But the fruit of the Spirit is also given by the Spirit! The fruit points to the qualities of the life of Jesus that the Holy Spirit is building into us. The ultimate definition of the fruit and the gifts is demonstrated for us in the life of Jesus lived out in the power of the Spirit.

Part of the fruit of the Spirit is the gift of "self-control," which is essential to sharing in the life of Christ by the Spirit. It's often said that the Spirit is all spontaneity, "letting go—going with the flow," aligned with our feelings or with love. These characteristics are then put in contrast with our thoughts, mind or truth or with any kind of intentional process or self-discipline. But the fruit of self-control serves as a reminder that Christian freedom involves self-discipline. The Spirit should never be used as an excuse for irresponsibility. The Spirit always joins truth with love, freedom with self-discipline, feelings with order or structure, especially with the moral order of right and good relationships. The Holy Spirit brings wholeness to life, not compartmentalization.

The gifts of the Spirit mentioned by Paul refer to the variety of ways members of the body of Christ are enabled to serve one another. We will not take time to explore the individual gifts. But let me point out a problem that often arises when there is a strong focus on these serving gifts of the Spirit. The problem arises when the serving-gifts of the Spirit are separated from the fruit of the Spirit, or the two are not seen to be in vital connection. Any such disjunction is a huge mistake—it amounts to dividing up the ministry of the Spirit into separate parts and pieces. What often happens in that case is that the gifts of the Spirit are exercised in ways that don't exhibit the fruit of the

Spirit. Serving-gifts used without love, joy, peace, patience, self-control, etc. are being misused! It seems that it has often been assumed that if the gifts come from the Spirit, they can't be misused. But that is wrong. Even gifts given by the Spirit can be misused, and they often are when they are not joined with an equal emphasis on the fruit-gifts of the Spirit.

Jesus: fruit and gifts. The primary work of the Spirit is to deliver all the benefits of Christ to us and in us. That includes both the fruit and the gifts. The Spirit doesn't give us the option of choosing one kind over the other, placing an emphasis on one and neglecting the other. If we look to the life of Jesus, we see in him no disconnect between the fruit of his character and the quality of his ministry of service to others. These are perfectly joined in his humanity, lived out in perfect communion with the Holy Spirit. So when we talk about Christ's likeness, we're talking about the fruit of the Spirit, which then shapes all his ministry service. Jesus lived by the Spirit. He's one of us. In his life, we see the use of the gifts of the Spirit through the fruit of the Spirit.

Fruit primary, gifts secondary. The fruit is primary, is foundational to the gifts of service. Paul indicates this by teaching that love is the primary thing when he's talking about the gifts. What went wrong in Corinth is they went ahead with the gifts but exercised them without love. The result was damage to the body. We cannot separate the fruit from the gifts. Fruit is essential to who we are. The gifts are the manifestations of who we are and who we're becoming in Christ, filled with his likeness or his sanctification, that is, with his fruits.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the Holy Spirit doesn't give us his own sanctification. Rather, he gives us Christ's sanctification, which was worked out in his human nature. The holiness of the Spirit, if offered to us apart from what Christ accomplished for us in his incarnate life, wouldn't fit us directly

as human beings. But the sanctification that Christ worked out for us in his humanity, by the Spirit, has become in him suited to us, and that is what the Holy Spirit shares with us.

Love. That's why, as the Holy Spirit works, we become like Christ, exhibiting the spiritual fruit of his perfected humanity. The primary center of that fruit, as Paul describes it, is love. In his letter to the Corinthian church, he makes clear that love manifests itself through a desire for unity, peace, harmony and upbuilding. The Spirit generates no sense of superiority or competition, possessiveness or even self-sufficiency. Paul's image of our being differing members of a united body holds these elements together well.

Paul surrounds his discussion of the gifts of the Spirit with the fruit of the Spirit even though he doesn't use that term but names love as the central aspect of the fruit. The gifts and fruit cannot be disconnected. Any working of the gifts should be a form of loving and serving others. If the gifts do not serve the unity, peace, harmony and upbuilding of one another, then they're not gifts of the Spirit. Just as Christ is, love is a proper test of the Spirit's working.

Since the Spirit works distinctly with individuals and also with groups to promote unity and harmony, we would not expect the movement of the Spirit to set up a hierarchy of super-spiritual over less spiritual persons. The Spirit wouldn't foster envy and jealousy, moving some to think or say that "They're less spiritual than we are" or "Their fellowship is more spiritual than ours." Nor would anyone be moved to say "I'm less spiritual than they are" or "My gift is more important than yours" or "My gift is less important than yours." That's not where the Spirit is going to take us. That's not what the Spirit is about. For in that case, the fruit and the gifts would be falling apart rather than being brought together by the Spirit. But they can never come apart, because the Spirit is one in his ministry and Person. The Spirit will not foster

competitiveness of one trying to be more spiritual than another. Unfortunately, that's what was going on in the church in Corinth.

Freedom for others, not from others. Another expression of the separation of the fruit from the exercise of the gifts arises when individuals insist on using the gift in their own way. Such a person may think, "I've got my freedom in Christ and that justifies my using this gift however I see fit!" This was going on in Corinth. Certain persons were attempting to use a gift of the Spirit without regard for others. They did so by claiming freedom in Christ. They took freedom to mean they didn't have to consider how the exercise of their gifts would affect others. But such an orientation is not going to come from the Spirit. The Spirit does not move persons to insist on their own way, even when it comes to serving others. Why not? Because, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, insisting on your own way does not demonstrate Christ's love. The gifts are never to be used apart from the fruit. Paul tells us even he, the apostle, does not exercise all the freedoms he has. Why not? For the sake of the body, he tells us in 1 Corinthians 9:12.

Not seeking my own experience. There is another way in which we can take up an interest in the Spirit without much regard for others. This next point could be more controversial than the previous ones, but it needs to be brought up. Some turn to the Spirit primarily to have a strong, moving or powerful experience. The assumption seems to be that the ministry of the Spirit is primarily to give us an experience of the Spirit. The main result sought is being able to say, "I had an extraordinary experience of the Spirit." Some, by this means, are perhaps seeking greater assurance either of their salvation or perhaps of their spiritual growth or maturity.

But a survey of the New Testament doesn't support such an approach or view of the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Spirit is not to give us special individual experiences, but to enable us to serve and to build up each other, to

help and to assist each other and to deepen the quality of relationships within the church's in-reach and its ministry and outreach in service to others.

We will have experiences of the manifestation of the working of the Spirit. But the resulting benefit will not be saying, "Wow, I had an experience of the Spirit. Now if I could just have another one for myself." We all will have experiences of the Spirit, but they're going to be experiences of love, service, fellowship, joy and worship that look away from the experience itself. The experience is a byproduct of something else the Spirit is doing in us and for us.

Jesus wanted his disciples to learn this lesson when they returned from a short mission trip and had worked miracles. They came back elated that in Jesus' name they were given authority over demons. Jesus cautions them: "Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

Who we are worshiping and serving is more important than having some particular experience. The Spirit who is not preoccupied with himself is not likely to want to make us preoccupied with him or ourselves! A focus on seeking after or having individual experiences of the Spirit can disrupt the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ. The Spirit will not want to take us in a direction where everyone is saying: "I had an experience and then another! Let me tell you about them." Sharing in this way usually brings out responses such as, "How did you bring that about? Why did you have that experience and I didn't? God must not like me," or, "God must like me (because...well, I can't say this out loud, but I must somehow be more favored than others) since I was given such an awesome experience that others, too, should have." Spiritual pride of this sort can slip in when there is a focus on individual experiences of the Spirit.

Should we avoid talking about the Spirit and his fruits and gifts? No. But

we can go about it in better or worse ways. In contrast, I suggest that the Spirit leads us to reflect more in this manner: “Wow! Someone noticed some fruit of the Spirit in my life. How did that happen? It must be the work of the Spirit!” Or, “Wow. I tried to serve somebody even though I wasn’t sure how, and they benefited in a way that led them to love God more. How did that happen? It must have been by the Spirit! I hope by the grace of God I can live in the middle of that more often.”

That response doesn’t make the focus the Spirit himself or having some kind of spiritual experience. When I was part of the charismatic movement in the ‘70s, I interacted with many who became Christians but were primarily looking to get high on the Spirit (or Jesus) rather than something else. “I just want to get high on Jesus,” some would say. There were plenty of ministries willing to feed that desire. It was a definite move in the right direction. But often, those whose Christian lives were not much more than going from one “spiritual” experience to another did not experience much of the fruit of the Spirit. The rest of their lives remained a wreck. There was little fruit and no service. Though they were having or seeking experiences with the Spirit, there was little sign of life transformation. Some moves on, grew and matured. But others didn’t. They seemed stuck, getting “high on Jesus.” Sometimes they’d go back to getting high on other things. Why not? One high is just as good as another, isn’t it? Unfortunately, they were often looking for ways to escape their problems or gain affirmation or attention for themselves.

Admittedly, these are complicated situations. The point is that looking to the Spirit for personal experiences doesn’t acknowledge the real, full ministry of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to respond more fully and freely to the truth and reality of God and the gospel.

Next, I’ll make a few more comments about the shape of the ministry of

the Spirit that might help us have a healthy approach.

Part 7

Our response to the Spirit

It's clear from the New Testament that the Holy Spirit works actively among us—both as a church and as individuals. A primary aspect of this ministry of the Spirit among us is to enable us to make a full and proper response to the truth and reality of who God is and what he has done, is doing and will do in our church, our world and within us. Enabling us to make that response is the key.

The Holy Spirit unbinds our wills and unscrambles our minds and refashions our affections so we can more fully respond with all that we are to all that God is. The Spirit frees us to be receptive at every level of who we are. Sometimes it seems we think the Holy Spirit only enables us to respond emotionally. We're human beings, and emotions are part of who we are, so the Spirit does enable us to respond emotionally to the truth and reality of who God is and who we are in him. That's part of it. In worship the Spirit moves us to thanksgiving, praise, adoration, joy and even sorrow and repentance.

But we are also thinking beings, so the Holy Spirit also enables us to respond with our minds. The Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26). He is involved with our hearts and minds, so (for example) he enables us to pray and praise not only with our spirits but also with our minds, with understanding or intelligence (1 Corinthians 14:15). As Paul indicates in Romans 2:8, our minds are set free to be obedient to the truth. Throughout the New Testament, the heart and mind are not split but coordinated together when healthy. The Holy Spirit enables us to respond with all of what we are. There is no reason to think the working of God in and among us is divided, as if Jesus addresses our minds and the Holy Spirit addresses our emotions.

We're not compartmentalized like that. The whole of God interacts with the whole of our humanity.

Jesus assumed a whole human nature with all its aspects. Jesus is a full human being with body, mind and heart. In the Gospels we see him responding fully with all that he is to the truth and reality of his heavenly Father and his relationship to him and the Spirit. Jesus obeys in the Spirit and rejoices in the Spirit. He overcomes temptation by the Spirit. He overcomes evil by the Spirit and sets people free. He offers himself up on the cross to the Father through the Spirit (Hebrews 9:14). Jesus lives his fully human life in and by the Spirit.

So, when the Spirit of Jesus comes upon us, he enables us to respond fully to the truth and reality of who God is and who we are in relationship to him with all we are and have. If there's part of us not yet responding, whether the body, mind or heart, the Holy Spirit will work to bring us to the point that we do respond. The Holy Spirit doesn't divide us, but heals and makes us whole, giving us human integrity before our Lord and God.

The objective work of the Holy Spirit in us

We should not align the Holy Spirit exclusively with what is subjective, internal, or affective in human experience. The Holy Spirit cannot be identified with our subjectivity—our feelings, emotions or our consciences, as if they were identical. There is no denying that the Spirit works in our subjectivity, but he is not identical with our subjectivity (our subjective states). If he did not work in our subjectivity, we would remain in bondage to our fallen, rebellious wills, hard hearts, and our self-justifying and rationalizing minds. He works in our subjectivity, but does so objectively, so we can respond with our whole being to the truth and reality of who God is and who we are in relationship to God.

The Holy Spirit objects to our false, resistant, self-justifying subjective

orientations. The Holy Spirit is not the subjective aspect of human beings that can be shaped and formed anyway we like, made to say what we want, made to reflect our own preferences, prejudices, biases and desires. The Holy Spirit has a particular character, mind, will, purpose, desire and heart, which is identical to that of Jesus Christ. We have no power over the Holy Spirit to recreate him in our own image. The Holy Spirit has his own objective reality, which works within our subjectivity to open our eyes, minds and hearts to God.

The Holy Spirit, then, is a healer who brings the whole of human being together from the inside out. He does not split us up. He does not say to us, "I'm just in charge of your emotions, your imagination and your desires. What you think and believe and come to know, the rational part, well, Jesus takes care of that. I don't know anything about that." The Holy Spirit does not divide up human being into compartments, but harmonizes the internal with the external, sharing with us the reestablished integrity of Jesus' sanctified humanity.

Humanizes us

A final aspect of the ministry of the Holy Spirit correlates with his ministry to make us whole in body, soul and spirit. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to make us more fully human, like Jesus, the one in whose image we were created and are being renewed or transformed (Colossians 3:10; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit shares with us the sanctified humanity of Jesus, which makes us fully human, more completely human, more personal, filling us with the fruit of the Spirit. True spirituality is mature humanity in full and right relationship with God.

So we can say the Holy Spirit humanizes us by making us share in the glorified humanity of Christ. In the process, he brings us to have humility before God. The transformation he brings will involve our confession that

God is God and we are not; that we are entirely dependent upon God; that we need the grace of God and that we must hand over to him all our sin in repentance and our whole selves in faith. But in doing so, the Spirit will not submit us to humiliation. He will not make us feel less than human or cause us to regret we were ever human or to think that God despises our humanity and creaturely limits.

There is a huge difference between humility and humiliation. This may be surprising, since some people teach that humility in the Spirit comes by way of our humiliation. Unfortunately, it's sometimes taught that the ministry of the Holy Spirit not only focuses exclusively on the subjective side of human being, but requires that we set aside our rationality or intelligence and act in less than human ways, perhaps like an animal or a person who has lost self-control (like a drunk person). It would be strange for the Spirit to lead persons to lose self-control and act in ways beneath human being, since part of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:23). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, who came to bring us into conformity with himself. He was humble before the Father and the Spirit, but he was never treated in a way that denigrated his humanity. Nor did he respond to God in ways that denied a healthy and whole humanity. Rather, Jesus' humanity came to be glorified. He fulfilled human nature and showed us what it really means to be a human being.

Given who the Spirit is and what we know of his ministry, we can affirm that the Spirit does not dehumanize or depersonalize us. Yes, we will be led into humility before God. But humility is a deeply personal and human thing. It's not alien to humanity, but a fruit of human maturity in relationship to God. In contrast, being humiliated involves being treated as less than a person, less than fully human, and that kind of relationship is the opposite of the kind of ministry Jesus performed in the power of the Spirit. Abject

humiliation does not represent the kind of relationship Jesus had with his heavenly Father. Even though his enemies, especially at the end, attempted to humiliate him to the fullest extent they could, the end result was not his humiliation in the sense of him collapsing into a dehumanized heap of regret and shame for taking on humanity. Rather, Jesus was “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus was exalted in his bodily (human) resurrection and ascension. He calls us his brothers and sisters and is not ashamed of us (Hebrews 2:11). Jesus shares with us his glorified and perfected humanity by the Spirit.

Rather than denigrating us, the Holy Spirit humanizes us. To be fully spiritual is not, on the one hand, to become non-human, or on the other, to become super-spiritual disembodied ghosts, vapors or ethereal gasses distributed throughout the universe. We should get our idea of spirituality in and through the life Jesus lived out in the Holy Spirit. True spirituality is a human being fully responding to the truth of who God is, firing on every cylinder, responding totally to who God is and who we are in relationship to him. True spirituality means responding in praise and prayer and in every other way of service and love. The Holy Spirit is the humanizing Spirit, sharing with us the perfect humanity of Jesus. His presence and working in our lives demonstrates that kind of spirituality and not another.

What about the Spirit in those not yet repenting and believing?

So far we’ve addressed the Spirit’s ministry to people who are responsive to his work in their lives. But what about nonbelievers? Does the Spirit work with those who are not Christians? The answer must be yes. No one becomes a believing person except in response to the Spirit’s ministry. Without contact with the Spirit, there is no conversion to Christ. If no one comes to the Father

except by the Son who sends the Spirit, and it is the Spirit who opens eyes, convicts of the need for forgiveness and life in Christ, then no one becomes a conscious member of the Body of Christ except the Spirit draws them. The Spirit must work on those not yet believing and responding, or no one would ever become Christian, no one could enter into their salvation. The Spirit goes out after people to bring them to Christ and so to the Father. That is essential to the Spirit's mission in the world. We can see this in the conversion of Saul/Paul in the book of Acts in a dramatic way. The Spirit has a ministry to those not yet believing as well as a ministry to those who are believing.

A related issue is whether we can say that the Spirit is "in" everyone. While there is not a lot about this in Scripture, there is enough for us to address this issue. If by "in" everyone we mean in the deepest most personal and intensive way that the Spirit ministers, we have to say no. Jesus told some of those following him that the Spirit was "with" them, but soon would be "in" them (John 14:17). In the upper room, Jesus breathes on the disciples the Holy Spirit, leading to their having the Spirit in a way they didn't previously. But Jesus also tells them to wait for the coming of the Spirit in Jerusalem, indicating that there is more yet to come involving the Spirit. The Spirit became present at Pentecost in a new and different way. The Spirit can be present in a variety of ways, with a range of intensities, and at a number of different levels of depth.

Inhabiting, or dwelling in

In the New Testament, one way of speaking of the Spirit's presence is through the word that can be translated "dwelling in" or "inhabiting." This coming and indwelling of the Spirit in persons is viewed as the fulfillment of the promise God made through the prophets Joel (Joel 2:28) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 18:31; 36:26) as indicated by Peter in Acts 2:17. The biblical notion

of the Spirit's "dwelling in" or "inhabiting" is exclusively applied to those who are believing, receptive and responsive to the leading and working of the Spirit (Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16). The idea of this indwelling has to do with the most intense, personal and abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in persons individually and in the community of believers collectively.

But this special presence of the Spirit does not mean that the Spirit is absent from everyone else. The Spirit was with people in ancient Israel, and sometimes in special ways upon the prophets and some of the skilled craftsmen who worked on the Tabernacle and Temple. But that kind of presence of the Spirit did not represent God's ultimate promise of the Spirit's indwelling. That only occurred at Pentecost in the lives of those who were receptive to the gospel and the presence and working of the Spirit. Further, we can see that the dynamic nature of relationship to the Spirit continues even at the deepest level of indwelling. Those who are part of the believing body are not to quench or grieve the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Ephesians 4:30) but rather are to be continually filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

The Holy Spirit can be present to anyone and everyone. He is God's presence throughout the creation. The Spirit can work in anyone and everyone. His ministry is to open people's minds, soften their hearts, open their eyes to truth, unbind their resistant wills and convict them of the need for forgiveness and the life of salvation that only comes from God by grace. The Spirit delivers to unbelieving people the gift of repentance and faith, hope and love. Doing so requires working within them, within their persons, in their subjectivity. So the Spirit works in them and is present to them in that way. However, that kind of inner working does not represent the promised indwelling that comes only through receiving Christ in faith in response to the promptings of the Spirit.

In Christ, united to Christ by the Spirit

This seems to explain why in the New Testament only those who are receptive to the Spirit, not resistant, and those who respond with repentance, faith, hope and love to the gospel of Jesus Christ are said to be “in” Christ, or to dwell “in the Lord.” They alone are said to be united to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17). This relationship of Christ with his people is compared to marital unity (Ephesians 5:23; Revelation 19:7; 21:9; 22:17). The most intense, intimate, deep and personal unity described in the New Testament is reserved for those who as believers are said to be members of the Body of Christ, united to Jesus as the head, just as the body of a living being is united to its head.

So, by the use of certain words and images, the New Testament makes a distinction between the Spirit’s relationship with those who are receptive and open to the ministry of the Spirit (believers) and those who are not yet responsive (non-believers). How the Spirit is present (whether or not he is indwelling or inhabiting a person) will involve whether or not that person is receptive to the gospel and the ministry of the Spirit to receive it and welcome it. How one responds to the ministry of the Holy Spirit makes a difference in the kind or quality of relationship they have with the Spirit, and thus with the Father and the Son.

But such a distinction should not be construed as meaning that the Holy Spirit is not for all persons, is not capable of ministering in and to all persons at the deepest level, speaking to their individual human spirits. The Holy Spirit is “for all” in the same way that Jesus Christ is for everyone who was created through him. The Father sends the Spirit for the same purpose as he sent the Son. But the Spirit is able to be present in a range of ways. This is represented in biblical understanding, so we have to account for it in our understanding as well.¹

What about the Spirit in other religions?

What can we say about the Holy Spirit's ministry in other religions? As an extension of what we have just covered, we can say that no religion can keep the Holy Spirit out or away from people. The Holy Spirit is God's sovereign grace at work. He can be present to anyone, anywhere, without becoming polluted, just as we see take place in Jesus' presence among sinners. The Spirit is present to bring to bear all the fruits of reconciliation, accomplished for all humanity in Christ. So in those situations where the religion being practiced is hostile to the gospel and unreceptive to Christ, the Spirit will nevertheless be present and working within the people against those points of resistance. The non-Christian religion will not be responsible or earn any credit for the presence and working of the Spirit. If hostile, the religion is an impediment to the Spirit's working, an obstacle to receptivity to the ministry of the Spirit of Jesus. However, that does not stop the Holy Spirit. He will work to bring individuals and groups out of bondage to false ideas about God and false ideas about their relationship to God. The Spirit will work to open people's minds and hearts to be receptive to God's grace, love, faith and hope. He will work to draw people to a humble repentance and a dependence upon some kind of grace.

Individuals and groups can be drawn by the Spirit even while remaining outwardly a part of their non- or anti-Christian religious community. In that case, the Spirit will be making "heretics" within that religion. He will be leading individuals or sub-groups to take exception to at least some of what they have been taught by their religion. These persons may not know that they have become willing to follow the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit may be anonymous to them, especially at first. But they, in their spirits, will have become responsive and receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

People in this state can be said to have implicit faith, not explicit faith.

There can be an analogy between these people and those of faith in the Old Testament, whose faith in Jesus was not explicit. Although they did not know Jesus by name, nor of the nature of his future work, they nevertheless lived by faith and repentance and trusted in the covenant love and free grace of God to renew it when they broke faith. They didn't know exactly how God's covenant was going to be fulfilled, but they knew and trusted and hoped it would somehow be fulfilled. That's how the New Testament depicts these Old Testament persons of faith. On the other side of their death, they will see how the promises they had hoped in were fulfilled. These persons are not excluded from God's salvation. So too, if through no fault of their own, persons responsive to an anonymous ministry of the Holy Spirit do not come to have explicit faith, there is no reason to believe that they will not be included in God's ultimate salvation. Such persons have not committed the absolute and complete repudiation (blasphemy) of the Spirit, but have been welcoming and receptive. Their implicit faith will become explicit as soon as it is made possible.²

It is normally God's will for all who have implicit faith to come to have explicit faith in this life. After all, everyone who comes to have explicit faith, first had, at least for a moment, implicit faith. But faith becomes explicit, it seems, only if and when there is a conscious and explicit proclamation of the gospel so that when it is heard, it is welcomed and received. Where there is implicit faith, the gospel is welcomed and received, since there has already been a responsiveness to the Spirit that is working even as these individuals hear an explicit announcement of the gospel. There are numerous missionary stories that corroborate this kind of scenario. People have somehow become ready to receive the proclamation of the gospel before any missionary arrived, so when the gospel is proclaimed, it is recognized as fulfilling what they have been waiting for. We know how this comes about—by the Spirit.

That's how they were prepared.³

But it may be the case that in not every instance where there is implicit faith engendered by the Holy Spirit that God brings about an opportunity for that faith to become explicit in this life. It could be that this never comes about. It could be that in every case where there is genuine implicit faith, God may send dreams or angels or miraculously appearing evangelists, like Philip with the Ethiopian, so that their implicit faith can become explicit through a conscious testimony to Christ.⁴ But we cannot know about all such situations. Knowing how God works in every case does not practically concern us. We do not need to know about situations in which we have no part to play. We do not need a final theory as to how things will necessarily play out in situations in which we have no part. Rather, our ministry is to serve in ways that count on the working of the Holy Spirit within people so that implicit faith can become joyfully explicit. In that way, our and their joy and thanksgiving will be increased. They will become members of the Body of Christ (Christians) and be able to join in explicit worship and consciously bear witness to God so that others can also come to have explicit faith as well. But in every case, we can rest assured that God will, one way or another, take care of all those situations where faith is implicit because he is merciful and faithful. He always acts on the basis of his sovereign grace, operating through the faithful working of the Holy Spirit.

We now come to the end of this series on the Holy Spirit. Not all questions have been answered. Not all the explanations have been complete. But hopefully, additional understanding has been gained of some of the fundamental concerns we have regarding the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes•

¹ Sometimes it is said that by virtue of the Incarnation, all humanity is

“united” to (or “in union with”) Christ. While true in one way, this can be misunderstood. The different kinds of relationships described in Scripture involve different kinds of unity/union that should not be confused. First, there is the unity between the eternal divine Persons, the Trinitarian unity. Second, there is the unity of the Son of God with all human nature forged by the grace of God in the Incarnation, called in formal theology the hypostatic union. This unity is a completed, once-and-for-all connection between Christ’s human nature and the human nature of all persons. That is why Jesus is identified as the new Adam. Third, there is the unity of human persons with Christ brought about by the Spirit but fulfilled only as human persons are receptive to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and as they respond to the promptings of the Spirit to welcome his grace and repent and share in the faith, hope and love of Christ.

The incarnational union does not automatically or mechanically or causally guarantee everyone’s personal and spiritual union with Christ by the Spirit. The incarnational union is the basis (or call it the platform), the foundational reality for the spiritual union that comes as people receive the gift of the Spirit and share in the glorified human nature of Christ and so become more and more like him. There could be no personal, spiritual union were there not the union of Christ with human nature forged in the Incarnation. But the one doesn’t cause or absolutely guarantee the other—they are distinct kinds of union.

² On this topic there is controversy that can get heated. Some churches and teachers insist that faith must be explicit in this life for anyone to enter eternal life. But others affirm that there is no significance to the difference between implicit and explicit faith and that the Holy Spirit works positively in many religions with no interest in bringing persons to explicit faith in Jesus, either now or in eternity. This later view has little to no support in

orthodox Christian teaching grounded in Scripture as held down through history. The view expressed in this article is different from both of these views.

³ The position expounded here does not mean that every claim and practice in every non-Christian religion is evil or entirely wrong. There may be partial reflections of truth that coincide with the revelation in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. This coincidence may also be a product of the working of the Spirit. But it is on the basis of the biblical revelation that we can discern what will need to be set aside and what preserved and seen as fulfilled in Christ. Without that normative revelation, it is impossible for anyone to authoritatively discriminate between what is true and what is false and misleading. However, as noted above, the Holy Spirit can lead persons to be discriminating anyway, although their sense of judgment will likely seem to them to be personal, esoteric and perhaps simply subjective since they won't have access, at that point, to the explicit, objective revelation in Christ according to Scripture to ground and validate their moral/spiritual discernment.

⁴ If explicit faith in this life is a requirement for receiving salvation, as some believe, it would seem that creaturely limitations limit God's grace and mercy. God could not, then, be more faithful than we are! If that is the case, then there is no such thing as grace and God cannot exercise sovereign grace, cannot be faithful in every situation. In that view, God is dependent on and limited to creaturely limits and obstacles, since there would be people he would want to receive eternal life, but creaturely obstacles got in the way that he was unable to work around to bring them to explicit faith in this life and make their salvation possible. But since there are exceptions to the need for explicit faith recounted in Scripture, we do not have to affirm a theory that God always makes implicit faith explicit—nor do we need to deny it. One

way or another, God will be faithful! That we can affirm with no reservation.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

About the Author

Gary Deddo earned his PhD at the University of Aberdeen in Aberdeen, Scotland, under Professor James Torrance. He helped begin the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship. He is author of numerous articles and books, including

Karl Barth's Theology of Relations

George McDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writing

Scripture: God's Gift

The Kingdom of God

Gary has a keen interest in the integration of faith and everyday life. He is an employee of Grace Communion International, and president of Grace Communion Seminary.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news, and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and

in our day-to-day lives.

If this e-book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to www.gci.org/participate/donate.

Thank you for letting us share what we value most — Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

Grace Communion International
3129 Whitehall Park Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28273

800-423-4444
www.gci.org

You're Included...

We talk with leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary
Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary
Gordon Fee, Regent College
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary
C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University

Paul Molnar, St. John's University
Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at www.youreincluded.org.

Speaking of Life...

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to www.speakingoflife.org.

[back to table of contents](#)



Grace Communion Seminary

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?

Worship: to love God with all your mind.

Service: to help others apply truth to life.

Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.

Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"

Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry.

Full-time students are also welcome.

Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.

Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to www.gcs.edu. Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, www.deac.org. The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S.

Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

[back to table of contents](#)

Ambassador College of Christian Ministry

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

This denominationally recognized program is available for both credit and audit study. At minimum cost, this online Diploma program will help students gain important insights and training in effective ministry service. Students will also enjoy a rich resource for personal study that will enhance their understanding and relationship with the Triune God.

Diploma of Christian Ministry classes provide an excellent introductory course for new and lay pastors. Pastor General Dr. Joseph Tkach said, "We believe we have achieved the goal of designing Christian ministry training that is practical, accessible, interesting, and doctrinally and theologically mature and sound. This program provides an ideal foundation for effective Christian ministry."

For more information, go to www.ambascol.org

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)
