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The Holy Spirit and Ministry in the Fathers

FREDERICK W. NORRIS

Within the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, we have had some leaders who could help us with the place of the Holy Spirit in ministry. Often, they have been gentle souls whose wisdom and loving kindness were their primary characteristics. Robert Richardson (1806-1876) was one; he could both rebuke and praise.¹ Yet for too many within our congregations an understanding of the Holy Spirit in a positive way has been one of our most prominent weaknesses.

Too often, the train of thought has been: Holy Spirit-speaking in tongues—almost mortal combat over who is right—divided fellowships. And much of the result has been that we are eager to talk about God and Christ but prefer to pass when conversation turns to the Holy Spirit. In the 20th century, gentle William Richardson who taught church history at Emmanuel for 10 years, had spent a significant period of his life at Northwest Christian College trying to heal congregations who were wounded in such battles. He did not avoid talk about the Holy Spirit, yet when it turned to tongues and prophecy, he almost bodily winced. Many casualties brought much sorrow.

Although speaking in tongues, prophesying, and interpretations of such are significant topics in Scripture, they make up only a small portion of what the Bible says about the Spirit. Gregory the Theologian (d. 390), in his 31st oration, claims that the only things not said of the Holy Spirit that are spoken about the Father and the Son are the names “Father” and “Son.” For instance, in creation and on the cross, the Spirit was active. The Theologian’s “swarm of proof-texts” about the Spirit includes nearly 70 verses; the number of texts mentioned in the whole oration is more than 150.²

His good friend, Basil the Great, also wrote a treatise on the Holy Spirit.³ The basic thrust of both pieces was to insist that the Holy Spirit belonged in the Trinity. Basil thought the Spirit deserved such a place but believed a confession of the Spirit’s divinity should be made in private, not in public worship. Gregory insisted that inclusion in the Trinity should be publicly expressed everywhere. Yet within their pieces on the Spirit as a person in the godhead, neither one said anything much about the work of the Holy Spirit in ministry. They worked within the questions of their time and regions.

When Gregory, John Chrysostom (d. 407), and Gregory the Great (d. 604) wrote treatises on the priesthood, they offered theological reflections and practical admonitions on ministry.⁴ That trilogy, however, was as circumscribed by the questions of its age as we have been by our own. All three authors spoke of God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son as the essential models of ministry. They made some connections between the work of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist but paid little attention to the spirituality of the pastor in terms of the Holy Spirit. That may seem strange, but many of their questions about ministry during the fourth through the sixth centuries concerned the nature of the Holy Spirit and its place in the developing doctrine of the Trinity.

In what we might consider a rather odd setting for discussing the relationship of the Holy Spirit to ministry, various desert fathers and mothers, as well as other spiritual writers, talked about the formation of the soul and its growth as a significant preparation for ministry directly connected with the Holy Spirit. They

were primarily the abbas and the ammas who escaped the bustle of the world to have more time for reflection. If we follow the interpretation of some Protestants that these people were not heroes but deserters, they seem to be of little help. It is, however, fascinating that these recluses tried to make it clear that becoming all that God wanted for humans demanded an indwelling of the Spirit that empowered people to minister to others. The complexity of monasticism has always been remarkable.

Basil the Great had in many ways wished for a monastic life, but he became a bishop. Through his family's wealth, he built a Christian center outside Caesarea in Cappadocia where he served as bishop. The compound included a church, a monastery, a house for the bishop, and a hospice for pilgrims. During a desperate famine, the hospice also became a hospital where thousands of people threatened with starvation were saved. It even included a section for lepers. Although Basil said little about what the Holy Spirit had to do with ministry, he demonstrated that he understood the connection. Indeed, his friend Gregory the Theologian wrote an oration that insisted on the care of the poor and the ill because believing in Christ called for such service.⁵ If you have a life of devotion and time for contemplation, you have the strength needed to serve others in ministry.⁶

The White Monastery in Egypt, led by Shenoute of Atripe (d.c. 450) had moved far away from the metropolis of Alexandria into a desert area. The people there organized themselves into a disciplined life, used their water sources well, and grew many food stuffs. But when the Blemmys horsemen invaded the farming communities along the Nile, those farmers and their families crossed the Nile and fled farther east looking for refuge. Thus, the White monastery sought to feed and shelter perhaps 10,000 refugees because they were in the right place at the right time.⁷ Many more monastic communities were involved in significant service to others.

In a number of sayings from the desert saints, the Holy Spirit is mentioned as a force for the spiritual life, not singularly in the ascent of the soul to heaven, but also in relationships with other people. "Never look down on anyone. You do not know whether the spirit of God prefers to dwell in you or in them." "For some, the charisms and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given as an advance. Some disciples enter into them through faith and prayer, apparently without any work or grief or toil, and even while they are still engaged in the affairs of ordinary life. Even so, God does not give his grace carelessly or inappropriately or accidentally but always in his ineffable and inscrutable wisdom so that he can test the autonomy and free will of the disciples who have come into such grace so unexpectedly."⁸

These monks were not totally cut off from "those still engaged in the affairs of life." Such folks were nearly always a part of bringing things that were needed to the monastery. Both thinking of these and remembering others from their lives before monastic living, the monks knew that the highest charisms and gifts of the Spirit had appeared in such people's lives. Surely there was also a moment of sorrow in recognizing that all the pummeling of the body, the sleepless nights, the hours lived in Scripture—all often in the extreme—did not without fail bring one into the best of the Spirit.

All things are possible for God. Such was the case of the thief [on the cross]. In one moment he was converted through faith and was restored to paradise. It was for this that the Lord came, so that he might change our souls, re-create them, and as scripture says, "make us sharers in the divine nature." He will give to our soul a heavenly soul, which is the Holy Spirit, who will lead us into the fullness of virtue, so that we will even start to live the eternal life, as far as this is now possible."⁹

There can be no "fullness of virtue, so that we can start to live the eternal life" unless our souls have a companion in the Holy Spirit. But virtues, the fruit of the Spirit, almost always are directed to others, focused on helping those unlike us in our ministries.

The power for such ministry comes from the Holy Spirit. When the gates of the intellect have been blocked by the remembrance of God, that intellect should pray "Lord Jesus," "for it is written than none

can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." "A person who has attained such a state of love that their whole existence is ordered by it is the one who can say 'Jesus is Lord,' in the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

One of the saddest of the conflicts about the Spirit in contemporary times is the forgetfulness about how any can confess Jesus as Lord. Any believer who has made that confession could only do so through the Holy Spirit. Other gifts are available, but the central feature of the Christian life involves the Spirit even at the early stage of the first confession of Jesus as Lord.

"If you assiduously concentrate on the interior life, you will become restrained and patient, kind and humble. Then you will also be able to contemplate, theologize and pray. That is what the apostle Paul meant when he said, 'Walk in the Spirit.'"¹¹ Once more, what seems to be totally involved in the contemplative life removed from ordinary existence helps one learn restraint as well as patience, kindness, and humbleness. Those are relational terms, how we serve and lead in ministry. They are the fruit we need in order to serve. From the viewpoints of these desert contemplatives, they do not emerge without a clear look into our inner lives, into the spiritual practices that train us to serve God, Christ, and the Spirit by giving ourselves in ministry to others.

Thankfully, there are quite different opinions about the measure in which humans can reach fullness of the Spirit in this life. One desert saint says,

You may attain to the highest level of interior life in your asceticism and your contemplation, but as long as you still live this present life, your spiritual knowledge and prophecy and the pledge of the Holy Spirit will all be yours 'only in part,' never completely. But when you come beyond the constricting limit of the ages, [as one] worthy [to] see face-to-face ... you will share in the entire pleroma of grace.¹²

Another sees it differently.

One who has found and taken possession of the heavenly treasure of the Spirit inside the heart is enabled by it to fulfill all the righteousness of the commandments and to practice all the virtues faultlessly and blamelessly. After that gift, everything becomes straightforward and easy.¹³

My reading of this latter quotation sees it dealing with how the continued practice of concentration on the "heavenly treasure of the Spirit" can bring a high level of obedience and virtue. Perhaps what we need to learn most from my juxtaposition of these two sets of sentences is that it is unlikely that we will have in this life all the fullness that God has promised in the Spirit. But when we live now as if in eternity, we will have ministries that by comparison with some of our other efforts may seem faultless and blameless.

In my judgment, we all still need salvation in Christ. But you and I have known people of age and wisdom in the Spirit who really are incredible. When they appear on that final day, they will innocently reply, "When did we see you Lord and minister to you?" Their habits of care for others, linked with their own humility, and the fullness of the Holy Spirit through the death and resurrection of Christ, will present them faultless before the judgment seat.

The godly apostle Paul describes the various energies of the Holy Spirit as varied gifts of grace, telling us that they all come from the single power of the Spirit. The revelation of the Spirit, however, is given in the measure of each disciple's faith, and in the form of communion in a special gift of grace. This power of the Spirit is available for each believer in a way that corresponds to the quality of their psychic state and of their faith and receptivity and it is this grace of the Spirit's power that allows them the capacity to fulfill the various commandments."¹⁴

Sincere faith can open any disciple to the remarkable power of the Spirit that gives us the power to keep commandments. This gift of grace does not come singularly through laying-on-of-hands or being set aside to be leaders. Ministry that consists of following the commandments is open to anyone who is open in faith to the Spirit.

“When the spiritual intellect is stripped of its obsessions, it discovers the Holy Spirit, and in the same way, the Spirit initiates it in the fullness of its hopes.”¹⁵ Is it our obsessions that keep us from the Holy One? No matter what our own demons are, whatever psychic troubles surround us, discovering the Spirit brings us into “the fullness of its hopes.” Leadership magazines well may insist that we need to be upbeat, ever hopeful. But only the Holy Spirit can bring ministers from any walk of life into a full hope.

How should we believe? In what way should we struggle and give all our energy to living a good life? We should do it with great hope and perseverance so that we can be found worthy to receive the power given from heaven and so receive the glory of the Holy Spirit in the innermost depths of our souls.¹⁶

Decades spent in the midst of God’s contemporary saints has led to some understanding of these sentences. Once after the minister of our church had preached another fine sermon, a young professional man said to me, “I love to hear him talk about heaven; it’s almost as if he had been there.” Ministry in which the “glory of the Holy Spirit” resides “in the innermost depths of our souls” shines through to others. Contemplative people who labor to receive the Spirit often are illumined and light the lives of those around them.

A head adorned with priceless Indian gemstones and pearls is beautiful. “But incomparably more beautiful is a soul that is rich in the knowledge of God and illuminated by the most radiant contemplation, for it has the Holy Spirit dwelling within. Who could ever properly tell of the beauty of such a blessed soul?”¹⁷ Surely in the gloom and doom of our own lives in this world, in the darkness of cynicism and rebellion, the beauty of a soul indwelt by the Holy Spirit is loveliness to behold in great appreciation.

One final note from our times is in order. Many Christians either confess in their worship or use in their teaching an early Creed: The Nicene-Constantinopolitan built at the Council of 381 from the basic structure of the Nicene one shaped at the Council of Nicea in 325. The genius of that creed is in its outline. I do not think we are wrong to avoid such creeds as tests of fellowship, but we do harm ourselves when they are not received as assets for teaching. In the three-fold creed, the confession of the one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic Church comes within the paragraph on the Spirit.¹⁸

The Spirit in the Church, guiding and protecting it, is a scriptural view. Once more, we can be aided if we think of the Spirit not singularly as indwelling individuals but also as empowering the community.

CONCLUSION

We have honored paid ministers who were servant leaders as well as people within whom the Holy Spirit lived and through whom that Spirit served others. Sometimes we have thought that only the irenic folks could be described that way, forgetting for a short while that the Spirit is also the holy source of prophetic utterance. That Holy Spirit can also be present in a call for repentance or a demand to right a wrong.

Ministry has little or no chance for fullness unless the Spirit is involved. It also cannot be settled only in saintly individuals but also must also be living within the whole church. We must no longer steer clear of talk about the Holy Spirit. In that way, we will grasp all the opportunities for the fullest ministry imaginable.

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Dr. Norris retired as Professor of world Christianity from Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, Tennessee.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert Richardson, *A Scriptural View of the Office of the Holy Spirit* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Co., 1872).
- 2 See Frederick W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus*, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 279-299.
- 3 Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980).
- 4 Gregory Nazianzen, "An Apology for His Flight to Pontus," trans. C.G. Browne and J.E. Swallow, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (Reprint Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 204-227. John Chrysostom, "On the Priesthood," trans. P. Bradram, *NPNF First Series* (Reprint Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 33-83. Gregory the Great, "Pastoral Care," trans. Henry Davis, *Ancient Christian Writers*, Vol. 11 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950).
- 5 Oratation 14 is newly translated by Martha Vinson in "St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations," *The Fathers of the Church*, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 39-71.
- 6 Brian Daley, "1998 NAPS Presidential Address, Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 7 (1999), 431-61.
- 7 *Besa: The Life of Shenoute*, trans. D.N. Bell (Kalamazoo: Cistern Publications, 1983).
- 8 John A. McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations on the Soul's Ascent, from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002) has brought together 300 statements from such folks and arranged them into three categories: praktikos, theoretikos, gnostikos. His appendices list authors and texts, sources, notes, and select bibliographies. The first quotation is for beginning students and the last for practiced mature leaders. They come from praktikos 69, "Sayings of the Egyptian Fathers" (Latin collection widely used in the Middle Ages) and theoretikos 57 "Maximus the Confessor" (d. 662).
- 9 McGuckin, gnostikos 64 "Macarios the Great" (before the sixth century).
- 10 McGuckin, theoretikos 7 "Diadochos of Photike" (mid-fifth century) and theoretikos 57 "Maximus the Confessor."
- 11 McGuckin, theoretikos 59 "Maximus the Confessor."
- 12 McGuckin, theoretikos 73 "Maximus the Confessor."
- 13 McGuckin, gnostikos 53 "Macarios the Great" (life dates unknown).
- 14 McGuckin, theoretikos 81 "Maximus the Confessor."
- 15 McGuckin, gnostikos 12 "Thalassios the Libyan" (late sixth, early seventh century).
- 16 McGuckin, gnostikos 45 "Macarios the Great."
- 17 McGuckin, theoretikos 50 Theodore the Ascetic (probably mid-seventh century).
- 18 Berard Marthaler, *The Creed: The Apostolic Faith in Contemporary Theology*, rev. ed. (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1993). Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 4 vols.

