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Jesus and the Trinity

LOIS MALCOLM

Why do Christians understand Jesus' identity and saving work in relation to the Trinity? Why does faith in Jesus as the savior of the world lead Christians to worship not only "God the Father, the creator of heaven and earth" but also the "Son" and the "Spirit" who are both *homoousian* ("of one substance," from the Greek *homós*, "same" and *ousía*, "essence, being") with the Father?¹ What is it about faith in Jesus' redemptive power that leads Christians to affirm that the one God exists in three divine Persons in "perichoretic" unity (mutually indwelling in one another)—as the Father who "begets," the Son who is "begotten," and the Spirit who is "spirated"?² In this essay, I do not attempt to give a comprehensive answer to these questions. My intent is more modest. I bring to the fore a neglected clue toward developing an adequate answer: the experience of the presence and power of the Spirit. I elaborate on this clue by developing central themes in the New Testament and in the work of two contemporary trinitarian theologians.

THE SPIRIT AND JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In *Christ and His Benefits*, Arland Hultgren notes "a neglected factor in the

¹See the Nicene Creed. See also Athanasius's treatise on "The Incarnation of the Word of God" and "Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit."

²See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa's treatise on "Why There Are Not Three Gods."

In the New Testament and in the work of contemporary Trinitarian theologians, the experience and power of the Spirit emerge as central features in understanding the relation between the Father and the Son and the meaning of the Trinity.

search for origins” in early Christology.³ The disciples experienced the “presence and power of the Spirit in and among them,” the Spirit they believed was “sent from God and mediated to them by the risen Christ.”⁴ The Old Testament expected that the outpouring of the Spirit would take place in Israel’s future.⁵ Many held, during the postexilic era, that prophecy and the manifest activity of the Spirit had

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ceased with the latter prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Nonetheless, there still existed the expectation that God would pour out God’s Spirit “on all flesh” (Joel 2:28–29) on the “great and terrible day of the Lord” (2:31). From the beginning, early Christians spoke of Christ’s death and resurrection in relation to their experience of the presence and power of the Spirit, an experience they interpreted in relation to expectations found in Scripture and tradition. Luke depicted this as taking place first in Pentecost (Acts 2:1–36; cf. Joel 2:28–32). John relates it to the appearance of Jesus to his disciples on the day of the resurrection (John 20:22). Although the chronology of these accounts differs, they refer to a similar conviction. Believers experienced becoming a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), “a new birth” (1 Pet 1:3), and “born from above,” (John 3:3, 7). Paul speaks of Christians as walking in “newness of life” (Rom 6:4), receiving “life” from the Spirit (Rom 8:11), and being justified and sanctified in the Spirit (1 Cor 6:11). In the “experience of...the risen Jesus in majesty” and the “experience of the presence and power of the Spirit among them corporately and individually,” the disciples of Jesus “considered themselves transferred and set within a new world, the age of life, new birth, and new creation.”⁶

In sum, early Christians believed that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the God of Israel had performed *the* redemptive act. Initially, they considered the cross and resurrection as the redemptive event they had experienced in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:36; Rom 1:3–4; 2 Tim 2:8). Upon further reflection, they came to understand the death of Jesus to be an atoning death, drawing on motifs of redemption present in the Old Testament, differentiating it from the resurrection. Note the pre-Pauline formula: (1) “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,” and (2) “he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4)—and Paul’s assertion, which may also have pre-Pauline origins: he

³See Arland Hultgren’s section on “Christ, Cross, and Spirit,” in *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 31–39.

⁴Ibid., 32. On the Spirit among early Christians, see Acts 2:33; John 20:22; cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8.

⁵On Old Testament expectation of the Spirit, see Isa 32:15–20; 44:3; Ezek 37:14; cf. 39:29.

⁶Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits*, 38–39.

(1) “was put to death for our trespasses” and (2) “raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25 RSV).⁷ Nonetheless, the central affirmation remained the same. In spite of the cross still being “a horrible, ghastly memory,” it was there, “at the deepest moment of despair and loss,” when the “innocent Jesus suffered and died,” that “God initiated an act of deliverance—for both Jesus and his disciples.”⁸ Paul would write later that the secret of the cross, “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (1 Cor 2:7), could not be known except as revealed through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:7–10). Nonetheless, he also goes on, “we have received...the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor 2:12; cf. Eph 3:5; 1 Pet 1:12).

THE SPIRIT, THE CROSS, AND WISDOM

According to Paul, the Spirit reveals the crucified Christ to be the “power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Paul develops this insight more fully in his argument, in Galatians and Romans, for an apostolic proclamation of the universal import of Jesus’ death and resurrection. By raising Jesus from the dead, the Spirit declares that he is the “Son of God with power” (Rom 1:3–4). Christ is not only the Jewish messiah, but also the Son God sent into sin and death in order to redeem “all of us” (Rom 8:32).⁹ This confession implies Christ’s preexistence.¹⁰ It underscores the universal character of the redemption Christ offers all people. Of course, one cannot speak of a “full-blown conception of Christ’s personal preexistence and a clear doctrine of the incarnation” until the Gospel of John.¹¹ Nonetheless, as Hultgren has pointed out, although Paul does not develop the concept as fully as the Gospel of John does, he does speak of Christ’s preexistence, signifying that the “origins and redemptive work of Christ are located in the being of God.”¹² The concept of preexistence is “related to, and dependent upon, wisdom traditions in the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism” where wisdom “came to be considered not only a personification of God’s activities,” but also “an agent of God in creation and revelation¹³—and even in redemption.”¹⁴

In addition to underscoring the universal character of Christ’s redemption, the presumption of Christ’s preexistence also enables Paul to turn the shameful scandal of the cross into the secret for understanding the distinctive character of divine power and divine wisdom, whose “weakness” and “foolishness” far surpass

⁷Ibid., 38.

⁸Ibid., 35.

⁹On God’s sending his Son to redeem us, see Rom 3:25; 5:8; 8:3–4; Gal 4:4–5.

¹⁰On Christ’s preexistence, see 1 Cor 8:6; 15:47; 2 Cor 8:9; Gal 4:4; and Phil 2:6–11.

¹¹James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) 258.

¹²Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits*, 8. For a more extensive discussion of Hultgren’s response to Dunn and the literature on Dunn’s book, see *Christ and His Benefits*, 7–8, 209–210.

¹³On wisdom, see Prov 8:1–36; Wis 7:22–24; 8:3–4; 9:2.

¹⁴Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits*, 7. For Wisdom’s role in redemption, see Wis 10:18–19.

human “strength” and “wisdom” (1 Cor 1:18–25). The hymn in Philippians describes the “mind” of Christ: though “in the form of God” and sharing “equality with God,” Christ Jesus “emptied himself,” humbling himself by being a human even to the point of “death on a cross” (Phil 2:5–8). The contrast between Adam (as a type for all humanity, the “man from dust”) and Christ (“the man from heaven”) lies here. By his “trespass”—grasping at what was not his (Gen 3)—Adam brings sin and death to many. By contrast, by his “free gift of grace”—in atoning through his death for others’ sins¹⁵—Christ brings “justification” to many, “the abundance of grace” and the “free gift of righteousness” (Rom 5:15–18; see also 1 Cor 15:21–26).

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Thus, Christ’s crucifixion is not merely a scandal or a tragedy; “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6) in order to share with us the life he shares with God. In baptism, we are buried with him so that we can live by faith in him; we now have a new identity (Rom 6; cf. Gal 2:20). Christ takes on our “curse” so that we might receive the “promise of the Spirit” (Gal 3:13–14; see also 2 Cor 5:21). By faith in Jesus Christ, and not our “works,” we are now adopted as God’s children (Gal 3:2; 4:5); God sends into our hearts “the Spirit of the Son” who enables us to share the intimacy Jesus had with the one he called “Abba! Father!” (Gal 4:6). We now have access to the Spirit, who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10). Not speculative, the germ of Trinitarian reflection in Paul’s thought lies in a promise. Amidst the vicissitudes and the “futility” of life that we experience as we await the full adoption of our bodies (Rom 8:18–25), the Spirit—who is at once the “Spirit of God” and the “Spirit of Christ”—dwells in us (Rom 8:9), helping us in our “weakness,” groaning with us and interceding for us “with sighs too deep for words” (8:26).

THE SPIRIT OF GOD IN JESUS AND THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

Paul’s letters have their locus in the cross and resurrection. By contrast, the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) center on Jesus’ proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God anticipated by the prophets. In turn, the Gospel of John centers on Jesus’ being the Word incarnate sent by the Father to save the world. Two theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, expand on our reading of Paul’s nascent Trinitarian reflection by way of their close readings of the Gospels in light of Paul’s theology. Moltmann’s Trinitarian reflection centers on the Synoptic Gospels’ attention to the way Jesus fulfills messianic expectation (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isa 61:1–2). Von Balthasar’s Trinitarian reflection centers

¹⁵On Christ’s being put to death for the sake of (*hyper*) the ungodly, see also Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 1 Thess 5:10; and Rom 4:25. See Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits*, 48.

on the Gospel of John's depiction of how Jesus fulfills the mission the Father has given him "before the world existed" (John 1 and 17). In spite of their different starting points, both theologians expand upon our reading of Paul in two ways. First, they develop more fully how the Spirit sustains Jesus' unity with the Father, not only in his life, but also in his death, where he experiences God-forsakenness for our sake (Mark 15:34; cf. Ps 22). Second, they develop more fully what happens when Jesus, as the risen Lord, sends the Spirit to be his presence within and among us in this time between his resurrection and the final Parousia (when he will come to judge humanity at the end of the world).

Moltmann's Spirit-Christology

Moltmann augments the "vertical" incarnational Christology of the patristic church by reclaiming the "horizontal history of the *ruach*—the Holy Spirit—who spake by the prophets,' as the Nicene Creed says, and who shaped the proclamation and ministry of the earthly Jesus."¹⁶ Drawing on the Synoptic Gospels, he describes how the Spirit was personally present with Jesus at his baptism by John (Mark 1:10). Conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), Jesus was strong in the Spirit as he developed (Luke 2:46). Throughout his life, he prayed in the Spirit, "Abba, dear Father," knowing, in the Spirit, that he is the "Beloved Son" (Luke 3:22).¹⁷ As the "expected messiah of the End-time," the Spirit descends upon him, bringing "the divine energies of life in Jesus to rapturous and overflowing fullness"; in this way, the Spirit makes Jesus "the kingdom of God in person."¹⁸ The kingdom of God comes so close that in his proclamation and actions the signs of the messianic era anticipated by the Old Testament prophets are already visible: the sick are healed, demons are driven out, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor have the gospel preached to them (Luke 4:18–19).¹⁹

The strength of the indwelling Spirit is with Jesus as he endures the "hidden, absent, even rejecting God" from Gethsemane to Golgotha—reading Jesus' prayer to his "Abba" (Mark 14:32–42) in light of Paul's later references to the Spirit's work in our adoption as children of God (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15). Moreover, if "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19)—in which *God* always means the Father of Jesus Christ—then the Father suffers *with* and *in* the Son, by virtue of his indwelling the Son through the Spirit. It is through the "eternal Spirit"—"God's indestructible life"—that Jesus offered himself to suffer God-forsakenness (Heb 9:14).²⁰ Thus, the Spirit accompanies Christ to his end, participating in the dying of the Son, in order to give him new "life from the dead."²¹

¹⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 4.

¹⁷Cf. Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11. See Gen 22:2; Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1; see also Luke 4:1–13; Acts 4:27.

¹⁸Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 61.

¹⁹Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 97.

²⁰Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 62–65.

²¹*Ibid.*, 68.

Looked at pneumatologically, Christ's death and resurrection belong to a single movement—one event. Jesus' passion and resurrection are "labor pangs" for the Spirit, the inbreaking of the new age (Rom 8:18–25).²²

When the Spirit raises Jesus from the dead, Christ is now present with us, through the Spirit, as the resurrected Lord—an "earnest," an "advance payment," the beginning of the "End-time new creation of the world."²³ If the Spirit was the "real determining subject" of Jesus' special relationship to God, then Christ now becomes "the determining subject of the Spirit."²⁴ The Spirit of God becomes the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9), the "Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4:6), and the "[S]pirit of faith" (2 Cor 4:13). Christ sends the Spirit to his disciples (John 16:7) and breathes the Spirit upon them (John 20:22). This Spirit enables believers to respond in faith to the word of the gospel, and their response resonates in their lives and hearts because, in the experience of the quickening Spirit, they experience the beginning of the new creation of the world in and among them.²⁵ By faith, and in the hope of the Parousia, the community of believers grows in the sphere of the Holy Spirit into a charismatic community, where potentialities and capabilities are brought to life. The body of Christ, charismatically enlivened by the Spirit, is now a "down payment," an advance pledge and witness of the new creation of all things—not only in history and for all people but throughout the cosmos.²⁶

Von Balthasar's Word-Christology

Von Balthasar takes Paul and John as his starting point for Trinitarian reflection,²⁷ in particular their testimony that all creation, history, and all of humanity is included "in Christ" (*en Christō*).²⁸ Paul's recurrent references to being "in Christ" have parallels with the Johannine depiction of our "abid[ing]" in Jesus, his words, and his love (John 15:5, 7, 9), an inclusion that encompasses the incarnate Word and all things created in him (John 1:1–4).

Drawing on John's depiction of Jesus' mission as the Son sent by the Father (John 17), von Balthasar depicts Jesus' relationship to the Spirit in the descending and ascending character of this mission. In his descent (his *status exinanitionis*, "state of humiliation"), Jesus' relationship with the Spirit consists in his carrying out his mission (John 19:36) both in his "claim" and in his "poverty and self-abandonment."²⁹ In his claim as the incarnate Word, Jesus announces the kingdom

²²Ibid., 65.

²³Ibid., 66.

²⁴Ibid., 68.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 68–69.

²⁷Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) 25–56, 183–202, 230–262.

²⁸For the meaning of Paul's recurrent references to being *en Christō*, von Balthasar refers to F. Neugebauer, *In Christus, Eine Untersuchung zum paulinischen Glaubensverständnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1961).

²⁹Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 189.

of God (Mark 1:15). Anticipated in the Old Testament, the kingdom of God converges “the lordship of Yahweh” with expectations of a messiah (especially in the Psalms and Deutero-Isaiah) whose reign includes not only Israel but also the nations (Zech 14:9, 16). In his poverty and self-abandonment, he empties himself on a cross (Phil 2:5–11)—as the one handed over by the Father (John 3:16; Rom 8:32). His mission in the incarnation culminates on the cross where he exchanges places—as the only Son—with sinners (Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21).³⁰ Nonetheless, even here, the Spirit sustains his unity with the Father as he endures being the “curse” for our sin—when the Father’s loving countenance disappears behind the “hard facts of what must be.”³¹ Yet, his crucifixion is precisely his point of exaltation (*status exaltationis*, “state of exaltation”; see the Gospel of John). Thus, through the “breathing forth of the Spirit of mission on the Cross” (see Mark 15:33; Luke 23:41; Matt 27:50) “the exalted Lord is given manifest power, even in his humanity, to breathe forth the Spirit.”³²

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In both states—in humiliation and in exaltation—the Spirit is an “objective witness” to the “unity” of the Father with the Son. Breathed forth from the love between the Father and Son in all eternity, the Spirit is with Jesus when he consents to the Father’s wish to send him “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3; cf. John 17), a unanimous salvific decision on their part. Nonetheless, the Spirit is also an objective witness to their “difference-in-unity” or “unity-in-difference” as the Son enters the absolute abyss of difference between the Father and Son, an abyss within God that surpasses and undergirds any abyss of distance between sinful humanity and God.³³

Although his departure in death comes to a “brutal end” in the cross, it is nonetheless “good for you” (John 16:17) because it makes possible the sending of the Spirit—the suffusion of the “empty area” between God and humanity with power—and with it a new form of “abiding” and “indwelling.” Initially tabernacling among us in the incarnation (John 1:14), Jesus departs to “prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). He goes to fashion a more “permanent habitation.” Thus, ever since the cross and resurrection, Jesus’ personal sphere is characterized by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; being “in the Spirit” (*en pneumati*) and “in Christ” (*en*

³⁰Ibid., 237–244.

³¹Ibid., 189.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 183–191. See also, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994) for an extended discussion of this point.

Christō) are intertwined. Through the Spirit, believers die with Christ in baptism so that they will also be raised with Christ; they are now “in Christ” and “together with Christ”—an interplay that ultimately includes the rest of creation when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). Paul, for example, is crucified with Christ, and while he lives it is Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:20). In his apostolic mission, he participates in Christ’s dying and rising (2 Cor 4:7–15). Likewise, believers cease to exist for themselves. Based on Christ’s work on their behalf, they are now members of the body of Christ (Gal 3:28) and endowed with unique missions (charisms) for the benefit of the “common good” (1 Cor 12:7; see also all of 1 Cor 12) as the church undertakes its missionary task throughout the world.³⁴

THE SPIRIT, JESUS, AND THE TRINITY

As we have seen, in these brief forays into Moltmann’s and von Balthasar’s Trinitarian theologies, the Gospels expand upon Paul’s initial insights. Not only do they elaborate on what takes place between Jesus and the Father, and with the Spirit who sustains their unity even in Jesus’ God-forsakenness, but they also elaborate on how Jesus sends us his Spirit to sustain our unity with him—and, through him, the Father—in this period between Jesus’ resurrection and the final Parousia. The Synoptic Gospels do so against the interpretive backdrop of Old Testament messianic expectation. The Gospel of John does so against the interpretive backdrop of the Word (Logos) who was God and with God from eternity. These differing interpretive backdrops—messianic expectation and the concept of the Logos—are brought together in an early Pauline insight, the pivot for all later Trinitarian reflection. As noted earlier, Paul had asserted that the Spirit “declares,” in raising the human Jesus from the dead, that he, though a human descendant of David (in line with messianic expectation), is the preexistent “Son of God” (anticipating later conceptions of him as the Logos).

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By faith in this Son of God—the crucified Christ—we now share the same Spirit who enables him to have intimacy with the one he calls “Abba! Father!” This Spirit sustains our faith and hope in God’s love, in spite of the futility and vicissitudes we now face. The root of all later Trinitarian reflection lies precisely in the Pauline insight into the way—by faith and hope—the Spirit grounds us in this love, not merely as a subjective experience but as the objective reality in which we exist. Even though “there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth,” for us, there is only “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we ex-

³⁴Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 245–250.

ist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:5–6). Moreover, there is also only “one Spirit” (Eph 4:4), who searches “everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10). In this Spirit, who helps us in our weakness, we can be confident that nothing—not even the sufferings we now endure in space and time—can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Father did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. The Son endured our futility in order to suffuse it with his cruciform wisdom and power. And not only does the Spirit, who searches the depths of the Father—whose mind the Father knows—intercede for us with sighs and groans too deep for words, but the Son, who now sits at the Father’s right hand, does so as well. United in their perichoretic unity by baptism into Christ, we too—as the Spirit bears witness with our spirit—can affirm: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31). ⊕

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