

HOW DOES THE SPIRIT FUNCTION WITHIN THE TRINITY?

Introduction

Despite the Spirit being a fully divine Person within the Trinity, He is the figure within the Godhead to be least understood, not only with regards to His nature and relationship with Father and Son, but also in His function and purpose. The orthodox position of the church, established by the First Council of Constantinople, explains that the Holy Spirit is an equal, divine Person of the Triune Godhead. As this is the accepted, orthodox position of all mainstream Christian denominations, including evangelical Christians, it is remarkable that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is so poorly understood by clergy and laymen alike.

Methodology

This paper will endeavor to elucidate clearly and concisely what the function of the Spirit is within the Trinity by defending the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. To do so, I will firstly explain the Scriptural authority for each member of the Trinity, highlighting the method in which we understand how God is divine and unique. After highlighting these key tenets of the doctrine of the Trinity, this essay will then explain the hierarchy of the Trinity, before then explaining the particular role of the Holy Spirit. This explanation will involve tracing the work of the Spirit through the entire canon before drawing conclusions about His role in salvation, sanctification and revealing Father and Son. Finally, this paper will show the unity of the Godhead in decisions before concluding.

The Trinity: Who?

The first, and most important, question to answer before addressing the function of the Spirit directly, is ‘who makes up the Trinity?’ It is not possible to understand the role of the

Spirit without first comprehending the Trinity as a whole (at least, insofar as we are able to apprehend the nature of the Godhead at all), for God is Trinitarian in nature, and therefore each Person acts with the others. We must, therefore, grasp the nature of God as the Supreme Being.

There are particular identifying features that God has disclosed about Himself that enable us to understand how He differs from us. He is the creator, being able to create *ex nihilo*. Hence in Genesis 1 we read that God created by the power of His word alone. The Father is the creator, for, when He spoke, light, matter, vegetation and animal life came into being. We know that the Son is also a creator for in John 1:3 we learn that He was the agent by which God the Father created. God is also the only being capable of forgiving sin and removing it completely. Note the way in which Jesus healed the paralytic in Mark 2: the Pharisees asked,

‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ And immediately Jesus...said to them...‘Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’ But that you may know the Son of Man has authority to on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’¹

By this miracle Jesus demonstrated that, just as He could heal the paralyzed, He could forgive the sinner; an act only God can do, as the Pharisees themselves noted. The conclusion is clear: Jesus is God. The Spirit also does this, for in Romans we learn that, ‘If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he...will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.’² This life is salvific, based upon forgiveness of sins.

A further tenet of how we come to understand who God is can be discerned by understanding that God, being infinite, cannot be *discovered* but must *reveal* Himself to finite beings. Thus in John 17 Jesus could pray, ‘I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’³ The Son acts divinely when He reveals the Father. In the Old Testament we can read about the

¹ Mark 2:7b-11. All Biblical quotations from the ESV unless otherwise stated.

² Romans 8:11.

³ John 17:26.

Father revealing Himself to Moses: ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name, ‘The LORD.’⁴

However, we also see the Spirit doing all of these things. In Genesis, we read that the ‘Spirit was hovering over the face of the waters,’⁵ and that when God formed man from the dust of the earth, He, ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.’⁶ The Spirit is clearly involved in the divine work of creation, giving life to the mould. Likewise, the Spirit is intrinsic for the forgiveness of sins for He is the means by which men are brought to repentance. He brings about the effectual calling of the sinner, and in fact is the One who intercedes on our behalf.⁷ However, the most visible role of the Spirit is found when we consider that He reveals God. At the baptism of Jesus in Matthew, we read, ‘the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.’⁸ Likewise, Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians, where he writes,

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.⁹

Evidently, therefore, the Spirit knows God and acts like a beacon shining on the Son and the Father, or a bullhorn, directing people to the Son and the Father. Indeed, in Ephesians we read, ‘...it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.’¹⁰ Here Paul refers to the mystery of Christ, and it is the Spirit who revealed to the apostles then and the prophets before. In these acts the Spirit is acting within the unity of the Godhead as a fully equal Person

⁴ Exodus 33:19

⁵ Genesis 1:2.

⁶ Genesis 2:7.

⁷ Romans 8:26-27.

⁸ Matthew 4:16b.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:10-11.

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:5.

of the Trinity. This is of the utmost importance to the Christian. Just as it is essential that Jesus be both fully God and fully man (for ‘what He has not assumed, He has not healed’¹¹) so it is essential that the Spirit is fully divine, otherwise we are not sanctified nor will the Law of God be written on our hearts, and nor will we have an intercessor who prays on our behalf when we cannot.

The Trinity: Who does what?

The second question to answer is, ‘who does what within the Trinity?’ Noting that each Person of the Trinity is equally divine in the fullness of *being* does not mean that there is no order or structure within the Trinity as to how each Person functions. God is a God of order, not chaos, and this can be seen from how He has revealed Himself as Three in One.

Jesus makes clear that, although He and the Father are one, the Father is clearly the One who sent Him: ‘And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’¹² This is the doctrine of the *eternal generation of the Son* from the Father. Jesus also acknowledges that He did the commands of the Father, ‘but I do as the Father commanded me’¹³ and that ‘the Father is greater than I.’¹⁴ Similarly, the Father also sent the Spirit (the doctrine of the *eternal procession of the Spirit*), ‘But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name...’ clearly demonstrates that the Father has the highest position within the Godhead. This in no way undermines the Son or the Spirit in their divinity, or in their equality as Person’s with God. Indeed this is clear when we read that the Son obeys the commands of the Father for the reason that, ‘the world may know that I love the Father.’¹⁵

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/gregoryofnaz_critique_of_apollinarianism.htm. Accessed 04/29/2015.

¹² John 17:3.

¹³ John 14:31.

¹⁴ John 14:28.

¹⁵ John 14:31.

Rather than being in an eternal power struggle such as in the Greek myths with Zeus against Cronos, the Son willingly submits to the authority of the Father out of mutual love and trust, as does the Spirit to both Father and Son.

The role of the Son is clear throughout the New Testament. He is the propitiation for our sins (Romans 3:25), the greater Moses (Hebrews 3:3), the Greatest High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), the source of eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:9), the mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:6), the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10:10), the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), the hope for Jews and Gentiles (Romans 15:8-9), the One who set us free (Galatians 5:1), Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8), the fulfilment of Genesis 15, the One who died for us (Romans 5:8), the One who gives life (John 5:21) and the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). Much more could be said, but the function of the Son, therefore, is to bring glory to the Father by being the redemption for mankind through His incarnation, the atoning, sacrificial death on the cross, and the inauguration of the New Creation through His resurrection.

As noted earlier, the Spirit functions as the Person within the Trinity who shines upon the Father and Son. Therefore His role is distinct as the revealer of God. Indeed this can be seen in how He functions with regards to salvation. In Galatians 4 we read that, ‘...because of this you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’¹⁶ The Spirit is the Person who calls us out of darkness, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12: ‘No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ Whilst He is the Person who calls us, He is also the Person who washes and regenerates us upon the profession of our faith in Christ (which He also gives us), as Paul reminded Titus.¹⁸ The Spirit applies the atoning sacrifice of Christ to us and therefore washes us by imputing the righteousness of Christ to us. The work of the Spirit

¹⁶ Galatians 4:6.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

¹⁸ Titus 3:5.

then, in salvation, is of the utmost importance, for without His call we would never come to repentance, and without His application of the work of Christ we could never be redeemed.

The Spirit is also intrinsically involved in our sanctification. He does this by assuring us of our new life in Christ (Romans 8:1-2), ‘by teaching us all things and bringing to your remembrance all that I have said to you’¹⁹ and writing the law of the Lord upon our hearts (Jeremiah 31). By ensuring we have this law written upon our hearts, He is able to conform us to become like Christ through teaching us, discipling us and constantly teaching us the example of Christ along with the commands of God. Indeed in Romans 8 it is by walking with the Spirit that we can be called sons of God through adoption, for He bears witness for us. As such we are not saved by the ‘spirit of slavery’²⁰ of our sin or the law, but through the grace of the Spirit we are convicted of our sin and given the strength to engage in the battle with temptation. As the Spirit indwells us for the purposes of sanctification, we can know that the gifts we have are from the Spirit also: ‘All these [the gifts] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.’²¹ These gifts enable us to trust that the Spirit is at work in us, and allow us to be an encouragement to the church as a whole for everyone’s edification, and all for the glory of God who has called us to Himself.

The Spirit throughout the Scriptures

In the Old Testament the Spirit is very active and discernibly present. Noticeably, in the Old Testament the Spirit is not always involved in salvation, but even hardens hearts against God, as He did with Pharaoh in Exodus.²² However, He is most evident in coming down upon individuals at specific times for various ministries such as war (Samson), prophecy (Saul), music (David) and visions (the prophets). This is different from what we find in the New Testament

¹⁹ John 14:26

²⁰ Romans 8:15.

²¹ I Corinthians 12:11.

²² Exodus 11:10.

where, unlike the temporary indwellings found in the Old Testament, the Spirit indwells us throughout our lives under Jesus' New Covenant. As Jeremiah prophesied, after speaking of God's Law written on our hearts, the Spirit would ensure that, 'No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and teach his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me...'²³ which indicates that the Spirit will permanently indwell, and which we see confirmed in 1 Corinthians 6, 'Our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, which is in us because we are bought with a price. Everyone who has been purchased by the blood of Christ also has the Spirit of God dwelling in him.'²⁴ This function of the Spirit is a ministry that ensures our steadfastness in the faith, and perseverance to the end. It is not we who ensure we survive the journey of faith, but He who has begun a good work in us.²⁵

Conclusions on the Spirit's Role

In the New Testament the Spirit's role is revelation, salvation and sanctification. Jesus explains to the disciples why it is better that He leaves, because these things are not His direct ministry in the way that the Spirit will fulfil them. He says,

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.²⁶

The Spirit, therefore, reveals the truth of God, and brings us into the mystery of all the words of Jesus. He won't speak of His own accord, but will speak that which the Father and Son give Him to say, and these are the words of Christ as recorded in Scripture. It is this revelation of the words of Jesus that he will use to bring us to repentance and to convict us of sin. As Jesus also said,

²³ Jeremiah 31:34.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:19.

²⁵ Philippians 1:6.

²⁶ John 16:12-15.

But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgement, because the ruler of this world is judged.²⁷

It is the ministry of the Spirit to bring about the repentance foreordained by the Father and won for us by the Son. It is the ministry of the Spirit to apply the work of Christ to us, to write the Law of God upon our hearts and to assist us, empower us and teach us how to be Christ-like in this world through the trials and temptations that we will face.

Unity in the Godhead

Finally, it must be understood that, due to the nature of the Spirit's eternal procession from Father and Son, and because He will not speak that which the Father or Son has commanded Him to speak, the Godhead is united in every act and deed any Person undertakes. In the act of salvation, as noted above, the Father foreordains and promises to give a people to the Son, while the Son goes to the cross to purchase this people by His blood and the Spirit effectually calls those whom the Father has ordained. Whilst the Spirit is the Person who calls the individual to repentance, He is not acting alone. In the act of sanctification, the Spirit applies the completed work of Christ to the individual so that they will be able to resist and flee temptation, and so that, when the Father looks upon the sinful sinner, He see the righteousness of Christ that the Spirit has imputed upon them, thereby assuring us that we are adopted heirs with Christ. In the act of divine self-revelation, the Spirit is the spotlight and bullhorn who points to the love of the Father and the work of the Son so that we might be humbled and call out in faith to be saved. The Spirit does all He does for the glory of the Father and Son, expressing His eternal unity and love to them, and they to Him.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has defended the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, explaining how the Trinity functions within relation to one another. With regards to the Spirit specifically, it

²⁷ John 16:7b-11.

was noted that He is fully divine and equal with the Father and Son, and as such shares in their actions of creation, revelation, salvation and sanctification. However, it was also explained that the Spirit's role was heightened after the ascension of Christ where He now calls every believer to repentance, indwells them and writes the Law of God upon our hearts, so that we might be engaged in the battle for sanctification and enabled to bring praise, worship and glory to God; who we can only approach because of the Spirit-applied work of Jesus' atoning work at the cross. This paper concluded by pointing out that the Spirit never acts without the Father or Son, but that all three Persons are entirely united in every act undertaken, even if their particular roles in that act are different by necessity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

The Bible. English Standard Version. Crossway, Illinois. 2001

Digital Sources

http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/gregoryofnaz_critique_of_apollinarianism.htm