

1. Historical survey

The history of the doctrine of the Spirit relates to other Bible doctrines at so many points – sometimes in connection with the Trinity, sometimes with the inspiration of the Bible, the doctrines of grace, the person and mediation of Christ – that were we to attempt a survey of all these debates, there is hardly a point in the whole field of systematic theology or church history which we would not be compelled to consider. But we here, briefly, indicate some of the views of the doctrines which have arisen in the history of the church.

In the very earliest Christian literature – that is, in the apostolic Fathers – we find allusions to the Holy Spirit in connection with the Christian life and experience. The whole doctrine of the Spirit was at that time practical and not merely presented to refute errors in understanding Bible truths.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), the early Christian defender of the faith, for example, makes considerable reference to the Spirit in his theological writings, as the ‘prophetic Spirit’, the ‘Holy Spirit’, the ‘divine Spirit’.

It was not long, however, before the first error concerning the Holy Spirit arose in the Church. This was the error of Montanism (2nd century). The Montanists claimed that they had the supernatural gifts of the apostles restored to them,

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gifts which had recently passed away with the apostolic age. These men were characterized by disorder, fanaticism and confusion.

Basil (c. 329-379) was amongst those who refuted their error. He wisely saw that the Holy Spirit leads no one to such excesses: 'How can the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge deprive anyone of his senses?'

Another error concerning the Holy Spirit, and indeed the Trinity in general, was Sabellianism (from AD 200). This theory taught that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were only different names for a unipersonal God. The divine person revealed at one time as Spirit was the same person who revealed Himself at other times as Father and Son.¹ Therefore Sabellianism denied that there were any real distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

However, in this system, the Son and the Spirit could have no part in creation, for they had not yet appeared. There could be no atonement for there was no other person of the Trinity to whom it could be offered, and the Holy Spirit's power was nothing but a vague, baseless influence that did not lean on a mediator. Sabellianism was biblically, theologically and practically useless.

Then there was Arianism. Arius (c. 318) destroyed the doctrine of the Trinity by teaching the subordination of the second and third persons (Son and Spirit) to the first (Father). He denied in fact that Christ and the Spirit were

¹ Sabellianism: it might be helpful to think of this error in the following way – God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the one man may be a father (of his child), son (of his father), and husband (of his wife). In other words, there are no actual personal distinctions, just one person in three different guises or functions.

[Readers interested in a detailed study of church history may be interested in the series of volumes being published by Grace Publications – '*2,000 years of Christ's Power*' by Nick Needham.]

essentially divine; instead they were only creatures. Arius was a rationalist, which means that his ideas were governed by his own reason and not by God's revealed word. He could not understand the doctrine of the Trinity, so he denied it. Needless to say, the Church, in the Nicene Creed (325) and the efforts of Athanasius (c. 296-373), rejected the heresy of Arius outright.

In the fifth century there was a controversy between the Western and Eastern church concerning the procession of the Spirit. The question was, from whom does the Spirit proceed, or go forth? The East answered, 'from the Father only'; the West answered, 'from the Father and the Son'. This controversy is termed the '*filioque*' controversy.² The West, following Augustine (354- 430), based its views on the words of Christ to His apostles in John 15:26.

Around the beginning of the fifth century, there arose the error of Pelagianism. Pelagius (c. 350-429) maintained that the human will is free and is able by its own natural powers, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, to convert itself to God, to believe the gospel, and to be obedient to the law of God with the whole heart.

It was Augustine who effectively countered this error. He argued powerfully from Scripture that a person's turning to God was all the work of the Holy Spirit. He admitted of course that there was free will in what may be called the 'ordinary things of life', for instance the choice whether 'to labour in the field or not, to eat, to drink, to visit a friend or not'. In these matters, matters which did not pertain 'to God as to love and fear God from the heart', the individual had free will. But where spiritual matters were concerned, he had no free will whatsoever, being spiritually dead.

² '*filioque*' is Latin for 'and the Son'.

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Augustine's biblical arguments demolished the theories of Pelagius. However, a new error soon presented itself. It is known as semi-Pelagianism. It was intended to be an acceptable middle way between Pelagianism and Augustinianism. It asserted that by our own natural powers we are able to take the first step towards conversion, and that taking this step earns us the Spirit's assistance to complete the act of conversion.

It was Augustine again who, before he died, began to counter this new error. He showed the folly of a teaching which ascribed to the sinner the most difficult thing – the initiation of a new spiritual life – and left to God's Spirit the easier task of merely giving assistance afterwards.

The semi-Pelagian error was most fully refuted at the Synod of Orange in the South of France (AD 529). It stated clearly that the whole person in body and soul has been corrupted by sin; and saving faith in Jesus Christ is entirely the gift of the Holy Spirit, not a human achievement at all.

The Reformation

The period of the Reformation (which took place during the late 15th and first half of the 16th century) brought an understanding of the Holy Spirit more full and explicit than had ever been taught since the age of the apostles. Indeed, the Reformation was itself a great work of the Spirit of God, and the men who took a leading part in it were fully aware of this fact.

The Reformers bravely denounced the medieval theology which asserted that sinners could choose salvation for themselves if they pleased, perhaps with some help from God. They also replaced Augustine's tendency to refer abstractly to divine 'grace' with the proper personal ascription, 'the work of the Holy Spirit'.

Following the Reformation, statement of faith followed statement of faith, affirming the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the One who alone brings spiritual life to souls dead in sin. A couple of examples may be given here:

‘Concerning free-will it is wrongly taught that to some extent man has freedom of will to lead a good life; but without the powerful grace of the Holy Spirit, man is not at all able to live a good life and please God, or to fear and honour God in his heart, or to believe in Him, or to cast out of his heart his evil inclinations; these things are the achievements of the Holy Spirit, who comes to us through the word of God.’
(*Augsburg Confession*, Article 18, 1530)

‘We are so dead, so blind, so perverse, that we cannot see the light when it shines nor respond to the will of God when it is revealed to us, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus enlivens that which is dead, removes the darkness from our minds, and bends our stubborn wills to obey the glorious gospel.’
(*Scots Confession*, Article 12, 1560)

However, following this period of Reformation and revitalisation, there was a period of spiritual decline. Two errors broke out: Synergism and Arminianism.

Synergism was an error which broke out in the Lutheran Church, and can be traced back to Melancthon (1497-1560, a friend and successor of Luther). It states that the human will has some part to play in conversion, that the human will may and must co-operate with the grace of the Holy Spirit if a person is to be converted.

The error called Arminianism broke out among the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Its founder was a Dutchman, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). What did he say concerning the Holy Spirit? He maintained that the Spirit’s operation in salvation was in every case resistible.

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The assent of a person's will was what finally decided the matter. Everyone could obey or resist the gospel.

Thus he and his followers denied the free-will of God and affirmed the free-will of man. These Arminian ideas oppose the biblical truth that all the invincible energy of God makes faith the gift of the Spirit of God. They make everything hinge on the human will in conversion, forgetting that sinners have as little spiritual power as merit before God (in both cases, none at all). On the contrary, the natural will and human mind are hostile to God, and the natural heart is spiritually dead as stone.

The Reformed response to Arminianism came from the Synod of Dort in the Netherlands, which assembled in 1618-19. This is as great a confession of faith as any. Its great point was to show that the Spirit produces the whole human response in conversion. Nowhere has the renewing work of the Holy Spirit been more correctly and fully displayed than in the canons of the Synod of Dort. Let us illustrate:

'All who are called by the gospel are seriously called; God seriously promises eternal life to all who come to him and believe on him.' (from Article 8)

'It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered in the gospel, nor of God who offers the gospel, that those who are offered the gospel refuse it. The fault lies in themselves, as Christ teaches in the parable of the sower.' (from Article 9)

'But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted, is not to be ascribed to the exercise of their free-will, but is completely to be ascribed to God, who, having chosen them from eternity in Christ, also gives them faith and repentance ...' (from Article 10)

'Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, because God works in the person to produce the will to believe and the act of believing.' (from Article 14)

Historical Survey

The Puritans (late 16th and 17th centuries), men like John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, also gave clear and strong teaching on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. They showed that the Holy Spirit is essential in every area of Christian teaching, life and experience. And in this way they freed people from making religion merely a matter of external rituals.

In the middle of the 18th century, the so-called 'Great Awakening' took place in Britain and America. This was a great period of spiritual revival. What happened then cannot be explained in natural terms, only in supernatural. The most prominent names were those of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. This Great Awakening had a powerful impact on the English-speaking world and continued for years afterwards.

However, in the modern period, the 19th and 20th centuries, there have been many views detracting from the divine dignity and personality of the Holy Spirit, particularly those of Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and his followers. This theology reduces the Holy Spirit to nothing more than the common spirit of the Christian Church. It turns out to be a modern form of Sabellianism, where the Spirit is a mere influence.

Allied to this, critical views of Scripture have arisen which reject the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; ritualism, which springs from a desire to substitute the material for the spiritual (the glorious Holy Spirit); and attempts at Christian evangelism which depend not on the Holy Spirit but upon human methods of persuasion. We need always to be reminded that Scripture says, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty' (Zech. 4:6).

This historical survey, which has brought to our attention great periods of revival such as the age of Augustine, the

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Reformation, and the Great Awakening of the 18th century, naturally suggests a closing remark which is not out of place. The Church of God is in her right attitude only when she is waiting for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who comes from Christ and leads to Christ.