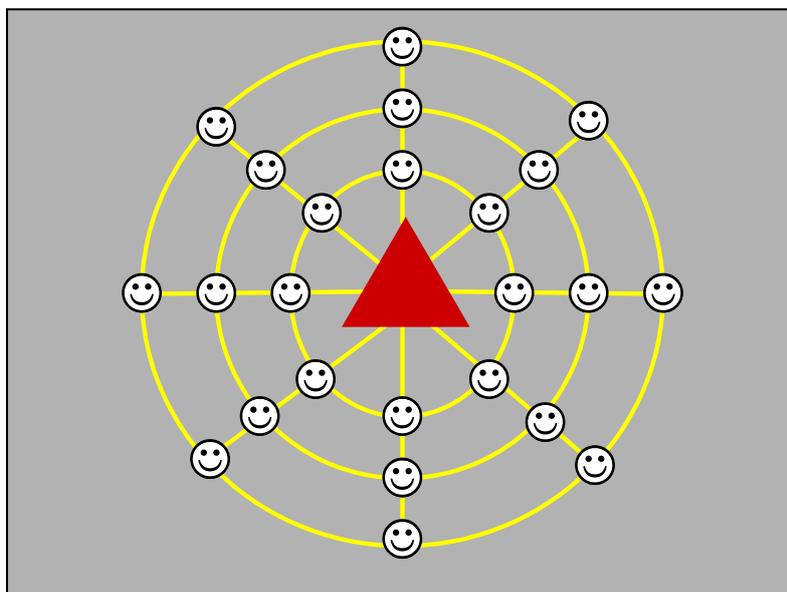


God is a Community

Part 5: The Spirit of Love



Who or What is the Holy Spirit?

Trinitarian doctrine refers to the Holy Spirit as one of the three “persons” of the Trinity and the New Testament in particular often uses personal terms for the Holy Spirit, however exactly how the Holy Spirit is a person is not all that simple. To begin with, the term “person” as it is used in formulating ideas about the Trinity is used in a highly technical way to refer to the three ways in which the Godhead expresses itself. This is very different to the way in which we normally use the word “person” to describe an individual man or woman. Indeed all three “persons” of the Trinity are very different kinds of “persons”. The Father is the divine nature existing as ultimate source of all being, the Son is divine nature existing as the image of all that the Father is, and the Spirit...well, what is the Spirit?

The root words used for God’s Spirit in both Hebrew and Greek is “breath”. The Old Testament sees the Holy Spirit as God’s breath or wind which goes out from God to achieve certain ends in the world and then returns to God. It was seen first as being present in certain unusual phenomena (eg 1Sam 10:5-13, Judges 14:6) and later it was associated with kings and prophets in an ongoing way (1 Sam 16:13-14, Is 61:1-2). It came thus to refer to the way in which God was present to God’s people. The New Testament continues to see the Holy Spirit in this way but adds a few significant ideas. Firstly, the Spirit is now also seen as the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9). Secondly, the Spirit is no longer associated exclusively with powerful, unusual actions but rather with every aspect of the believer’s life (1 Cor 3:16-17, 1 Cor 12:3). And, thirdly, the Spirit comes to be spoken of in personal categories (1 Cor 12:11, Rom 8:16).

As the Church struggled to find adequate ways to understand the exact structure of the Trinity, the Biblical connection between the Spirit and love became a helpful guide (Rom 5:5, 15:30, Col 1:8, Eph 3:16-19). It was St Augustine (d.430) who formulated the idea of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love that flows from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father in the eternal unity of the godhead. This became the

dominant view of the Holy Spirit in Western Christianity. This image of the Spirit is helpful in that it explains why the Spirit is always accredited with uniting us to the Father and the Son; it explains how the Spirit is different to the Son – it is not another Son or Daughter but a bond of love; it explains the “facelessness” of the Spirit, for love is faceless, the only face it seeks and therefore has is the face of the beloved.

So, in summary we can say the following: The Spirit is the bond of love within the divinity. The Spirit’s very identity as a person is constituted by being this bond of love between Father and Son.

What does the Spirit do?

We have already seen what the Spirit does within the Trinity – it binds Father and Son together in an eternal bond of love. But what about the Spirit’s mission outside the Trinity: for what reason do the Father and the Son send the Spirit into the world? The two main reasons that are normally cited are:

- 1) The Spirit is sent to sanctify people and be the means whereby God dwells in them.
- 2) The Spirit is sent to equip people for mission.

Both of these reasons are however merely expressions of the deeper purpose, namely that the Spirit is sent to be the love that unites and, by uniting, transforms all that it unites. Just as the Spirit is the bond of love between Father and Son, so the Spirit becomes the bond of love uniting us to the Father and the Son and uniting us to one another. It should be clear that from this unity would flow the sanctification of both individuals and communities as they become more loving (i.e. more like God). Similarly, as we shall see when we speak in more detail about the Church, the mission for which God’s people are equipped by the Spirit is nothing other than the mission to spread God’s love in the world.

Signs of the Spirit’s Presence

How do we know if the Holy Spirit is present in a certain situation, or in an individual or a community? The Bible gives us several lists of “gifts” that are associated with the Holy Spirit. None of these lists is intended to be exhaustive but together they give us a flavour of the kinds of things that the Spirit does. Such lists can be found in Isaiah 11:2, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, Romans 12:6-8 and James 3:17-18 for example.

Most of these “gifts” are not unique to the experience of Christians. Wisdom, faith, miraculous healing, ecstatic speech (speaking in tongues), etc. are all found among other religions as well. Moreover, even within Christianity these gifts are vulnerable to abuse as Paul makes abundantly clear in his first letter to the Corinthians. None of the gifts can therefore be signs of the Spirit’s presence in and of themselves. For any of them to be true signs of the Spirit’s presence, something else is necessary. If the Spirit is essentially love, then love must be a component of all signs of the Spirit’s presence. Thus Paul insists that the gifts only have any value when love is present (1 Cor 13:1-3). For Paul the true, unambiguous sign of the Spirit’s presence is the love that builds up the Christian community (1 Cor 12:7, 14:12). Love, then, is *the* sign of the Spirit’s presence.

The place where the love of the Spirit begins to take concrete shape in the world is the Christian community, or Church, and in the sacraments of the Church.

The Church

Since the day of Pentecost, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world has been very specifically linked to the Church. We turn now to a consideration of who and what exactly the Church is.

Who or what is the Church?

There are about 80 different images for the Church in the Bible, and we hardly have time to discuss them all here. It will suffice to look at three of the better known images and their implications for the nature and mission of the Church.

Firstly, the Church is “**the People of God**”. In this sense the Church stands in continuity with Israel. This image reminds us that the Church is in special relationship with God, the Father; that it is its people and not its buildings or its clergy; that it should look like a “people” or a community; that it is made up of imperfect members (people); that it is part and parcel of the world; that it meant to be of service to the world; and, that it is only a “people” at all because of the gracious call of God that makes it so.

Secondly, the Church is “**the Body of Christ**”. Here we are reminded that the Church is in special relationship with God, the Son; that it shares in Christ’s relationship to the Father; that it continues the work or mission of the risen Christ and represents the risen Christ in the world; and, that its members are organically linked to one another in and through Christ.

Thirdly, the Church is “**the Temple of the Holy Spirit**”. The Church is in special relationship with God, the Holy Spirit. The Church is filled with God’s life-giving Spirit; it is the true sanctuary of the presence of God in the world and therefore the place where true worship takes place.

In terms of the linking idea that we are using for this study, we can go further to conclude that the Church is the place where God’s intended Divine/human Community of Love is beginning to take concrete shape in the world. As the People of God, the Church is called into this Community of Love. As the Body of Christ the Church is united to the Incarnate Son, the one who participates in both the divine community and the human community. As the Temple of the Holy Spirit the Church is bound together with God and internally with the same Spirit of Love that binds the Trinity together.

The marks of the Church

There are certain gifts and tasks which the Spirit gives to the Church. These are summed up in the Church’s creeds by saying that the Church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”. These gifts/tasks are also called the “marks” of the Church.

- 1) **One.** Unity is an essential property of the Church, whether on a local or global level. The Church is a community of people united to Christ and through Christ to one another. Firstly, this means that the Church must be seen to be one. It is not a place for factions or division. The visible signs of that unity to which the Church has traditionally appealed are its faith (expressed in the Creeds), its sacraments, and its ordained ministry. Secondly, the fact that the Church is one means that the divisions that we do see today in the Church with its various denominations and in particular their non-acceptance of each other are a perversion of Christ’s intention for the Church.

- 2) **Holy.** The Church is holy first in the sense that it is called by God, and anything united to God is holy in that it belongs to God. Furthermore, the Church is holy because its members, being united to God, are in the process of being transformed towards holiness through the power of the Spirit of Love. This does not mean that the Church is perfect however. It is quite possible for individuals to join the Church deceptively without any intentions of being joined in love to either God or fellow Church-members. Similarly, it is possible that existing members may turn away from God and love without formally leaving the Church. And finally it must also be said that even the best intentioned and most committed members of the Church never cease to be human and fallible this side of glory. Nevertheless, despite all her failures, the Church is still holy.
- 3) **Catholic.** The term “catholic” as used here means that the Church is universal or all-embracing. The Church is open to all people and none can be excluded on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, age, culture, class, or socio-economic standing.
- 4) **Apostolic.** The Church stands in continuity with the Church of the Apostles. Different denominations see this continuity expressed in different forms. For Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Orthodox Christians the continuity is expressed in the line of apostolic succession (the idea that the faith, sacraments and ministry of the Church are handed down from one generation to the next through the ordination of priests and bishops). For Protestant Christians it is the faithfulness to the faith and practice of the Apostles, embodied in Scripture, preaching and sacraments, that constitutes the apostolicity of the Church.

Do Christians need to be part of the Church?

From time to time the question is raised whether it is necessary for Christians to actually belong to the Church, or whether their private and independent devotion to Jesus is a sufficient response of faith. The traditional answer given to this question is *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – outside of the Church there is no salvation.

This slogan is not intended as a stick to keep schismatics in line, it is a rather the logical conclusion drawn from the mission of the Spirit which, as we have already seen, is to bind people together with both God and one another in the Community of Love. 1 John 4:20 makes it clear that one cannot have the one without the other. To love Christ is to love his Body, the Church, and it should be self-evident that any desire to cause division or to separate oneself from fellow believers would be a sign of the presence of a very different spirit.

The Sacraments

Finally we turn to the sacraments or visible signs that Jesus has given believers of His presence among them – ceremonies that symbolize and make real for individual believers that they share in some or other aspect of the life of the Community of Love. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality. For a ceremony to qualify as a sacrament, it must in some way mediate (or make real) the presence of Jesus in the community. Protestants would add that for it to be a true sacrament it must also be an ordinance, i.e. something that Jesus instructed his followers to do. For Protestants then there are only two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion.

Baptism

Baptism is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual reality that an individual has been washed clean of sin (recall what we said about original sin) and accepted into the Community of Love. It is advisable that the sign of Baptism be administered as close as possible to the actual moment when such incorporation into the Community of Love takes place. Therefore most branches of the Church practice adult baptism for those who have converted to the faith, as well as infant baptism for those who have become part of the community by virtue of their families' participation in it.

Holy Communion

Holy Communion is the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual reality that individuals share in the life of the Community of Love on an ongoing basis. It is the sacrament that symbolizes and deepens our unity with Christ and each other and our sharing in the sacrifice that made such unity possible. As such it acts on three levels of time: a) It recalls the sacrifice that Jesus made on the Cross in the past; b) it allows us to share community with Christ and one another in the present; and c) it anticipates the day when we will share perfect community with Christ and all God's people at the wedding banquet of the Lamb in glory (Rev 19:7).