

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S PERSON AND WORK IN US

In our Nicene Creed we stop short of confessing that the Holy Spirit is God, and “of one substance with the Father.” However, we imply these things by confessing that He does what only God can do, such as give life and inspire prophets. We confess that we worship and glorify Him, something that we can properly say only about God. This kind of “understatement” is essentially true to the Scriptures.

The appropriation of certain divine works to the three Persons separately is fine as devotional language goes. At the beginning of his explanation of the Creed in the *Large Catechism*, for example, Luther says: “The first article, of God the Father, explains creation; the second, of the Son, redemption; the third, of the Holy Spirit, sanctification.” However, this does not do full justice to the witness of the New Testament. Each of the three persons is Creator (1 Cor 8:6; John 1:3; Col 1:16; Gn 1:2; Rm 8:11). Each is Saviour (1 Tm 4:10; 1 Jn 4:11; Eph 1:13-15). Each sanctifies (1 Ths 5:23; 1 Cor 1:30; 1 Cor 6:11). Each will raise the dead at the last day (1 Cor 6:14; John 6:54; Rm 8:11). In reverse, we confess that, because the Spirit does divine works, which the other persons of the Trinity also do, He also is God.

The Scriptures usually speak about the Spirit in terms of what He does for us, and say little about Him in metaphysical terms. The Son has revealed the Father, whom no one has seen. The Spirit shows us the Son, but the Holy Spirit remains only partly unrevealed. We know less about him than we know about the Father or about Jesus. Just as in the Old Testament He at times could “spirit people away” (1 Kng 18:12; 2 Kng 2:16; Ezk 3:14; 8:3), so He suddenly took the evangelist Philip away from near Gaza to Azotus (Ac 8:39).

Peter said that, when Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God. (Ac 5:3-4). In 2 Corinthians Paul quotes Exodus 34:34, where the Hebrew used “Yahweh” for LORD, and said that the “LORD” in that passage is the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:16). The Creed calls Him “Lord” (although its Greek neuter original form of the noun “Lord” meant “the Lordly-One”, as otherwise-not-used neuter adjective).

When the New Testament sometimes refers to the Holy Spirit as a “gift” and uses instrumental language about Him, (“with the Spirit is parallel to “with water”, Mt 3:11), we should not think about the Spirit as some kind of impersonal force. The wind is impersonal when it blows wherever it pleases (John 3:8), but the Spirit is not a mere impersonal power. That He is personal can easily be seen from the things He does. Some of the most telling statements about Him are Paul’s, that the Spirit knows the thoughts of God and searches the deep things of God (1 Cor 2:10-11). He works when and where it pleases God in those who hear the Gospel. He sanctifies, creates anew, knows all things, reveals, and sees everything. Although the Greek word for “Spirit” is neuter, when Jesus used a pronoun for Him, it was “He”, not “It” (John 14:26), and Jesus said that He would send the “Advocate” as “another” that is, one like Himself (John 14:16).

Many things that Scriptures say about the Son are also said about the Spirit. Both are “Paraclete” (Counsellor or Advocate 1 Jn 2:1; John 14:16, 26). Both dwell in the disciples (John 14:20; 14:17), and will be with them for ever (Mt 28:20, John 14:16). The disciples, but not the world, know Both of Them (John 14:17; 16:3). Both go forth from the Father (John 16:27; 15:26). The Father has sent Both (John 14:24; 14:26). Both teach (John 7:14; 14:26). Both tell things that are to come (Rv 1:19; John 16:13). Both bear witness (John 8:14; 15:26; Ac 5:32), and Both convince the world of sin (John 3:18-20; 16:8-11). Both speak on the basis of the Father’s authority (John 14:10; 16:13). Both directed the apostles (Ac 9:5; 13:9, 15:28). Both the Spirit and Christ spoke to the seven churches (Rv ch 2-3). Even the charismatic gifts come, not only from the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4) but also from the Son and from the Father (1 Cor 12:5-6; Rm 12:3-8). Both Christ and the Spirit intercede with the Father for us (Rm 8:34; Hb 7:25; Rm 8:26,27).

There are distinctive things that the Third Person of the Trinity does. The things that are distinctive of the Son are His incarnation and His work of redemption for us. The things that are distinctive of the Spirit are His revealing of Jesus to the disciples (John 14:26; 16:13), His reminding them of Jesus’ words (John 14:26), His guiding them into all truth (John 16:12), and His glorifying of Jesus (John 16:14). Although His words are no different from what Jesus said while he was on earth, it is by the Spirit that the words of Jesus work faith and other results in us (John 6:63; 14:26; 16:14; 16:8-11).

The phrase in the Creed that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” is taken from John 15:26: “When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of me.” It is a fact of history that, in its original form in AD 381, the Creed did not add “and from the Son.” Cappadocian theologians like Gregory of Nazianzus were quite convinced that this phrase described the particular way in which the Holy Spirit existed in his relationship to the Father. As the Son was begotten from the Father, the Spirit proceeded from the Father. Writers in the West like Hilary, Victorinus, and Augustine said

that the Holy Spirit proceeded from Both, and one can find traces in Eastern writers like Gregory of Nyssa that suggest that they held that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. One of Gregory of Nyssa's illustrations for the Trinity was Adam, Eve, and Seth. Though these three persons were essentially human, Eve and Seth derived differently from Adam. Seth derived from both Adam and Eve.

The church of the West, probably in Spain initially, perhaps about AD 590, added the words "and from the Son" (Latin *filioque*) to the Nicene Creed. The Athanasian Creed, which is used only in the West, also says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son. This was one of the chief reasons for the split between the East and the West in 1054 AD. The Council of Florence said, in 1439 AD, that, as the Father is the "cause" and the "principle" of the subsistence of the Holy Spirit, so also the Son is. It added: "Since the Father has through generation given to the only-begotten Son everything that belongs to the Father, except being Father, the Son has also eternally from the Father, from whom He is eternally born, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son."

Exegetically, the question is what Jesus meant in John 15:26. Did He mean that the Holy Spirit is eternally derived from the Father or that the Holy Spirit comes into this world from the Father? When we speak about the Son, there is the same distinction. We say that the Son is eternally begotten by the Father and also that He was sent into the world by the Father. In John 15:26 the verb "proceeds" is parallel to the earlier verb, "comes." There is a parallelism between the statement "whom I shall send to you from the Father" and "who proceeds from the Father." In the phrase "who proceeds from the Father" the Greek word for "from" (*para*) does not immediately mean "derived from" as the word *ek*, which the Creed uses for "from" means (*ek* often means "out of"). The preposition *ek* is used about the Spirit in 1 C 2:12, "the Spirit Who is from [*ek*, literally, 'out of'] God." If it is true that John 15:26 really speaks about the sending of the Holy Spirit into the world, we frankly have no word in the Scriptures that describes the eternal relationship of the Spirit to the Father or to the Son. There is then no word in Scripture for the Holy Spirit that is parallel to the word "begotten", which would denote the relationship of the Spirit to the Father. The Cappadocians' basic understanding of the Trinity was that the Father is the origin, the fountain, or the cause, of the other two persons of the Trinity. The compilers of the Creed in AD 381 clearly intended to say, by putting in the clause "who proceeds from the Father", that procession was the particular "mode of being" that eternally distinguished the Holy Spirit from the Father, just as "being begotten" distinguished the Son from the Father. Still today the Orthodox Churches reject the idea that the Spirit proceeds from the Son eternally. When we look at John 15:26 carefully, we probably have to say that the dispute should never have arisen. Of course, we believe that the Father and the Son sent the Spirit into the world, just as the Father sent his Son into the world. The Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ, and He, too, breathed the Spirit (John 20:22). If we understand John 15:26 to mean that the Spirit comes into the world from the Father, we mean less than the original framers of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed intended.