

ENCOUNTERING GOD: AN EXPLORATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
THROUGH THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The concept of the Spirit is hard to grasp. As modern, reformed Protestants, we tend to be more comfortable with God the Father or God the Son than with God the Spirit. Part of the problem is rooted in the fact that we often do not have a good handle on who the Spirit is or what the Spirit does. Where does the Spirit come from? Is the Spirit found only in Christ? How is the Spirit related to the Father and the Son? What does the Spirit do? These are all questions under debate in modern theology. While they are huge questions to ask, one place to begin thinking about the answers is in the Prayers of the People. In the Prayers of the People we encounter an understanding of a God¹ who is fully present and engaged in this world and in human lives. Moreover, we come to know ourselves as creatures who are able to engage our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. In this paper I will look at the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Prayers of the People. Specifically, I will look at the image of God that is conveyed in the Prayers and will argue that this image of God is what we mean when we say the Spirit. In order to make this argument, I will explore the theology of the Trinity and the Spirit. Finally, I will look at the ways in which our deeper understanding of the Spirit enhances our

¹ The debate over what language to use when addressing God is too large to engage in this paper. When I use the word God, I am referring to the Triune God. When referring to the different “persons” of the Trinity, I will be more specific so as to leave no doubt about whom I am speaking. The language used to talk about the Trinity will be addressed later in this paper.

understanding of who we are and how we relate to God, as conveyed in the Prayers of the People.

According to the Book of Common Worship, the Prayers of the People are offered in response to the Word, both read and proclaimed.² The Proclamation of the Word in a service of worship reminds us that God speaks to us, and is active, today.³ With this understanding in mind, moving to the Prayers of the People after the Proclamation of the Word is natural: if God is active in this world, than it is appropriate to bring our concerns, both for our own lives and communities as well as for the whole world before God.

The Prayers of the People are one of the ways in which we respond to God's Word. Recognizing that God is active in this world, and in our lives, we bring to God our joys and concerns. Placing the Prayers of the People at the end of the service also helps to push us back out into the world. Praying for our world is one way of engaging in Christ's ministry, but it also calls us to work in the world. As David Stubbs writes, the Prayers of the People remind us that there is liturgy (literally the work of the people) to be done after the Liturgy.⁴

In the Prayers of the People, members of the congregation pray not only for their own individual and communal concerns, but also for the concerns of their nation and the world at large. They pray not only for those they care about, but also for those they have never met. They pray for their families as well as their enemies. The congregation is charged to pray for the entire world because *God* loves the entire world.⁵ It is not a matter of individual or communal loyalties or affections, it is a matter of aligning ourselves with God's loyalties and affections.

² "Prayers of the People," in *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 40.

³ "Sermon," in *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 37.

⁴ David L. Stubbs, "Ending of Worship: Ethics," in *A More Profound Alleluia*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 136, 145.

⁵ Prayers of the People, *Book of Common Worship*, 40.

While we might be tempted to delineate God's affections, Jesus taught that we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-44). Indeed, the *Book of Common Worship* asserts that if we are "to abide in God's love [we must] share God's concern for the world. Our prayers therefore should be as wide as God's love and as specific as God's tender compassion for the least among us."⁶ There is certainly room in this injunction for our personal prayers; in fact, they are called for as strongly as our prayers for others. Yet, as human beings rooted in a culture that prizes the individual, we are more prone to forget others before we forget ourselves.

For perhaps this very reason, the Book of Common Worship gives an outline for the Prayers of the People. We are to pray for:

the church universal, its ministry and those who minister, that the world might believe;
 the world, those in distress or special need, and all in authority, that peace and justice might prevail;
 the nation, the state, local communities, and those who govern in them, that they may know and have strength to do what is right.

. . . the local church, that it may have the mind of Christ in facing special issues and needs;
 those who struggle with their faith, that they may be given assurance;
 those in the midst of transitions in life, that they be guided and supported;
 those who face crucial decisions, that they receive wisdom;
 those who are sick, grieving, lonely, and anxious, that they be comforted and healed;
 all members, that grace conform them to God's purpose.⁷

In this list, the breadth and specificity for our prayers is made clear. We pray for those in government, whom we may or may not have voted for; we pray for our neighbor's job loss; we pray for our ailing parents; we pray for those living in lands ravaged by war. We pray for the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

specific needs in our lives and the lives of those around us, and we pray for those caught up in situations we can barely imagine. It is work that we are engaged in when we pray for others: we must remove ourselves from our individual contexts and imagine ourselves in the lives of strangers.

In worship, and in life, we seek to encounter God. Augustine wrote that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.⁸ In our worship service, we seek to find the God in whom our hearts might rest, not so we can have a brief respite, or leave fulfilled only to be emptied during our week, but rather in order that we might learn to recognize God both as our dialogue partner in prayer, and also as one present and engaged in the world. While the Prayers of the People seem to be focused on humanity rather than God, there is much being claimed about who God is based in these prayers.

To begin with, there is the basic assumption that if we are speaking to God, we must be at the very least capable of a relationship with God. Therefore we understand God as a God who is in relationship with humanity and responds, in some way, to humanity's attempts at communication. Second, if we are praying to God about our hurt and broken world and lives, God must be a God who cares. This is more than a formal relationship, this is an intimate relationship with a God to whom we can bring our deepest concerns and fears. Third, God has some agency in the world and in human lives. We are praying that those lacking in faith might be given assurance, and that grace will conform people to God's purpose; there is inherent in our prayer a belief that God can and might intercede in this world and in our lives, for the better. Finally, God is not God simply for the Church, God cares for, and acts on behalf of, the entire world.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

We can see then that simply from the format of the prayer, we claim that God is engaged, concerned, involved, accessible, global, and active. Because our prayers certainly shape our understanding of who God is, it is essential to explore the theology behind the prayers. Does it make sense in Christian theology to understand God as engaged, concerned, involved, accessible, global and active? What critiques made be made on these characteristics, or what might be added to them from a theological reflection on God.

In speaking about God, we have to acknowledge first and foremost that, ultimately, God is a mystery. We can, and must, do our best to prayerfully and patiently discern who God is to the best of our ability, experience, and knowledge, but it is important to remember that our understandings, and language, will always come up short. Having acknowledged that, it is most appropriate to begin speaking about God through the concept of the Trinity. This is an appropriate place to begin for two reasons. First, as Christians, rooted in scripture, we know God through God's self-revelation in Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁹ In this way, our knowledge of who God is, through God's self-revelation, is embedded in the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, if we think about who God is through our experiences of God, some Christian theologians will argue that we know and experience God in three ways, and this again places us squarely in the middle of the Trinity.¹⁰ So, whether we are approaching our knowledge of God through God's self-revelation or through our own experience of God (and one could argue that those two are not mutually exclusive), we find ourselves enmeshed in the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁹ William C. Placher, "What Do We Mean by 'God,'" in *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 52.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 198-199.

The doctrine of the Trinity emerged out of a need to make sense of three experiences of God. Early Christians understood God as the Creator and Ruler of the World, and yet they knew Jesus to be God. The question arose, how is Jesus related to God? Are there two separate Gods? Is Jesus a lesser God? Moreover, there was this encounter individuals and communities were having with the Holy Spirit. How were they to make sense of it all? Using their own experiences, as well as the experiences recorded in the Scriptures, along with Jesus' words, the early community developed the doctrine of the Trinity. While words defy the nature of the Triune God, the best language suggests that there is *one* God who is "manifest" in three distinct ways. In the West the language was of one substance and three persons. In the East, the language was one essence and three beings.¹¹

The consequences of the language have been profound. In the Western tradition, the language has emphasized the oneness of God. While the unity of God certainly needs to be affirmed, the problematic shift occurs when we start thinking about one God being God the Creator with God the Christ and God the Spirit being somehow lesser Gods.¹² In the Eastern tradition, the language has emphasized the three-ness of God. The result has been a recent focus on the relational nature of the Trinity. Guthrie writes, "the oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a *community* of persons who love each other and live together in harmony. . . *They are what they are* only in relationship to each other. Each exists only in this relationship and would not exist apart from it."¹³ The danger of this Eastern model is tritheism – the tendency to understand three distinct Gods with three distinct wills, talents, actions, et cetera. Knowing that each of these models has its strengths and

¹¹ Placher, 56-57.

¹² Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 89.

¹³ Guthrie, 92.

weaknesses, it makes sense to keep these two traditions in tension with one another. Out of the tension we remember that God is one. We also remember that there are three persons within that divine community who work with one another and within one another. We affirm that “each of the three persons of the Trinity is radically equal to each of the others, their difference lying only in their ways of being related to each another.”¹⁴ Even this corrective, however, seems to root itself more in the Eastern camp, emphasizing the relational nature of the Trinity.

In speaking about the God whom we encounter in the Prayers of the People, the communal understanding of God makes the most sense. Two of the characteristics of God conveyed in the Prayers of the People is God’s engagement in the world and in our lives, and that God is accessible to us. This understanding of God as relational is confirmed in an understanding of the Trinity as relational.¹⁵

Thus far, the doctrine of the Trinity has pointed out that there are three ways of encountering God and that God has a communal, relational nature. An understanding of God as unified also emerges. Although we lift up the communal nature of the Divine, we do not forget the unity of God. And, this has important implications. If God is one, then God the Creator is the same as God the Christ and is the same as God the Spirit and vice versa, et cetera. In this way, we can understand the God of the Old Testament (primarily understood to be the Creator) to be the same God as the one we encounter in the New Testament (primarily understood through Christ). Further, the God we encounter today is the God we encounter in Scripture. As we shift to speak about the Spirit, it will be helpful then to remember that not only is the Spirit the same God as the Creator, but also the Spirit encountered in the New Testament is the same Spirit encountered in the Old Testament and today.

¹⁴ Johnson, 196.

¹⁵ Placher, 59.

In looking at the Prayers of the People, we painted a picture of God as engaged, concerned, involved, accessible, global and active. I want to make the argument here that it is appropriate to understand this action of God to be the Spirit.¹⁶ Of all the persons in the Trinity, the Spirit is the hardest to pin down. We encounter God the Creator in the creation. We encounter God the Christ in Jesus. It is clear from the doctrine of the Trinity that the Spirit is fully God. The questions that remain is what the work of the Holy Spirit is as well as the characteristics of the Spirit and where we find the Spirit.

In Scripture, the Spirit is found both in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. There are so many references to the Spirit, and actions of the Spirit, that it would be impossible to cover all of them in this paper. It will, however, be helpful to highlight a few illustrative examples. The first place we encounter the Spirit is in the Genesis 1 account of creation. The Spirit of God¹⁷ sweeps over the face of the waters and creation emerges out of chaos (Genesis 1:2). In Ezekiel, we encounter the renewing power of the Spirit in the vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones: God brings to life a pile of dry bones by breathing into them the Spirit (Ezekiel 37:1-10). The gift of the Spirit, and its ability and willingness to dwell in the world, is evidenced in Christ's baptism as the Spirit descends and lands on Jesus (Mark 10). The freedom of the Spirit is attested to in John: "the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).¹⁸ In Acts and I Corinthians, we encounter the Spirit gifting

¹⁶ I am drawing here on Elizabeth Johnson's assertion that, "this movement of the living God that can be traced in and through the experience of the world, Christian speech traditionally gives the name Spirit" (124).

¹⁷ Here, as Christians rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity, it is appropriate to understand God as the Triune God. Not to do so is to risk understanding the Spirit as subjugated to God the Creator. Our understanding of the Trinity as a community of three, equal, persons of Divinity does not allow for such an understanding of subjugation.

¹⁸ All Bible quotes and references are from the New Revised Standard Translation.

communities with gifts of unity as well as the gifts needed to do the ministry of Christ (Acts 2:1-4; I Corinthians 12:4-13). While these are only a few places in Scripture where the work of the Spirit is attested to, important characteristics of the Spirit, and the Spirit's work emerge. The Spirit is what gives and sustains life. The Spirit dwells among us and within us, gifting us and uniting us with others. The Spirit is free to blow where it chooses.

Working with these Scripture references, and others, theologians throughout the ages have attempted to flesh out who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does. Calvin, for example, argued that the primary work of the Spirit is faith. By faith, he meant connection with God. Therefore, the work of the Spirit is to connect us with God.¹⁹ Calvin further understood the Spirit to be

everywhere diffused, [the One who] sustains all things, causes them to grow, and quickens them in heaven and in earth. Because [the Spirit] is circumscribed by no limits, [the Spirit] is excepted from the category of creatures; but in transfusing into all things [it] energy, and breathing into them essence, life and movement, [the Spirit] is indeed plainly divine.²⁰

The Spirit then, according to Calvin, is the life giving and life sustaining force of the Triune God and the One who connects us to the Triune God.

Shirley Guthrie, a modern theologian rooted in the Reformed tradition, defines the Spirit as “the presence and work of the living God here and now in our individual lives, in the church, and in the world.”²¹ Guthrie highlights, as Calvin does, that the Spirit is what connects us with the Triune God.²² He further pulls out six things we can know about the Spirit based on Scripture: the Spirit is involved in creation and sustaining creation; the Spirit is the source of

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), Book I: 139; Book III: 538, 541.

²⁰ Calvin, Book I, 138.

²¹ Guthrie, 292.

²² *Ibid.*

human creativity, art and wisdom; the Spirit is an advocate and companion for the poor and oppressed; the Spirit dwelt in Christ most fully; the Spirit will be a teacher; and, the Spirit is promised to communities.²³

Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist theologian, also understands the Spirit to be God present in this world and that which connects us to the Triune God. She writes, the Spirit is “She-Who-Dwells-Within, divine presence in compassionate engagement with the conflictual world, source of vitality and comfort in the struggle.”²⁴ According to Johnson, we primarily experience the Spirit in and through the natural world, our own human experiences and relationships, and community.²⁵ The Spirit is God acting in this world; it is the creative, liberating, sustaining force that connects us with the Triune God and makes life come alive.²⁶

As Presbyterians today, our understanding of the Spirit comes both out of the Eastern and Western traditions of the Trinity, as well as through the work of theologians and the Confessions of the Church.²⁷ In “A Brief Statement of Faith,” the Presbyterian Church sums up its best understandings of the Holy Spirit so far. Four characteristics of the Spirit are highlighted. First, and foremost, the Spirit is defined as God “everywhere the giver and renewer of life.”²⁸ Second, the Spirit liberates us to be united with Christ. Third, the Spirit is active both in history and today. Finally, the Spirit is what sustains us and allows us to continue living in the midst of a broken world.

²³ Ibid., 295-297.

²⁴ Johnson, 86.

²⁵ Johnson, 125-127.

²⁶ Calvin makes a similar argument for the vitality of the Spirit in arguing that it is the Spirit who makes Christ real and intimate to us (Book III, 541).

²⁷ Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith address the definition of the Holy Spirit. *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 36, 131, 160.

²⁸ *The Book of Confessions*, 268.

From Scripture, through early Christian theology and church creeds, to modern theology and church creeds, our understanding of the Spirit has remained homogenous. As we affirmed with the Triune God, the Spirit is ultimately a mystery. All of our language and understandings will come up short. The Spirit especially defies our grasp because we affirm it to be unconstrained. Yet, from these various pictures of the Spirit, a common image emerges. The Spirit is the Triune God engaged in our world and in our lives. The Spirit is how we are able to be in relationship with the Triune God. We can see the work of the Spirit not only in history and scripture, but also today in the creation and regeneration of life. We see the Spirit building and strengthening communities. The Spirit comforts and sustains individuals and gives all of us the gifts we need to do God's work in the world. The Spirit is the Triune God breaking in, holding up, and working in this world.²⁹

This exploration of the Spirit emerged from looking at the Prayers of the People. The Prayers conveyed an understanding of God as engaged, concerned, involved, accessible, global, and active. The question was whether or not this was an accurate understanding of God theologically. We began by recognizing that as Christians, our knowledge of God is rooted in the Trinity. In exploring the Trinity, the Triune God emerged as a relational God whom we know and experience in three different ways. From the doctrine of the Trinity, I posited that the God we proclaim in our Prayers of the People is God the Spirit. In looking at Scripture, past and present theologians, and the creeds of the church, we explored the theology of the Spirit and fleshed out who the Spirit is through how the Spirit works. In returning to the initial question, it is clear that it is appropriate to understand the Spirit as God engaged, concerned, involved,

²⁹ I recognize that there are many aspects of the Spirit that have not been explored here, including whether or not all are able to recognize or receive the Spirit and how the Spirit is specifically related to Christ. While I think these aspects would add to our understanding of the Spirit, there is not room for them in this paper, so I will bracket them as further issues to explore with regard to the Spirit.

accessible, global and active in this world. Indeed, these characteristics cover most of what the theology of the Spirit revealed. With this deepened understanding of God the Spirit, the question remaining is who are we and how do we relate to the Spirit?

The question of who we are is an enormous one that deserves an entire paper. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will touch on it only briefly in order to illuminate further our knowledge of the Spirit. Serene Jones argues that there are four central stories we continually and simultaneously live out as humans. We are created good and we are created finite; we are sinful (by which she means alienated from God); we are redeemed by God (through Jesus Christ); and we have hope for ultimate redemption.³⁰ It is the second, third and fourth story that I want to focus on here. We are sinners who live and participate in a broken and sinful world. It is because of this context that we have concerns and problems to bring before God for healing. Yet, it is our hope for ultimate redemption that makes our prayers worth our time. It is because we believe God has the power to ultimately reconcile the world and our lives that we pray for healing. Through our knowledge of Jesus Christ, who redeemed us, we know that God is already working to reconcile and heal the world: so our prayers are not just for the end of time, but for today and tomorrow and next week. We pray because God does work in this world.

Many of the questions about how we relate to the God the Spirit are answered in the nature of the Spirit. We do not go to the Spirit or control the Spirit, rather the Spirit chooses to be engaged in this world and to engage us. The Prayers of the People show us not only God's compassionate love and care as evidenced in the Spirit, but also who we are to be. Don Saliers writes, "to join Christ in his ongoing prayer for the world is to be plunged more deeply into the

³⁰ Serene Jones, "What's Wrong With Us: Human Nature and Human Sin" in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 143-158.

densities of social reality, not to be taken out of them.”³¹ Our liturgy (or work) does not end with our prayers. Rather, the Prayers of the People are designed to push us out into the world, to continue the work we began in worship. It is in worship that we are reminded of what real life is and ought to look like; it is in worship that we formed into Christians,³² but it is not for worship on Sunday mornings alone that we are reminded and formed. We are called into community and we are called to join the Spirit in the world – working to reconcile the world to God’s dreams for it.

In the Prayers of the People we pray to the Triune God for what is broken and hurting in our lives and in the world. We pray in faith because we know God the Spirit is present and active in this world. Through the prayers we recognize that God’s presence and love is not limited to those in the church or those who call themselves Christians. Moreover, in praying the Prayers of the People, we express our faith and hope that God will one day completely reconcile the world to God’s self. Until then, we are reminded of all the work left to be done in the world. Through the Prayers of the People, we are further formed into Christians and pushed out into the world to continue Christ’s ministry with the help of the Spirit.

³¹ Quoted by Ronald P. Byars in “Creeds and Prayers: Ecclesiology” in *A More Profound Alleluia*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 101.

³² Stubbs, 137.

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