

The Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John

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The gospel of John was described by Tertullian as a “spiritual gospel.” Indeed there are many references to the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel. The purpose of this article is to evaluate John’s representation of the Holy Spirit’s work, with the goal of articulating elements of a cohesive Johannine pneumatology. The methodology for this article shall be a sequential study of specific Johannine passages referring to the Holy Spirit. Passages selected are representative, and are not comprehensive of references to the Holy Spirit in the fourth gospel.

The first significant reference to the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John is found in 1.32, which records the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, at which the Baptist testified:

“I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

In this introduction to the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel, two distinguishing aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit are evident. The first is that of identifying the Messiah. God had revealed to John the Baptist that the Holy Spirit would positively identify His sent one². At Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit fulfilled this prophecy to John. The second aspect is that the Holy Spirit is associated with baptism. In contrast to John’s water baptism, which can be performed by men, and which is symbolic of the washing away of sins, the baptism of the Spirit is offered only by Christ, and the indwelling Spirit enables the Spirit-baptized believer to carry out the mission and work of Christ.³

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² John 1:33

³ Acts 1:5-8

It may be said of this passage that the Holy Spirit is the identifier- both of Jesus as the Christ and of future Spirit-baptized believers. It is appropriate to note the first-century Mediterranean social and cultural context of John's gospel and of this event, and to explore the concepts of self-identification and honor. Mediterranean culture was, and continues to be, a culture in which the individual's identity is found not within himself, but in some 'other' which defines the person and his role in society. This other is called a *dyad*. Pilch and Malina explain:

Individual people are not known or valued because of their uniqueness, but in terms of their dyad, that is, some other person or thing. Dyadism, therefore is a means value by which one's honor can be continually checked, affirmed, or challenged... Personal identity and knowledge of this sort belong in a cultural world that is highly ordered and carefully classified, so that there is a place for everyone and everyone in his place... It follows that such people tend to think of themselves and others in stereotypes which tell of their role and status: as fishermen and carpenters, as scribes and lawyers, as governors and kings.⁴

In this text, the Holy Spirit is that 'other' which identifies Jesus as the Messiah, just as Jesus is the 'other' from which John the Baptist derived his sense of identity⁵. The coming of the Holy Spirit at His baptism marked Jesus as belonging to a particular dyad (His messianic identity), just as the coming of the Holy Spirit on believers at Pentecost marked them, establishing their identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Another cultural concept deserves mention here- honor. Honor is ascribed or derived from one's dyad. Honor is "a register of social rating which entitles a person to interact in specific ways with equals, superiors, and subordinates, according to the prescribed cultural cues of the society."⁶ In this text, the Holy Spirit bestows honor on Jesus by marking His identity as the Messiah, and by establishing his dyad- Jesus belongs to God Himself. This dyad is confirmed by John the Baptist in John 1:34- "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God. Matthew⁷ records that God spoke at Jesus' baptism, identifying Jesus as God's son (establishing

⁴ Pilch and Malina, 54.

⁵ Matthew 3:11

⁶ Neyrey, 26

⁷ Matthew 3:17

Jesus' dyad), and that God was pleased with Him (ascribing Jesus honor). Thus, the Holy Spirit in this text is that which establishes Jesus' identity as the Messiah, and which indicates that God has honored Him. It is in this identity, and with this honor, that Jesus begins his earthly ministry.

It is significant to enquire at this point whether this was an "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit in the sense that the Son had been incarnated in Jesus Christ. In other words, to ask whether a true and living dove, an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, descended from Heaven on to Jesus, or whether John is using a figurative expression. John Calvin answers this question in the negative:

This is an unliteral and figurative expression; for with what eyes could he see the Spirit? But as the dove was a sure and infallible sign of the presence of the Spirit, it is called the Spirit by metonymy; not that it is really the Spirit, but it shows Him in a way man can grasp... you must not think that the Spirit who fills heaven and earth was included under the dove, but that He was present by His power, so that John might know that such a sight was not put before his eyes in vain.⁸

Calvin's logic is reverent and pious, displaying a high regard for the deity of the Spirit, but it breaks down at the point of the incarnation itself. For if the body of dove could not contain the fullness of the Spirit, how could the body of a man contain the "fullness of the godhead" as Christ did? Merrill Tenney offers a different perspective:

The manifestation of the present of the Spirit in Jesus' case was visible. The Gospel records the Baptist's subsequent reflection on the event. Luke's Gospel preserves the testimony of eyewitnesses who reproduced the actual scene. The phenomena of the descent of the Spirit and voice from heaven identified Jesus unmistakably as the predicted Messiah and prompted another aspect of John's witness.⁹

It remains unclear if this was a theophany of the Holy Spirit or a representative vision given to John, but seems logical to take this event as a literal vision of a literal dove, in keeping with the literal human body of Jesus Christ's incarnation.

⁸Calvin, 34

⁹Tenney, 38

The second prominent reference to the Holy Spirit in John's gospel is found in 3:5-8, during Jesus' nighttime encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus, having misunderstood Jesus' reference to the second birth, has asked Jesus for clarification. Jesus responds:

Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

This cryptic reference to the Holy Spirit points to the spiritual nature of the second birth. In order to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born physically (born of water) and spiritually. The holy mystery of salvation is paralleled in this text by another natural phenomenon. We cannot perceive the origins of the wind- where it has been before us, how it came to us, and where it will go beyond us, but we have subjective and objective evidence of its existence and activity. So also with the second birth of the Spirit- though the activities of God in salvation are mysterious, we have subjective and objective evidence that God has indeed done and continues to do a remarkable work of regeneration in the lives of believers. In this passage, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the One who characterizes the second birth. McCabe notes that Jesus' explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit in rebirth in this text is consistent with Old Testament pneumatology:

While "spirit" may be used in this sense on a general level to describe God's animating force in all living creatures, it is more specifically used to denote the Spirit who will quicken his people and produce God's eschatological blessings. The Old Testament predicts that a time will come when God pours out his Spirit on all mankind (Joel 2:28). This pouring out of his Spirit involves a transformation that includes a cleansing from sin and a spiritual renewal of God's covenant people (Ezek 11:18-20; 36:25-27). This time will also include a restoration of God's blessings and righteousness (Isa 32:15-20; 44:3; Ezek 29:29).²⁴ The use of πνεῦμα in John is consistent with the Old Testament predictions of the Spirit's quickening work in salvation.¹⁰

¹⁰ McCabe, 89-90.

The third reference under present scrutiny is John 3:34, and is found in the mouth of John the Baptist. Upon receiving a report that Jesus was baptizing and many were coming to Him, John affirms the rightful priority of Christ as the Messiah, and states in verse 34: “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure.” Taken in its immediate context, this reference to the Holy Spirit is connected with Jesus’ prophetic nature- His “speaking the words of God.” Two significant features of John’s statement deserve attention. First, the Holy Spirit is connected with the speaking of God’s Word. This theme will be further developed as John’s gospel progresses. Second, the Holy Spirit was given boundlessly (not ‘by measure’) to Christ- Christ possessed and was filled with the entirety of the Holy Spirit. This passage does not speak to the extent to which the Spirit is given to believers, since it precedes by several years the day of Pentecost, but simply to Christ. It does, however, speak to the nature and actions of God- He does not give the Spirit partially- the Holy Spirit is given fully to believers (the question remains how fully believers are given to the Spirit!) Thus it can be said that this passage presents the Holy Spirit in connection with the speaking of the word of God (though not in an explicitly causal relationship), and as given to Christ fully, not “by measure.” Just as Jesus Christ is fully God the Son, the Spirit poured out from the father is fully God the Spirit.

The fourth reference to the Holy Spirit is found in 4:21-24, during Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. As Jesus has been speaking to the woman, she has presented a series of theological and ecclesiastical obstacles to derail a conversation with which she is obviously uncomfortable. At her mention of the contemporary Jewish/Samaritan debate over the legitimate place of worship (the temple or Mt. Gerizim), Jesus tells her that the Father is seeking people who will worship Him “in spirit and in truth.” The reference to spirit here is probably a reference to the human spirit, not the Holy Spirit, and carries the idea of worshiping God from the innermost depths of one’s being, with full commitment. He goes on, however, to say that “God is Spirit...” In light of Jesus’ previous references to the Holy Spirit, this reference may be taken as a deliberate correlation between the Father and the Spirit, clearly asserting the full

divinity of the Spirit. We may extrapolate from this to say that God is God the Holy Spirit, just as He is God the Father, and God the Son, though this is not the primary emphasis of this text, and stronger biblical evidence for the Trinity may certainly be marshaled¹¹. We may also argue from Jesus' parallel references to the human spirit and God as spirit, in the context of worship, that the human spirit is able to communicate with God as spirit- that God is imminent to the human spirit. Thus our worship can be a meaningful communication with God. In fact, God desires this.

Brown points out that Jesus' reference to God as spirit in this text is a reference to God's representation of Himself to humanity: "This is not an essential definition of God, but a description of God's dealings with men..."¹² Such a construction is not foreign to Johannine writing, as John elsewhere declares "God is love"¹³ and "God is light"¹⁴. Just as God is love and light, so also He is spirit, representing Himself to humanity in the incorporeal form of the Holy Spirit.

John 6:63 records the following words of Jesus, in explanation for the rejection of His message by many: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." This reference to the Spirit as life-giver harks back to John 3:34, in which the Holy Spirit is represented as being vital in Jesus' ministry of proclamation, and to John 3:5-8, in which Jesus depicts the Holy Spirit as the source of spiritual birth. Here the Holy Spirit is represented as "giving life"- i.e., in this context, enabling those who heard Jesus' message to believe it and to remain with Him. Thus becomes clear that the Holy Spirit is active and necessary on both ends of religious epistemology: proclamation and reception. It is the Spirit through whom Jesus proclaimed the message of the Kingdom, and is the Spirit through whom certain of His listeners were able to receive that message. As. D. A. Carson puts it, although the Spirit will not come upon the disciples until His departure, "already

¹¹ Matthew 28:19; Luke 3:21-22; Galatians 4:4-7; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 4:2,9, 13-15.

¹² Brown, 172

¹³ 1 John 4:8

¹⁴ 1 John 1:5

Jesus himself is the bearer of the Spirit.”¹⁵ Thus, the Holy Spirit is vital in proclamation and understanding of Christ’s message.

John 7:39 presents Jesus at a feast proclaiming “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” John, acting as omniscient narrator, adds his interpretation of Jesus’ cry: “But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”¹⁶ This statement of Jesus, along with John’s brief explanatory note, provides several important aspects of Johannine pneumatology. First, the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditioned upon belief in Christ. The Spirit is not given broadly to all humanity, but to those who have entered a unique relationship with God. This is significant, in that the Holy Spirit is differentiated from the human spirit, and from conscience, which are universal. Second, the giving of the Holy Spirit fulfills the spirit of many Old Testament passages. Jesus does not quote a specific prophecy, but alludes to several references, including Deuteronomy 18:5, Isaiah 12:3, Isaiah 43:20, Isaiah 44:3, and Isaiah 55:1. Third, at the time of Jesus’ statement, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given to believers at large, but at the time of John’s writing, after Pentecost, He had- thus, John’s omniscient perspective. Fourth, there is a direct relationship between the glorification of Christ and the giving of the Spirit. Indeed, as is stated in John 14, the Holy Spirit will not come until Jesus has gone to Heaven.

The seventh reference to the Holy Spirit in John’s gospel is found in 14:15-18, in which Jesus states:

If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever– the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.

¹⁵Carson, 301

¹⁶ John 7:39

Again, there are several important teachings of Christ in this passage that further illuminate the person and work of the Holy Spirit. First, the Spirit is given to believers by the Father, based upon the prayer of Jesus. This is part of the session of Christ- His present ministry of intercession on behalf of believers while awaiting the parousia. Second, the Holy Spirit is an everlasting gift to believers. He is given at a specific time and continues to abide forever. This speaks to the protection and perseverance of the saints. Those who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, retain this gift forever. Third, He is the Spirit of truth. This echoes the previous idea that the Spirit is involved in the proclamation and understanding of the message of Christ. The Spirit is active in both the proclamation and the reception of truth. Fourth, the world cannot receive the Holy Spirit “because it neither sees Him nor knows Him.” This is a cryptic reference to the people’s reception of Christ’s message. Those whom the Spirit has illuminated to understand Christ’s teaching can “see” the eternal $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ in the audible words of Christ. In seeing the Son, believers see the Spirit. Fifth, the Spirit has had an ongoing relationship with believers since the baptism of Christ. When He says that the Spirit “dwells with you,” He is speaking before the common gift of the Spirit- He is speaking of the Spirit dwelling with His disciples through Himself. When He says that the Spirit “will be in you,” He is referring to the future gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The eighth reference John makes to the Holy Spirit is in the context of Jesus’ farewell discourse, and is recorded in 15:26-27. Jesus says: “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.” This verse is rich with theological depth, and has sparked controversy in the historic struggles between the Eastern and Western churches, particularly in regard to the Nicene Creed, which was one of the first creeds to mention the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father. The 325 edition of the creed, adopted at the first ecumenical council, states that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, but the 381 revision adds the Latin *filioque*- “and the Son,” advocating

the double procession of the Holy Spirit, which is the position adopted by the Western church.¹⁷ The procession of the Spirit from the Son is not mentioned in this verse, but Jesus does state that the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and is *sent* by the Son. The verse also contains allusions to previously discussed roles of the Spirit, such as coming after Jesus has ascended, and being the “Spirit of truth.” In addition, Jesus adds that the Spirit will testify of Christ after His ascension.

The final significant reference to the Holy Spirit is found in 16:5-15, and is the most comprehensive statement of Jesus in the gospel referring to the Holy Spirit. Jesus says:

But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement: of sin, because they do not believe in me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgement, because the ruler of this world is judged.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.

Exegesis of this passage reveals several salient features of John’s pneumatology. First, the departure of Jesus yields greater advantages to the believer than His remaining. Andreas Kostenberger amplifies this idea with the following list of advantages for believers in the ascension of Christ:

- a. Jesus is preparing a place - John 14:1-4
- b. Jesus’ disciples know the way to follow Him- John 14:5-7
- c. Jesus’ disciples can enjoy greater intimacy of relationship with Christ- John 14:8-11
- d. Jesus’ disciples can do greater works than Jesus- 14:12-14

¹⁷Schaff, 25-26

e. Jesus' disciples receive another divine helping presence¹⁸

Second, the Holy Spirit is recorded for the first and only time in John's gospel as having a ministry specifically to unbelievers. Previously it has been explained that the Spirit is essential in the proclamation of the gospel, but that not all who hear the gospel understand and receive it because the Holy Spirit does not illuminate all who hear. Those who are illuminated by the Holy Spirit believe, and the Spirit carries on a unique relationship with them through the bodily Christ and, Christ tells us, through the indwelling of the Spirit after His ascension. Here, however, the Holy Spirit is predicted to have a unique ministry to unbelievers: the ministry of conviction. He will convict the unbelieving world of three things: sin, righteousness, and judgment.

The Holy Spirit's conviction of the world for their sin will be related to their unbelief. Those who believe are forgiven for their sins, but those who remain obstinate in their unbelief are convicted. The Holy Spirit's conviction of righteousness is related to Jesus' ascension to the Father. Because Jesus will not have a physical, tangible presence through which to guide (and condemn) the moral behavior of the world, the Holy Spirit will provide that conviction subjectively to individual unbelievers and objectively through the indwelt church. The Spirit's conviction of judgment is related to judgment of Satan, the "ruler of this world." In the death and resurrection of Christ, God began the process of passing judgment on sin from the top down. Satan has been judged and condemned at Calvary and the empty tomb, and he now awaits the execution of his sentence. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of judgment because judgment is coming for all unbelievers. This is part of the Spirit's ministry of drawing unbelievers to Christ.

Third, the Holy Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth because He is the channel of revelation from the Father. This promise of Jesus was fulfilled in the apostolic writing of the New Testament, and continues to be fulfilled today in the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures.

¹⁸Kostenberger, 152-158

Fourth, the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be to glorify Christ. Any alleged manifestation of the Spirit which does not glorify Christ is counterfeit, for Christ said that the Spirit would glorify Him. This is relevant to the 'signs and wonders' movement within charismatic Christianity- where Jesus Christ is not explicitly glorified, one cannot be assured that the Holy Spirit is active.

In summary, the gospel of John presents a concise and well-rounded picture of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis seems to be more on the work of the Spirit than His person. The Holy Spirit's work is depicted as being the Identifier (the dyad) both of Christ and believers, the Medium for new, spiritual birth, is vital for proclaiming and understanding the gospel, is given based on faith in Christ, was unable to come to all believers until Christ's ascension, and now, having come, He will guide believers into all truth. His ministry to the unbelieving world includes conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

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