

THE 'PROBLEM' OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

David Sullivan

I. Introduction

Calling the differentiated identities of the Trinity 'Persons' raises peculiar sorts of problems, not least because such a term runs the risks of basing the description of the trinitarian identities upon our understanding of human persons. One of the serious difficulties with this approach is that the three trinitarian identities exist as One Being, whilst human persons are separate beings.

So we may ask, how is it that the Holy Spirit exists as a distinct identity within the Trinity, yet exists in one being with the Father and the Son? There is a further specific problem we may raise that is imposed by Scripture. If the spirit is what God is, how can we identify the Holy Spirit specifically as 'the' Spirit of God?¹

The raising of this particular problem is also important in a religious sense. For example, we may ask whether there is anything distinctive about invoking the Holy Spirit as against invoking God. We would expect that the *trinity* of the Godhead is purposeful and meaningful, and that a monadic or binitarian Godhead is therefore either inconceivable, or at least would have a different purpose and meaning to the trinitarian God. We might put the questions reverently in this way: what difference as against the other members of the Trinity does the Holy Spirit make?

Or we may yet put the matter in another way. In the contemporary world, there is particular attention given to the experience of the Holy Spirit and his work in the world. These experiences are considered to be not only private, nor limited to isolated groups. Christian theology

¹This problem and the one following are posed by Robert Jenson in his *Systematic Theology Vol 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 146.

claims that the Holy Spirit is at work everywhere in creation, and particularly in and through human agents. Yet, as Michael Welker points out, 'it is often difficult to distinguish the reciprocal relations defined by God's Spirit from other relations between people and between creatures.'² Welker raises the questions: why, if God's Spirit is at work in the world with divine force and power, intervening in new and creative ways, why is it that only some parts of the contemporary world recognise this, and others see the Holy Spirit as, at best, a person of the past, or merely as an intellectual construct? How can the Holy Spirit be recognised and defined as a distinct person within the Trinity and within today's world?

These questions are complex and cannot be given full justice within the space of a few pages. Therefore we are compelled to consider some of the more important issues. It is fitting that, as we set out in this discussion, to begin by considering the term 'person' and its appropriateness as applied to the Holy Spirit, and indeed the other identities within the Trinity.

I. The Term 'Person'

The risk in labelling the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as 'persons' lies in invalidly invoking anthropomorphic metaphors as in some way determinative of the identities of the Trinity. There are clearly fundamental and important differences between the persons of the Trinity and a human person. As noted before, not least of these differences is that the Holy Spirit is of One Being with the Father and the Son, whereas each human person is a separate identity. This oneness is inextricably bound to the deity of the Trinity. There is a difference in *kind* between trinitarian person and human person.

Karl Barth attempted to avoid any confusion incumbent in the term 'person' by speaking of the 'Modes' of the Trinity.³ However, this term creates a new confusion by being suggestive of the ancient heresy of Modalism. Barth tried to avoid this problem by insisting that the three Modes exist simultaneously rather than successively. However, Barth's attempt is unsuccessful because it fails to give a convincing account of the role of the Holy Spirit as distinct from the Father and

the Son, and his doctrine often appears to be binitarian rather than Trinitarian. For example, as Robert Jenson points out, Barth fails to give any credit to the Holy Spirit as an agent who unites Christ and the church. Jenson writes: 'It is invariably Christ himself who is specified as the agent, with the Spirit denoted only by impersonal terms, as a *capacity* of Christ.'⁴ Thus, while Barth wishes to recognise the Spirit as a distinct identity within the Trinity, his theology often seems to fail to give the Spirit that status.

Karl Rahner indicates that he is content to maintain the term 'person' to describe the Trinitarian identities, since it is a term that has lasted and served well for over 1500 years. However, he qualifies his support for the term by speaking of the Trinity as being 'three distinct manners of subsisting,'⁵ and avoids any accusations of tritheistic heresy by stating that 'these distinct manners' exist in the One God. It seems that whilst Rahner desires to clarify the term 'person,' he in fact adopts terminology which in itself is not clear.

It is useful and helpful, though perhaps insufficient to think of the Trinity as 'three centres of consciousness,'... 'but that so interpenetrate each other that a oneness of being obtains that does not obtain in the case of three human individuals.'⁶ We shall discuss this perspective further at a later stage in this paper. Let us note for the moment that, provided that we are able to maintain our focus that the Trinity is One God, there does not seem to be any valid reason why we should not continue to employ the term 'person' in referring to the Trinity. We now turn our discussion to the particular role of the Holy Spirit as a person distinct from the other identities of the Trinity.

II. The Role of the Holy Spirit

As we embark upon this section of our task, we do well to begin with the Scriptural evidences which, when examined together, clearly support the belief that the Holy Spirit exists as a distinct divine person. The qualification 'when examined together' is added here because the personhood of the Holy Spirit is not clearly determinate in the Old Testament, though it is revealed in the New Testament.

² Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 4.

³ See J. Kenneth Grider, 'The Triune God,' in *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, edited by Charles Carter, (Salem: Schmul, 1992), p. 400.

⁴ Jenson, p. 154.

⁵ Grider, p. 401.

⁶ Grider, p. 401.

Moreover there is not even one statement in Scripture, and in particular in the New Testament, that teaches that the Trinity comprises three persons. The term 'Trinity' is itself not even to be found in Scripture. Nevertheless, the Scriptural perspective does present the Spirit as a divine and active agent in the world. The Spirit was the divine creative agent, as we read in Genesis 1:1, 2 where the inspired human author wrote the following: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....and God's Spirit hovered over the waters.' We know that the Spirit is the divine author of the Scriptures, that he was active in the redemptive life and ministry of Jesus, that he empowered Jesus for ministry, sustained and directed him in temptation, and by him Jesus was raised from the dead and is now glorified.

And we also know that the Spirit is present with every believer (John 14:17), that he is our witness that we are children of God, that he is God's gift to us as our advocate and helper (John 14:25), and that he convicts the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8). He is also our teacher. Perhaps most importantly of all he points us to Christ, as Christ himself says: 'He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine.' (John 16:14)

This last point is critical in any discussion of the Holy Spirit's personhood, because it establishes the Spirit as being distinct from Christ, yet connected inextricably to Christ. Romans 8:9 speaks of the Spirit of Christ. Elsewhere Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God. Thus, from a biblical perspective, we may note that any understanding of the personhood of the Holy Spirit can only be gained within the context of the Holy Spirit's relationship to the other members of the Trinity. This is the subject of the next section of this paper.

III. The Holy Spirit within the Trinity

Welker notes the following in one of his articles: 'Whoever is capable of thinking and conceiving of a person only as an individual-human center of action will have to come to terms with the fact that the personhood of the Holy Spirit will simply remain impenetrable.'⁷ At

⁷ Michael Welker, 'The Holy Spirit,' printed in *Theology Today* Vol 46, No. 1, April 1989, reproduced on the internet as theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1989/v46-1-article1.htm, p. 11.

another point Welker states that 'the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most difficult person of the Trinity to conceive. It is hard to say what one is talking about when one speaks of the Holy Spirit.'⁸ Why has the church had so much difficulty with its doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

Both Welker and Jenson point out that the confusion surrounding the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the Trinity arises to a large degree from the way in which Western theology has developed. For example, Welker asks the questions:

How can we understand the Holy Spirit as personal if, in accordance with the leading contemporary doctrinal traditions, the Spirit is regarded as the bond of peace or the bond of love between the Father and the Son? How can we understand the Spirit as personal if we regard the Spirit, still more abstractly, as relation-relation between the other two persons of the Trinity and, likewise, between God and humans?⁹

In other words, Western theology seems to be inadequate in establishing the Holy Spirit as more than a bond that exists between the other trinitarian identities. Robert Jenson, when critiquing Barth's lopsided presentation of the Holy Spirit in terms of being merely 'the perfect consubstantial fellowship between the Father and the Son,'¹⁰ attributes this lopsided thinking to 'Barth's unquestioning devotion to the West's standard teaching that the Spirit *is* the bond of love between the Father and the Son.'¹¹ Jenson is *not* saying that this is not the function of the Holy Spirit, nor that Barth's description is in itself wrong, but rather that no other description of the Holy Spirit appears. If all that the Spirit *is* is the 'bond of love' between Father and Son, then, argues Jenson, he has not been adequately and properly established theologically as a distinct person.

Jenson begins his 'solution' to what he calls 'the pneumatological problem' by noting that:

Barth's exemplary use of Western doctrine thus displays what can only be called an 'I-Thou' trinitarianism. The Father and the Son are unproblematically understood as persons in mutual converse, whose mutuality constitutes the triune life and is the ground of God's *ad*

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

¹⁰ Jenson, p. 155.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 155.

extra. But the Spirit is not a *party* to this converse. And, indeed, it is at the heart of the 'I-Thou' relationship,' as it has been normative in Western thinking, to allow no third party.¹²

Jenson questions whether an 'I-Thou' relationship, as described in traditional terms, can be healthy, and in fact describes such a relationship as enslaving. He begins his argument by writing that 'if you and I are to be free for one another, each of us must be both subject and object in our converse.'¹³ If I am not object for you as subject just as you are object for me as subject, then 'I enslave you, no matter with what otherwise good disposition I intend for you.'¹⁴ How can this enslaving be avoided? How can two persons be mutually available in love for each other? Jenson's answer is: 'Surely we must acknowledge that if there is to be freely given love there must be a third party in the meeting of 'I' and 'Thou.' If you and I are to be free for one another, someone must be our liberator.'¹⁵ Jenson argues, for example, that if a friendship becomes too exclusive, allowing no third party, then it becomes destructive. And so, argues Jenson, 'we must learn to think: the Spirit is indeed love between two personal lovers, (Father and Son), but he can be this just *in that* he is antecedently himself. He is another who in his own intention liberates the Father and Son to love each other.'¹⁶

Jenson's argument has the advantage of offering some explanation as to why the Godhead is a triunity, and not a biunity. It also has the strength of avoiding any faulty subordinationist theology, wherein the Holy Spirit is perceived as something other than fully divine. Only God can 'liberate' God to love. It is strange, however, that Jenson does not offer any Scriptural support for his argument, but relies on his understanding of human 'I-Thou' relationships. Jenson is always quite adamant that any knowledge or revelation that we have of God must be searched for in the narrative events of the Scriptures. This point is central to Jenson's theology. He is opposed to any sort of natural theology or theory that would suggest that we would know anything about God from any source other than the events recorded in Scripture. In this instance of attempting to understand the

¹² Ibid, p. 155.

¹³ Ibid, p. 155.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 155.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 156.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 156.

personhood of the Holy Spirit, however, Jenson seems to break his own rule by employing natural theology to establish his case.

Let us see how, in more detail, Jenson breaks his own rule. His argument arises from basing his understanding of Trinitarian pneumatology upon the inadequacy of the 'I-Thou' relational model developed by Martin Buber, but particularly as perceived by Hegel. Jenson seems to extrapolate his argument that the 'I' and the 'Thou' of human 'I-Thou' relationships need a third party to free them to relate healthily, to the Father and the Son. And it is the Holy Spirit who fulfils this function as the third party. Jenson's argument may well be true, but where is this reality about the Trinity made explicit in the Scriptures? Jenson appears to be imposing human developed theories about how humans relate healthily upon the Trinity, and in doing so seems to violate his won theological principles with regard to revelation.

Welker comes at the issue of the Holy Spirit's personhood from a different angle. Welker's 'solution' to the question about the distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit as person depends upon what he calls 'the concept of *resonance*.'¹⁷ We recall from above discussion that Welker states that it is not the fact of being a center of action that necessarily establishes a being or an identity as a person. Welker states that 'only through a domain of resonance does a center of action become a person.'¹⁸ A being only becomes a person 'by being formed in multiple webs of relationships'¹⁹ with other beings.

The central statement in Welker's argument is that 'The Holy Spirit is to be understood as the multiform unity of perspectives on Jesus Christ, a unity in which we participate and which we help to constitute.'²⁰ Welker uses metaphors to explain this statement. Each of us, whilst certainly centers of action and self-consciousness, becomes a whole person publicly within the context of being a child of our parents, a friend of our friends, or a contemporary of our contemporaries, and within all other webs of our relationships that we belong to. The total unity of those external perspectives in which we exist constitutes our 'public' person, and or 'domain of resonance.' Similarly, the Holy Spirit is Christ's domain of resonance, he is 'the

¹⁷ Welker, 'The Holy Spirit,' p. 12.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.13.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

public person who corresponds to the individual of Jesus Christ.²¹ For the Holy Spirit is at work in the world today, working in and through everyday life, pointing humanity to Christ. And it is we, who are God's witnesses in Christ's power in the world, who have the privilege of participating in the Spirit's work.

Welker's perspective on the Holy Spirit is fascinating. It must be noted, however, that the personhood of the Holy Spirit, as defined by Welker, seems to depend largely on the redemptive work of Christ. We might ask how, in Welker's system, the Holy Spirit might be a person had the redemption not taken place. Of course, such questions may be futile, because we do not have any specific revelation about how the Trinity would have been identifiable apart from the redemption and God's revealing of himself in the redemptive events of history. We must be careful about being too specific about what God's identity would have been like had he not created at all, or if he had chosen to create in a way different from the way in which he actually did choose.

We may criticise Welker's view on one other ground, and that is that it does not appear to be a solid trinitarian perspective, with the Father being noticeable by his absence. Does not the Father as origin of the Trinity have some bearing of the personhood of the Holy Spirit and his pointing us to Christ? Is not the Father included with the Spirit in some way as being a part of the domain of resonance of Christ? And if so, how? To be fair to Welker, we note that his other theological works are clearly trinitarian. However, in this instance, his work does seem to deficient in trinitarian perspective.

Currently, I know of no fully plausible theological explanation that establishes how and why the Holy Spirit is a third distinct person of the Trinity. It is an area, perhaps, which needs more attention. In the concluding section we turn our attention to consider a few final issues that have bearing upon our understanding of the Holy Spirit as a person within the Trinity.

IV. A Final Few Observations

²¹ Ibid, p. 13.

One of the important doctrines of the church is that of the procession of the Holy Spirit. The actual meaning of this doctrine has not always been totally clear. For example, the question of how 'being begotten' is different from 'proceeding' needs to be explained, although this paper is not the place for such a discussion. Nor is the question of whom it is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from unanimously agreed upon. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only, or is it also from the Son? And how can we avoid any sort of subordinationist fallacy or heresy in our theology as we approach the question of procession? That is, how do we do due honour to the divine equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son as we examine questions such as procession?

The matter of procession leads inevitably to the *filioque* question, which divided and still divides East and West. Initially the Augustinian idea of *filioque* and then its insertion as a creedal clause by the West was considered necessary to ensure recognition of divine equality of the Son with the Father. The focus was therefore not so much on the Spirit as on the Son. But one of the perhaps unforeseen consequences of the *filioque* insertion has been the 'neglect' of the Holy Spirit as being equal with the Father and the Son. It has also led to many thinking, speaking, or writing almost exclusively of the Holy Spirit's trinitarian fellowship in terms of being a relation of origin. Pannenberg notes the problem in the following way: 'The mistaken formulation of Augustine points in fact to a defect which plagues the Trinitarian theological language,.....namely, that of seeing the relations among the Father, Son, and Spirit exclusively as relations of origin.'²² Pannenberg's point is that we need to develop accurate theological ideas that encompass the reciprocity of the members of the Trinity, as well as their relations of origin. This would then help to clarify the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

Clearly this is not the place to develop Pannenberg's ideas in great detail. However, we may note one of Pannenberg's essential ideas. He refers to the Holy Spirit as breathed by the Father. But he says: 'The Spirit also fills the Son and glorifies him in obedience to the Father, thereby glorifying the Father himself. In doing so he leads into all truth (John 16:13) and searches out the deep things of the Godhead (1

²² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1988) p. 317.

Cor 2:10-11).²³ We ought not to try to read too much into what Pannenberg is saying here. But we may perhaps interpret his words by paraphrasing them in the following way: whilst the Holy Spirit derives being from the Father, and is sent by both the Father and the Son, he gives the Son glory, and in doing so also gives proper and due glory to the Father, who is known only when the Son is known. The Holy Spirit takes the glory that is the Father's and shines that glory back perfectly onto the Father though the Son. And only God can give proper, due and perfect glory to God.

Conclusion

In summary we may observe that, whilst the divine personhood of the Holy Spirit is clearly revealed in Scripture, a number of theologians have stated that theology has had a difficult task in effectively encompassing that divine personhood in its description of God's identity. In particular there have often been descriptions of the Trinity that fail to account for the reciprocity of the three divine persons and thereby present the Holy Spirit in a subordinationist role, or even as a capacity of Christ rather than as a distinct person. There have been various attempts at establishing the Holy Spirit successfully as a distinct person in a theological sense, though I am not sure that any have been entirely convincing. Perhaps Pannenberg comes the closest. It is without doubt, however, that the Scriptures are clear about the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit. And perhaps this is sufficient.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 320.