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Pentecost: Mission of the Holy Spirit

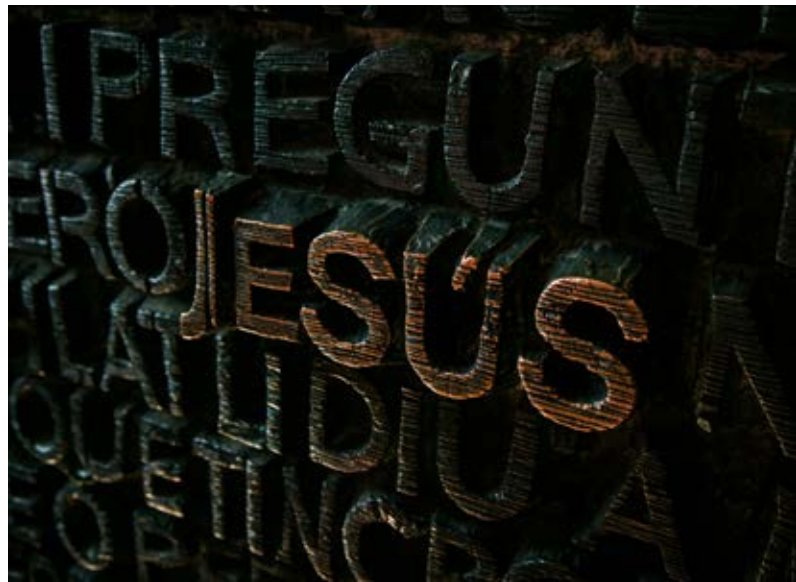
By Gloria L. Schaab

From the earliest attempts at Trinitarian proclamation, questions were raised about the person of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Trinity. Is the Holy Spirit the Spirit of God spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures as the “mighty wind” who hovered over the waters of creation (Genesis 1:2), as the one poured out over all humankind as proclaimed in the book of Joel (3:1–2), and as the Spirit sent forth to renew the face of the earth (Psalms 104:30)? Is the Holy Spirit the Spirit of God in the Gospels who overshadowed Mary at her annunciation (Luke 1:35), who descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism (Mark 1:10, Matthew 3:16, Luke 3:22), who drove Jesus into the desert after his baptism (Mark 1:12, Matthew 4:1, Luke 4:1), in whom Jesus prayed and rejoiced (Luke 10:21), who distributes spiritual gifts for the benefit of the community (1 Corinthians 12:4–11), and in whom we are sanctified (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14)?

Or is the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Jesus whom Jesus breathed upon the disciples after the resurrection (John 20:21–3), who enables us to cry out, “Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6), and who makes it possible for believers to belong to God (Romans 8:9)? Are these one and the same Holy Spirit? Is it the same Holy Spirit at work in creation, in incarnation, in grace, and in salvation? ...

The conclusion of those who posed the question was “yes.” If it is the same Holy Spirit, however, how can one speak of the emergence or mission of the Holy Spirit in new and surprising ways? What distinguishes the Trinitarian Person of the Holy Spirit from the Spirit of the Divine who animated, vivified, and inspired the leaders and prophets of Israel? ...

To answer that question, one must attend to the words of Jesus himself. It is he who signals the emergence of the Spirit as a distinct person with a distinct mission. One of the first inklings of this new emergent comes through in the Gospel of John. In the midst of the “farewell discourses” of Jesus in John 13–17, Jesus makes several references to the Advocate, or Paraclete, whom the Father will send. The term comes from the Greek word *parakletos*, which can be translated as comforter, counselor, advocate, or defender: “In the Gospel, the sense of Advocate, counsel, [is] one who pleads, convinces, convicts, who strengthens on the one hand and defends on the other.”¹



Consider the five ways in which Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John—four that use the term *Advocate* and one that implies such a role.

1

In John 14:16, Jesus tells his disciples: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it.” By referring to the Holy Spirit as “another” Advocate, Jesus clearly distinguishes the Holy Spirit from himself, even as he implies that he himself was the first advocate.

2

In John 14:26, Jesus elaborates: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.” Expanding the notion that he will ask the Father to send the Spirit of truth, Jesus further develops the character of the Spirit as a teacher in the Spirit’s own right, even as he affirms that the Spirit reinforces what Jesus himself has taught.

3

In John 15:26, Jesus attributes the sending of the Holy Spirit not only to the Father but also to the Son: “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me.” This corresponds to the relational distinction of persons through the internal dynamic of the Trinitarian processions. As Christians profess in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, the Holy Spirit is the one “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Moreover, the Spirit is now spoken of as a witness, one who testifies to what one has seen or heard, which further emphasizes the distinction of persons.

4

In John 16:7, Jesus definitively testifies to this distinction between the Spirit and himself: “I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” Two further insights about the Spirit emerge in this part of the discourse. On the one hand, the statement contends that the Son and the Spirit are mutually exclusive, for if the Son remains, the Spirit does not come. On the other hand, the sending of the Spirit is now exclusively attributed to the Son rather than to the Father or the Father and the Son together.



In John 20:21–23, Jesus sends the Spirit in a different way: “Jesus breathed on [his disciples] and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’” While this seems to indicate a mission of the Spirit with a broader purpose, it nonetheless implies that the Spirit serves to counsel the disciples in discerning the forgiveness of sins.

This series of Jesus’ sayings concerning the Holy Spirit promises something truly novel that requires a new way of viewing and speaking about the Holy Spirit. From this novelty emerges a new sense of the Holy Spirit both in relation to the Father and the Son and in relation to the nascent Christian community.



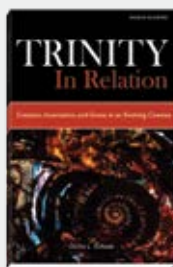
The promises to send the Spirit that surface in the farewell discourses in the Gospel of John reflect an earlier narrative found in the Acts of the Apostles.² Commonly considered a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke and attributed to the same author, Acts opens with a promise of its own, one that reveals another characteristic of the Holy Spirit to be sent. In Acts 1:8, before his ascension, Jesus says to his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This description attributes a power to the Holy Spirit, a power that the Spirit gives to the disciples to enable them to witness to the words and deeds of Jesus, even as the Spirit witnesses to Christ. The fulfillment of this promise comes in the second chapter of Acts, in the narrative of Pentecost.

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. (Acts 2:1–4)

This is a narrative full of symbolic language: the rushing wind signals a new and unexpected act of God within history (John 3:8); the tongues of fire call to mind the fire of the presence of God in the giving of the covenant on Sinai (Exodus 19:18). With fire, the Christian community now must witness to a new covenant in the power of the Spirit, one that reaches to all parts of the world, symbolized by the utterance in different tongues. How did this power of the Spirit manifest itself through the disciples? It enabled them to speak of the mighty deeds of God in language that each one could understand despite the fact that they were Jews from many disparate regions around Jerusalem (2:6–11). It empowered them to testify fearlessly to the mighty deeds, wonders, and signs that God had worked through Jesus (2:22), to proclaim his resurrection from the dead (2:32), and to call for repentance that those who listened might have their sins forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit (2:38).

Many other insights into the personhood of the Holy Spirit follow as the relation of effect further constitutes the distinctive being of the Spirit in the community of the Trinity. Nonetheless, the emergence of the Spirit through a defined mission within history furthers Christian understanding of this Third Trinitarian Person. **Amplified beyond conceptions of inspiration, prophecy, renewal, and empowerment found in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Nicene Creed, the previous biblical passages sharpen the contours of the Spirit in ways that reveal the Spirit’s personal uniqueness and relationality within the Trinity.** The Spirit emerges as (1) distinct from the Father and the Son, (2) as sent from both the Father and the Son, (3) as the Spirit of the Son as well as the Father, (4) as advocate and counselor to the disciples and the nascent Christian community, (5) as teacher of “everything,” even beyond the revelation given by Jesus himself, (6) as active remembrance of all that Jesus taught, (7) as power of proclamation of the Risen Christ, and (8) as impetus for the spread of the Gospel to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Clearly, this Holy Spirit is no longer an impersonal force or indiscernible from the Father and the Son. Remaining fully united with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit yet emerges in novel ways as fully personal and unique through the mission of the Spirit in history. It is in this way that Pope Francis achieves his balance between evangelization and liberation theology. Sharing the gospel connects with living the gospel, and living the gospel connects with social and economic inclusion. There is no line to be drawn dividing faith from justice.

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1. “What does it mean that the Holy Spirit is our Paraclete?” in GotQuestions.org: Bible Questions Answered; available from www.gotquestions.org/paraclete-Holy-Spirit.html.

2 Most scholars date the composition of the Gospel and Acts attributed to Luke between 80–90 CE and date the Gospel attributed to John between 90–100 CE. That the Gospel of John is situated between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles in the biblical canon may confuse the sequence of the Pentecost narrative and the farewell discourses.