The Holy Spirit and the Trinity

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I. Introduction

Historically speaking, the classic christological problem has been dealt with from two different aspects, though closely related: one is the problem of Christ’s relation to God, the other is the problem of the divine and the human in the historical Jesus.

The principal preoccupation of theology for the first three centuries was to determine the problem of Christ’s relation to God. At the Council of Nicaea (A. D. 325) and the First Council of Constantinople (A. D. 381), they affirmed that Christ was truly divine, "of the same substance as the Father." For the next three centuries, christological thought, which is the problem of the divine and the human in Jesus of Nazareth, was focussed. At the council of Chalcedon (A. D. 451) they formulated that Christ was "perfect in deity and perfect in humanity... God truly and man truly... acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation... not divided or separated into two persons but one and the same Son and only begotten God Logos, Lord Jesus Christ." This formula was made more precise in the declaration, at the sixth Council of Constantinople (A. D. 680), that Christ had two wills, a divine and a human, and two energies fully operative.

However, what does this trinitarian formulation mean? Here arises the necessary question about the concrete meaning of this christological formulation. We cannot deny that of all the beliefs of Christian faith, the most mysterious is the trinitarian doctrine. The Trinity is a "vague, oblong or triangular blur" to the Christians. We tend to think of the doctrine of Trinity as, not only the most obscure and mystifying but also the most speculative of all Christian beliefs.
However, we must not forget that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and triune nature of God arose out of the religious experience of the early Christian community. "The substance of all trinitarian thought is given in revelatory experiences," though the form has the same rationality that all theology, as a work of the Logos, must have. "It was the experience of the early church Christians that God was redemptively present as Saviour and Lord in Jesus the Christ. After Jesus' physical departure, they experienced a continuing sense of his abiding presence in their fellowship, the Christlike presence of God."

For this reason, it is important to recognize that the Trinity is not a dogma of theology, but a datum of experience. We have no dogma of the Trinity inherited from the ancient church, only some pronouncements of Councils about the divine character of Christ and of the Spirit. The formula "one being, three persons" from the very first moment left open several interpretations.

I believe that Christian experience requires "a radical revision of the trinitarian doctrine and new understanding of the Divine Life and the Spiritual presence." It is rather necessary for us to reinterpret this problem from an existential and experiential point of view. For historically the Trinity of experience long antedated the Trinity of dogma.

II. The Three-fold designation of God in the New Testament

The three-fold designation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is present in the New Testament in the two passages: (1) the Great Commission and Baptismal Formula in Mt. 28:19; (2) the Benediction of St. Paul in II Cor. 13:14.

These two trinitarian phrases worked their way into the heart of Christian thinking through frequent repetition in the public worship. Likewise, we can see the same idea of the three-fold distinction which was a constitutive element of Paul's central teaching.
In the Pauline writings, the relation between the Spirit and Christ appears in much the same dialectical pattern of identity and distinction. Christ and the Spirit are so closely associated in the life of Christians that their names are interchangeable. The Lord "is" the Spirit in the sense that he is present and active in the Spirit among men. St. Paul experienced this kind of the intimate and consummate communion of the Holy Spirit.

"It is no longer I who live: Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

"It is no longer I who live: the Spirit of Christ which is the Spirit of God which is the Holy Spirit lives in me." (Rom. 8:9)

In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit is subsequent to Christ. However, as is written in Jn. 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Quite literally God dwelt in Him fully - the Holy Spirit which is the Spirit of God, His Father - as fully and completely as God's Holy Spirit can possess a truly human life.

At the same time, Van Dusen suggests that the Logos of the Fourth Gospel, the forerunner of Christ, had been recognized as the Holy Spirit, not as the Word of God or as the pre-existent Christ. He may say, "In the beginning was the Spirit, and the Spirit was with God...and the Spirit was made flesh, and dwelt among us, fully of grace and truth." Van Dusen as well as Berkhof is convinced that such a rendering is more meaningful and faithful both to the prevailing meaning of Logos in the thought of the time and to the historic connotation of Spirit throughout Scripture. Tillich also supports this idea, saying that "originally the distinction between the Logos and the Spirit was indefinite or non-existent."

St. Paul nowhere stresses the subsequence of the Holy Spirit to Christ, perhaps because it had become self-evident. Paul's thought is rather of a distinction between the respective spheres of operation of Christ and the Spirit, which may be described as the objective and the subjective
respectively. The Spirit is the subjective complement or counterpart of the objective fact of Christ, and it is the function of the Spirit to bring about an inner experience of outward fact in the hearts of men. This does not mean that the objective fact is dissolved into a subjective experience. There remains a polarity or correlation between them. Faith comes only when the outward fact penetrates to the inner heart of man and takes possession of him there — and this is the work of the Spirit. "No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3). The Spirit is presented in a purely Christocentric reference. The Spirit of prophecy is identified with the Spirit of Christ and correlated with the Spirit of the apostolic Kerygma in I Pet. 1:10-12. Thus, the action of the Spirit is literally Christocentric, inasmuch as it is always centered on Christ, whether it comes from before or after the Incarnation.  

On such revelatory experiences as this, we can deal with the trinitarian problem. Tillich certifies this idea as a right way of investigation. He says: With the statement that the historical Jesus is the Christ, the trinitarian problem became a part of the Christological problem, the first and basic part, as indicated by the fact that the trinitarian decision in Nicaea preceded the definitely Christological decision of Chalcedon. This sequence was logical, but in terms of motivation the sequence is reversed: the Christological problem gives rise to the trinitarian problem.

For this reason it is adequate in the context of the theological system to discuss the trinitarian symbolism after having discussed the Christological assertions of Christianity.  

III. The Traditional Interpretations of the Trinity

We cannot or should not ignore the religious experience in the life of the first century Christian church concerning the trinitarian problem. The trinitarian doctrine is not a matter of mere speculative thought, but the inmost reality of the Divine Being, distinctions which are real within
human experience of the Divine Being. For this reason if we think of the
relation of Christ to God in terms of the Holy Spirit, we may find a more
adequate comprehension and expression of their relationship, which is
somehow more intimate, more interior than the former formulations
suggest. Van Dusen says, "the doctrine of the Trinity, then, is not basically
an attempt to foist upon Christian credulity an unintelligible and incredible
speculation regarding Ultimate Reality; it is the effort to discover
what must be true of Ultimate Reality because of what our experience
of that reality tells us. Affirmation of the Trinity and some attempt
to explain it are an inevitable and inescapable corollary of Christian
certitude."

At the same time, Berkhof states the similar indication. "This time
I believe the renewal will not come from a discovery of the Biblical
content of the word Logos but from a discovery of the Biblical content of
the word Spirit." Here, I think, it is of importance for us to look back
at the history of the doctrine of the Trinity.

[A] The Eastern Church

The earliest attempt at a formulation of the Trinity was made by
Cappadocian Fathers – Basil and Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of
Nazianzus. They begin with an honest confession of the incomprehensibility
of the Divine nature and the limitations of human speculation. In spite
of this recognition of the impossibility of the attempt, Basil interprets
the relation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the Godhead in terms
of the accepted discrimination of substance from hypostasis. Basil explains
the Trinity as affirming one ousia (substantia, substance or nature) in
three hypostases (personae or persons).

Briefly speaking, we cannot deny the historical fact that their inter-
pretation of the Trinity sets forth the method employed in all subsequent
trinitarian speculation, and the Trinity of speculation has triumphed over
the Trinity of experience.

According to Van Dusen, the resulting conception was formally declared by the Eastern Bishop and scholars at an assemblage at the Constantinople in A. D. 382 (which is not the Ecumenical Council in A. D. 381). 17

However, it is worth noting here that Tillich sympathizingly points out the existential element of the Greek Orthodox understanding of the Trinity:

Behind the subordinational element in the Greek Orthodox understanding of the Trinity lies one of the most fundamental and most persistent traits of the classical Greek encounter with the interpretation of reality in grades, leading from the lowest to the highest (and conversely). This profoundly existential understanding of reality runs from Plato’s Symposium to Origen and through him to the Eastern Church and to Christian mysticism. 18

(B) The Western Church

In the Western church the tendency of their theological interest had moved along more or less different lines.

The Eastern theologians were interested in elaborating the distinctions within the Godhead while affirming the unity. However, Augustine was concerned to safeguard the unity of God in man’s thought of Christ, while recognizing the three-fold expression of the divine unity. In his work, On the Trinity, Augustine merely recognizes the three-fold operation of the one God on the level of human psychological experience. He explains the distinction of the three persons within the Godhead by means of the analogy of the relations of individual men to each other, but principally in analogies drawn from the inmost self-consciousness of every man. The Trinity may be likened to (1) memory, understanding, and will — three faculties of one person; (2) mind, self-knowledge, self-love — three aspects of the same person; (3) the lover, the beloved, love — the faculties
of the relations of separate beings. Van Dusen, however, points out the tendency toward tritheism of Augustine’s third explanation. Anselm was afraid to speak of the “three persons” in the sense of “three substances.” Thomas Aquinas argues the “person” cannot mean anything else than “relation,” though a relation “which is its own mode of being.” The Reformers were less interested in the terminological heritage of this problem.

The early speculation, both Eastern and Western, came to find its definitive and official formulation in the Athanasian Creed. All this can well explain the traditional emphasis in pneumatology on the trinitarian aspect. Through the ecclesiastical history, however, all interpretations of the Trinity move along the same two alternative lines, Eastern and Western. There is no novelty in principle of interpretation. Protestantism generally became indifferent to the dogma, and even in denominations with a high Christology and an emphatic confession of the divinity of the Christ, no new understanding of the Trinity was produced. We may say that “most Christians accept the traditional doctrine of Trinity only with a more or less avowed sacrifice of their intellect – unless they are simply tritheists.”

IV. New Interpretations in Contemporary Theology.

(a) Karl Barth

As is widely known, Barth’s theology proves to be thoroughly trinitarian. He deals with the doctrine of the Trinity in the prolegomena of “Church Dogmatics.” He interprets this as the logic of the One-in-Three from the Christocentric point of view. And he begins the doctrine of Revelation with the doctrine of the Triune God. According to him, “God Himself in unimpaired difference is Revealer, Revealed, Revealedness. One in three of His own modes of existence, which consists in their mutual relationships – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Barth never puts emphasis
on categorical insistence upon the unity of God. "Not three divine 'I's', but thrice of the one divine 'I'." At the same time, Barth is careful of anti-trinitarianism which falls into the dilemma of denying either the revelation of God or unity of God. He keeps insisting the three "modes of Being" in God, rather than three "persons." (For he regards the ancient concept of Person as absolute.) "This means that the one God, i.e., the one Lord, the one personal God is what He is not in one mode only, but... in the mode of the Father, in the mode of the Son, in the mode of the Holy Spirit."22

D. M. Baillie criticizes Barth's idea as a decline toward Modalism. At the same time, Tillich points out the lack of the experiential elements in Barth's understanding:

It was a mistake of Barth to start his Prolegomena with what, so to speak, are the Postlegomena, the doctrine of the Trinity. It could be said that in his system this doctrine falls from heaven, the heaven of an unmediated Biblical and ecclesiastical authority.23

(b) Rudolf Bultmann

R. Bultmann defines the Spirit as "the miraculous divine power that stands in absolute contrast to all that is human." He does not regard the Greek word Pneuma as "Spirit" in the Greek-Platonic and idealistic sense. Dynamistic conception of the Spirit is conceived as "the power of permanent endowment which gives a special character to the whole mode of a man's life. This power enables a man to have miraculous insight. This power in a man is called dunamis, not pneuma. In early Christianity, this dunamis is identical with pneuma. Thus, the Spirit which determines a man's present existence, is the origin of a new attitude of a Christian. However, the Spirit should not be considered as purely subjective experience or purely objective reality. At the same time, his attitude qualifies him for an ever-new endowment of the Spirit, so that he
must strive after spiritual gifts. According to Bultmann, wisdom cannot be separated from the basic character of an existential knowledge in which faith unfolds itself. "To understand God's gift means to understand one's self as the receiver of it: hence, this highest "wisdom" and "knowledge" must simultaneously be the clearest understanding of one's self.

Frankly speaking, we may comment that Bultmann's interpretation of Spirit is missing the close relation to Christ. The event of Christ provides no specific basis for the activity of the Spirit, subjectifying the objective reality of Spirit.

Needless to say, the Holy Spirit has no objective reality in terms of substantial or ontological terminology. At the same time, the Holy Spirit is not a mere subjective experience in terms of psychological concept. There is no reality of the Spirit without being experienced as far as faith is concerned. Faith occurs where the reality and experience of the Holy Spirit are united into one subject-object structure of thinking. Precisely, what makes faith in Christ occur is the work of the Holy Spirit. As I have already mentioned, the Holy Spirit is the bond which unifies the objective reality and the subjective experience. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectively binds us to Himself.

(c) Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich distinguishes the spirit which is the dynamic-creative nature of man's personal and communal life, from the Spirit, which is the activity of the divine Spirit in man. For Tillicih, the Spirit is the symbolic application of spirit to the divine life, so that it is impossible to understand the meaning of the Spirit unless the meaning of the spirit is understood.

In human life, spirit is the unity of the ontological elements and telos of life. It is the unity of power and meaning of human existence.
Therefore, God as Spirit is the "ultimate unity" of power and meaning. That is to say, "Spirit is the Power through which meaning lives, and it is the meaning which gives direction to power."

For Tillich "the trinitarian symbols are dialectical, neither irrational nor paradoxical: they reflect the dialectics of life, namely the movement of separation and reunion. The statement that three is one and one is three was the worst distortion of the mystery of Trinity." In the historical process, the christological problem developed independent of the concept of the Spirit. Tillich tries to reinterpret the trinitarian doctrine on the basis of "a new understanding of the Divine Life and the Spiritual Presence." Since the realization of salvation by Christ is carried on through the Spirit, and since the Spirit whose essence is Life works as love, the Spirit is understood in terms of the concept of Life and its phenomenological investigation. Thus, the substance of all trinitarian thought is thoroughly given in revelatory experiences. Therefore, he rejects conceptual phantasies and speculation.

In the trinitarian principle, Tillich corresponds God to the element of power, and Logos to the element of meaning, and both of them are united in Spirit. Thus, he concludes that "God is the Spirit."

(d) Dorothy Sayers

In her book The Mind of the Maker, Sayers intends to interpret the doctrine of the Trinity, using the analogy of the data of creative originality of artists, which is familiar to our experience. (1) The creative artist begins with an "Idea" in the mind. (2) This inner logic must body itself forth into the world in a creative Act - "Energy." (3) That which the creator has envisioned and has given forth, must act to communicate the "Idea" and the "Energy" to the reader. (4) It even returns to the artist to bring added understanding of his own creative Idea - "Power" - and thus to complete the full cycle of creation.

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Sayers thinks that this three-foldness is the actual structure or the pattern of the creative mind—an eternal Idea, manifested in material form by an unresting Energy, with an outpouring of Power that inspires and communicates the works. These three are one and the same in the mind and in the work. I think that her interpretation is well-elaborated. However, Van Dusen criticizes it as "abstruse speculation made intelligible" and "unmistakable reminiscence of Augustine and also perhaps of Hegel."

V. Conclusion

Biblically speaking, (1) we must know that the Trinity is not a matter of speculation, but a matter of revelatory experience. We have nothing to do with a nature of God outside his revelation. "We may believe that He is as his revelation is." At the same time, (2) we must know that the three-fold designation of God is not a mere description of human experience: it is a positive assertion of Divine manifestation. The Holy Spirit is the subjective counterpart of the objective fact of Christ. It is only through God's three-fold manifestation of Himself in terms of the Trinity that we can know what God is in His inmost being. "Grace, love and communication (not human experience) are three ways of describing God's one saving work. Accordingly, Jesus Christ, God and the Holy Spirit are three ways of describing God's one saving reality." (3) We cannot fix or dogmatize the doctrine of the Trinity as a dogma. As Tillich says, "the doctrine of the Trinity is not closed. It cannot be either discarded nor accepted in its traditional form. It must be kept open in order to fulfil its original function—to express in embracing symbols the self-manifestation of the Divine Life to man." We must know that Father, Son and Holy Spirit enlarge, qualify, and enrich our understanding of each of the others. According to St. Paul, one of the gifts of the Spirit is, paradoxically, "the ability to distinguish between spirits." (I Cor,
12:10). Therefore, in order for us to establish the doctrine of the Trinity, we must pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.


**Bibliography**