

WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

by Ern Baxter



A look at the work and identity of the least-known person of the Godhead.

Some years ago I was a member of a Friday luncheon discussion group, which consisted of men from various walks of life. I was one of two ministers attending. The group was not highly organized, and a simple post-card mailed the first day of the week informed us of the Friday topic. We covered a wide variety of subjects in these pleasurable Friday gatherings, and sometimes references were made to some aspects of the Christian religion. These were in the main, quite general.

Each person was allotted two minutes to speak to the subject, and if time allowed, there might be some general exchange after all had spoken, supervised by the chairman of the day. I had not been with the group too long before I realized how valuable those two minutes were, and so disciplined myself to use my time wisely.

I was delightfully surprised when the notice card arrived one week, announcing that we would discuss on the following Friday the subject, "What Does It Mean To Be Filled With The Holy Spirit?" Knowing the men in the group as I did, I could hardly wait for Friday. We had not been this topical about Christianity before.

Friday arrived and after the usual pleasantries, and the lunch which was always light and brief, we settled into the topic. One man, a lawyer, who obviously had little vital knowledge of Christian things, started the discussion, and his contribution went as follows.

"I don't profess to know much

about this, not being a particularly religious man. However, I would think that being filled with the Spirit is similar to the feeling I have when I come home at the end of a tiring day in my law practice, and after a pleasant meal settle down to listen to some good music. The feeling of relaxation that I experience, would be what I would think of as being filled with the Spirit."

The second man took his turn, and said much the same thing, only in his case it was good literature.

There were two or three, including the other minister in the group, who related the receiving of the Holy Spirit to a religious rite in which they had been involved in their particular church relationship. But obviously it meant nothing to them vitally having no continuing significance in daily experience.

I had managed to hold my peace and preserve my precious two minutes, although at times I had to fight the strong desire to "jump in." Now I found myself the last speaker. I recall saying, "Gentlemen, I have listened carefully as you have each expressed your idea of being filled with the Spirit, and note the wide variety of viewpoints. I am wondering, however, if there is not some authoritative source that would provide accurate information. I would like to suggest that since we are speaking of a Christian matter, we should be able to find some reference to it in the Bible, which is the text of our Christian

faith." With that I drew from my pocket my New Testament and turned to Acts, chapter 2, and began to slowly read the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. When I had finished reading, I simply said, "Gentlemen, it seems to me that we have here the official account of what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit." And with that I closed my Testament, put it back in my pocket and said no more.

The chairman rather gruffly remarked that my time was up, and that particular Friday we had an early dismissal. I could tell that what I had done had disturbed, perplexed, and probably angered several of the men. The meeting broke up with some feeling of tension.

While a number of the men dismissed my contribution as a piece of religious fanaticism, God's Word produced in others a wholesome curiosity and a desire to know more. In following days and weeks I was approached by several members of the group, and was enabled by God to lead them into vital experiences of sound commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and into the fulness of the life and blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Some may smile at the responses given by these men, and say, "How can people be so ignorant of these things?" However, I think it is fair to say that the spiritual revitalizing we have been experiencing across the earth in recent years, has indicated that great cross sections of the professing Christian community have been, and yet are, living in considerable ignorance of the reality of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and of the glorious possibility of being personally related to Him in meaningful experience.

A minister, whom I am sure would subscribe officially to the doctrine of the Trinity, commented to me that he had no problem with the Father and the Son, but didn't seem to be able to get his thinking straight on the Holy Spirit. As I listened to him, I seemed to be hearing a representative expression of haziness on this matter, shared by great numbers of professing Christians.

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THE "THIRD" PERSON

In the great commission we are introduced to God as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Because this is the way God is referred to, each of the persons in the Trinity is spoken of as first, second and third. This makes the Holy Spirit the third person of the Triune God. Since there are only three persons in the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit is the third person, there is a sense in which He is "last." He is not only "last" however in this descriptive designation of God, but He is also "last" in the redemptive process. As God moved into the world of men to bring about their redemption, we are told that "the Father sent the Son." The Son "came" and did that which had to be done. In His impeccable life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, and ascension into the presence of God, He established His saving work as finished and acceptable. Upon Christ's return to heaven, the Holy Spirit was sent back to the earth to effect in the lives of men the redemptive work of the Father and the Son.

Probably another reason why the Holy Spirit has seemed to have a subordinate role to the Father and the Son, is that He is not only "last" in the biblical designation of the Trinity, but He was the last to receive consideration in the formation of our historic Christian creeds. In the Apostles' Creed, which is considered to be one of the earliest formulations of our Christian faith, the Father is referred to as "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," and then we are told of "Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, He descended into hell; the third day He arose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth on the right hand

of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead." This is followed by the brief declaration, "*I believe in the Holy Ghost.*" It is not without significance that the Father and the Son receive fuller treatment than the Holy Ghost, who is simply mentioned.

It was not until the beginning of the fourth century that the Christian community got around to any extensive definitions of the Holy Spirit. It is also interesting that by this time the supernatural and charismatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit had receded considerably. Probably this shows the danger of reducing God, Christian experience, and even the Bible, to systematic definitions suitable to intellectual forms, while not retaining vital relationship to God through the Holy Spirit.

THE "ACTIVE AGENT" OF THE TRINITY

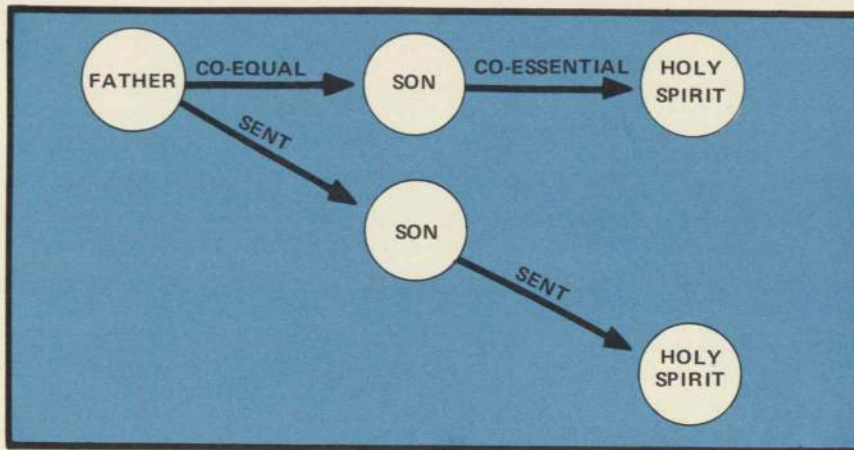
While it is true that in the historic process of redemptive activity, and in the historic development of the Christian creeds, He is "last," nevertheless, there is a very real sense in which He is "first." It is clear from Scripture that we would have no knowledge of the Son's saving work, and the Father's redeeming love, except as such are brought to our attention and pressed upon us by the Holy Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of your Father" (Matt. 10:20), and "the Spirit of His Son" (Gal. 4:6). It is the very nature of the Holy Spirit to proceed from the Father and from the Son to reveal a life-purpose for mankind. All that the Father has planned, and the Son has made possible by His redemptive act, is made available to us by the Holy Spirit.

In early Christian times, experience and teaching were closely related. Men experienced the life of God by repentance, faith and obedience, before they attempted to define and creedalize their experience. We do not minimize the necessity of sound teaching in sound form. But the form can be "form without content." At the same

time it is obvious that content must have form. So we are confronted with the necessity of not favoring either/or, but insisting on both. However, the order seems to be, to experience the new life in God by responding to the simple declaration of the gospel, and then be taught from the Scriptures the meaning and ongoing implications of the wonderful thing that has happened. Our Lord in His earthly ministry "did and taught" (Acts 1:1). The grace of God first "brings salvation" and then teaches what that salvation brings (Titus 2:11-14).

It is desirable and important that those newly converted, or those who have come into some new phase or dimension of the Christian life, should be scripturally taught the meaning and purpose of their experience. However, until they are so taught, it is not uncommon for them to attempt to relate what is happening in sometimes unconventional and even unscriptural terms. The inarticulate sounds from an infant do not indicate the child is not alive because he cannot give an academic statement concerning the nature of human life. To punish the child, or question the reality of his existence because of his infantile ignorance is obviously ridiculous. We think the analogy is apparent. How many young converts, and those new in legitimate experiences in God have been criticized, and their experience questioned, because they have not been able to give mature explanations of their experiences, or have put wrong labels on right boxes. Certainly they need teaching and correction, but not ridicule and suspicion.

All through the Old Testament the Father's word comes to holy men who were enabled to supernaturally release the word by the Holy Spirit. In our diagram (see next page) we have shown the Trinity in the form of three circles horizontal and three circles diagonal. The three circles horizontal speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as co-equal and co-essential. In the three circles diagonal we have shown the Trinity in functional operation in relation to mankind, the Father sending the Son, the Son coming,



doing His work, and returning to the Father. This is followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit to the earth to be the “active agent” of the Trinity in all that is to be accomplished in redemptive and providential action in human experience.

JESUS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

It was the Holy Spirit who was active in the formation of the body of the Son in the womb of Mary. The angel declared to her, “*The Holy Ghost* shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). When the time came for our Lord to enter upon His ministry “when He was baptized, He went up straightway out of the water; and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him and He saw *the Spirit of God* descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, this is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” Luke tells us that following this, “Jesus being full of *the Holy Spirit* returned from Jordan, and was led by *the Spirit* into the wilderness” (Luke 4:1). Here at the outset of our Lord’s ministry the Father acknowledges His Son and equips Him with the Holy Spirit to perform His ministry and work in the earth.

In all the days of His earthly ministry He walked in complete obedience to the Father, and accomplished the Father’s will by the power of the

Holy Spirit. The Son acknowledged His dependence upon the Holy Spirit when He said “If I cast out demons by *the Spirit of God*, then the kingdom of God is come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). He acknowledges His dependence upon the Holy Spirit as the divine agent of power and action. This had been prophesied of Him by Isaiah. Matthew quotes this prophecy, saying, “Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put *my Spirit* upon Him, and He shall show judgment to the Gentiles” (Matt. 12:18).

The place of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of our Lord is clearly seen in the summary given by Peter in Cornelius’ house, as he declares “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the *Holy Spirit* and with power, who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). When our Lord came to the great moment of His sacrificial death, “He through *the eternal Spirit* offered Himself without spot to God” (Heb. 9:14). The resurrection of our Lord was also the work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

THE HOLY SPIRIT TODAY

Upon His ascension to heaven, one of His first acts was to “receive of the Father the promise of the *Holy Spirit*” which He “shed forth” on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). Thus by His death and resurrection He released the

Holy Spirit to perform the will of the Holy Three in the earth during this “day of salvation.”

This was according to the plan our Lord had shared with His disciples in those intimate moments in the upper room discourse before He went to His death. He had said He would “pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever” (Jn. 14:16). Speaking of this Comforter and His coming, He said later in the same discourse, “And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment” (Jn. 16:8). So He has established that the Holy Spirit is to be in this age the one who acts for the Father and the Son. We have from time to time tried to make the matter simple by saying “the Holy Spirit is ‘God active’ in the earth today.” We have also suggested that this might well be why Satan so desperately fights the work of the Holy Spirit. He apparently doesn’t mind people holding correct doctrinal views on the Trinity, or for that matter, on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, but He certainly doesn’t want people to become involved personally with the Holy Spirit in real and vital experience.

In the Scriptures the Trinity is described as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” (Matt. 28:19); the Holy Spirit being “last.” However in terms of experience, we might well think of “Holy Spirit, Son, and Father.” Jesus said, “No man cometh unto the Father but *by Me*” (Jn. 14:6). But this does not complete the process of “coming unto the Father,” “for through Him [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access *by one Spirit* unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18). The Holy Spirit is the one by whom we are introduced to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and Jesus Christ is the one who introduces us to the Father. The structure and pattern of operation within the Trinity seems obvious throughout the Bible. The Holy Spirit is the one who performs the will of the Trinity, and provides such life and power as enables believing men and women to do the will of God.

THE MINISTRY OF CONVICTION

Jesus had said to His disciples, just before going to His death, "If I depart, I will send Him [the Holy Spirit] unto you. And when He is come, he will reprove [convict] the world" (Jn. 16:7,8). Notice the order here. The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples. They become the residence and headquarters of operation for the Holy Spirit. As they "preached the gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven" (1 Pet. 1:12), *the world was convicted*. "We are witnesses of these things; [Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension]" said the apostles, "and so is also the Holy Ghost" (Acts 5:33).

We see this work of the Holy Spirit in conviction on the day of Pentecost. After hearing Peter's Spirit-anointed preaching, a great number of the hearers "were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter told them what to do (Acts 2:38), "Then they that gladly received His word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). The Holy Spirit had, through the preaching of the gospel, convicted them of their sin. Many had responded in true repentance, and had found that the same Holy Spirit who made them miserable with conviction, made them joyful in conversion.

Many others, however, did not receive the word of the gospel. Stephen referred to these rejectors as those who "do always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). The Holy Spirit is the one who presents the claims of the Lord Jesus upon the hearts of men. To "resist" the introducer is to reject the one being introduced.

. . . CONVERSION

All who respond to the conviction of the Spirit will "repent and be converted" (Acts 3:19). The Greek word translated "convert" is also

translated "turn" in several places. When the Lord revealed His will to Saul of Tarsus, He commissioned him to be His servant to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, and to *turn them* from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:18).

"Conversion" is a comprehensive term which embraces all that takes place at the beginning of the Christian life. On the human side there is a "turning unto God" in obedient response to "the word of the gospel" (1 Pet. 1:25). This word is "incorruptible seed." When one "obeys the truth" he is "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever" (1 Pet. 1:22,23).

Jesus spoke about this same experience to Nicodemus, where He said, "Except a man be born again [from above], he cannot see the kingdom of God." When one is "born again," Jesus says, he is "born of the Spirit" (John 3:1-8).

Here we see the word and the Spirit as the agents of the new birth. Paul speaking of this new life, declares, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature [creation]" (2 Cor. 5:17). Something happens when one becomes a Christian that is illustrated in the creation of the world. This sends us scurrying to Genesis. There we read that "the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen. 1:2). That seems to be a pretty good description of a life into which God has not yet come. Then we are told that "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). But the Spirit cannot operate without the Word, and so we read, "And God said, Let there be light; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3).

So it is in the new creation. The Holy Spirit is "moving upon" the dark chaotic lives of "the world." Then comes "the word of the gospel." When the word is received in obedience, the Holy Spirit makes such a person "a

new creature, or creation."

While we cannot fully explain what happens when one is "born again," there is one thing clearly stated, that "he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17). The Holy Spirit established a life-giving relationship within the redeemed human spirit.

He comes not only as life, but moving out from this spirit life-center, He engulfs the yielded believer in a baptism of power. Ideally, the coming of the Holy Spirit as life and power should be virtually simultaneous. However, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). "We receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14). Where the Word is not preached concerning the baptism of the Spirit, there is not a call to, or basis for, faith. Therefore in many lives there is an unnecessary "gap" between the coming of the Spirit as life in the new birth, and His blessed baptism of power.

. . . CONSTRUCTION

The Holy Spirit comes into the redeemed life not only to reside, but to preside. He is not only the resident Spirit, but the president Spirit. Having established His residence in the very heart of our being, He commences a program of change in every area of the converted life, and we "are changed into the same image [of the Lord] from glory to glory, even as *by the Spirit of the Lord*" (2 Cor. 3:18).

This "changing" and structuring of the life of "the new creation" is comparable to the formation of the material creation, to which we have already referred. The Holy Spirit makes the "change" in response to the Word. This is why Christians are exhorted "as newborn babes, [to] desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). As we "let the word of Christ dwell in us richly" (Col. 3:16), and are constantly being "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), our lives are being changed and structured to be "conformed to the image of His Son"

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you have to blow it Friday night by having a healing service? You were just getting respectable. Last year you reached the point of respectability, and this year we were ready for more of that." Praise God for the surprises of the Holy Spirit.

God is directing the movement of the Spirit to accomplish His personal aims and designs in our time. We need to be in a personal union with him, wanting to hear His voice and wanting to move on with Him. I believe that He is leading us as He led the people in the Exodus. He is as sure a guide as the pillar of fire and the clouds were to the Israelites in the desert. We run the risk of wanting to go back to Egypt. We run the risk of wanting to stay where we are. We're happy with our prayer group as it is right now. We're happy with our Catholic Church as it is right now. Let's not rock the boat. To stop short of God's full purpose is to run the risk of us being left behind to die in the desert. A good thing of God can be the enemy of the next thing of God. If we clutch on to today's gift and say it's so nice, I want

to stop here . . . we are going to become the enemy of the next thing that God wants to do.

In the past, even the Bible became for some people the thing with which they defended themselves against God. Jesus spoke to Jews who loved the Bible and said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). If we love the Catholic Church as it is so much that we won't let Jesus make it what He wants it to be for today, we become the enemy of the Catholic Church.

A UNITED WITNESS

I believe that in a very deep way God is moving to change the course of these mighty rivers. They have been flowing separately, but God is working on the riverbeds to enable them to flow together, to present a united witness to the church and to the world. I don't know *how* God is going to do it, and I don't know *when*, but I

know He's begun, and He'll complete it. I don't necessarily think we ought to do one thing differently than we've been doing because of this. But I hope that this will make us want to listen to God more, and look for the movement of the Spirit so that when He gives direction for our local situations, we will be ready to move. What we're experiencing in the Holy Spirit is not something that's private and personal, just for us; it's something that's cosmic in scope. What's unfolding is a mighty plan from God. The darkness is growing darker, and the light must grow brighter.

The spirit that we've received as a movement is not a spirit of timidity and not a spirit of fear, but a spirit of sonship; we're sons and daughters of God. He wants us to live in that and to walk in boldness and confidence as His sons and daughters.

God is moving to bring His people together in the bonds of deep love and commitment so that the world may believe. Let's follow Him and not be left in the desert. Let's go on with Him and enter the promised land. ♣

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(Rom. 8:29).

It is of the utmost importance in the life of the Christian, that the Word and the Spirit be given equal place. Imbalance here can produce fanaticism on the one hand, or lifeless doctrinal intellectualism on the other. A Spirit-filled life must also be a Word-filled life. When this combination is maintained we are on the way to God's goal for us — a Christlike life!

. . . COMMUNITY

There is a further work of the Holy Spirit which, in our opinion, has been neglected. It is, however, being restored in these days in a dimension that is exciting and hopeful. We refer to the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing the converted into community. On the day of Pentecost, "they that gladly received Peter's word were baptized: and the same day there were *added unto them* about three

thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). These "continued steadfastly in . . . *fellowship*" (Acts 2:42). Having repented, been baptized, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, it was obvious that what each one had experienced individually, could only be fully expressed and enjoyed corporately. They were automatically drawn to one another in the sharing of this new life, "and they, continuing daily *with one accord* in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46). This collective expression of the new life, power, and joy, gave them "favor with all the people." "And the Lord *added to them* day by day those that were saved" (Acts 2:47 ASV). How irresistibly attractive this community of redeemed and rejoicing people must have been.

Aspects of the life of the redeemed community may alter in different places and under differing circumstances, but the principle of unity and community is basic. Paul capsulated it

when he wrote, "By *one* Spirit are we all baptized into *one* body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into *one* Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). The pattern is so beautifully simple, and simply beautiful, that one cannot help wondering how Christian people could stray so far from "the beauty of God's plan" (Rom. 3:23 Phillip's).

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit, who has to so many of us been "last," may in our experience become "first," as He is allowed to make the loving purpose of the triune God real in our lives. Perhaps it would be especially meaningful in the day in which we live, to close with Paul's prayer for the division-threatened Corinthian church: "The grace (favor and spiritual blessing) of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the *presence and fellowship* (the communion) and sharing together, and participation) *in the Holy Spirit* to be with you all. Amen" (2 Cor. 13:14 Amp.). ♣