

# Theological Review

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## HOW DID THE HOLY SPIRIT GET INTO THE TRINITY?

J.M. ROSS

There is no good reason to doubt that within a generation of his death Jesus was widely regarded in the Church as not merely Messiah and Son of God, but as God himself in human flesh. This is stated or implied in many places in the New Testament, if the Greek is allowed to yield its natural sense. A few examples are sufficient for the present purpose. As early as the already existing hymn incorporated by Paul into Phi. 2.5-11, that status of Jesus before his incarnation is described as "equality with God". In 2 Thes. 1.12 Paul wrote "according to the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ." In Rom. 9.5. he wrote of the Israelites "of whom is Christ in his human aspect, who is over all things, God blessed for ever." The writer to the Hebrews (1.8) applies to Christ the words of the Psalm (44 LXX) which says "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." In Mark 4.35-41 the stilling of the storm is narrated in language borrowed from the first chapter of Jonah and ends with the question "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" implying that the Lord Yahweh is present in person. According to Acts 20.28 (in the best manuscripts) Paul referred to "the church of God, which he purchased to himself with his own blood." The first chapter of John's Gospel asserts that the word was God, and that (according to the best manuscripts of verse 18) "the only-begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father has declared God to us." The Epistle to Titus mentions (2.13) "the glorious manifestation of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ"; and in the book of Revelation divine honours are paid to the Lamb, both separately (5.12) and jointly with God (5.13). The same language — alpha and omega, first and last — is used of God (1.8, 4.8) and of Christ (1.17 and 2.8).

There is equally no good reason to doubt that quite early the Holy Spirit was regarded by the Church as on a level with the Father and the Son. Just as Christ and God are at times equated in the New Testament, so are the Holy Spirit and God. In 2 Cor. 3.17-18 the Lord of Exodus 34.34 is identified with the Holy Spirit who gives liberty to Christian believers. At Acts 5.9 Peter, who had already rebuked Ananias for trying to deceive God (verse 4), rebuked Sapphira in her turn for trying to tempt the Spirit of God; it was the same thing in different language. Thus it is not surprising that the Church quite early came to speak of God in a threefold manner. We find this in the New Testament not only in the well-known cases of the benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians and the baptismal formula in Matt. 28.19, but in many other places where the three persons of the godhead are linked together. An interesting example is 1 Cor. 12.4-6, where for rhetorical effect Paul cites the three persons of the single godhead one after the other as the source of the various spiritual gifts. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; and diversities of ministries, but the same Lord (i.e. Jesus); and diversities of workings, but the same God (sc. the Father) who works all things in all." Other examples of the same collocation may be found at Eph. 2.18 ("through Christ we both have access in one Spirit to the Father") and Jude 20 ("praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ").

But though the New Testament writers thought of God as threefold, they are not always clear as to the practical distinction between God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Paul can use identical language to describe the work of Christ and of the Spirit. For instance at Rom.8.9-11 he writes "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. If Christ is in you . . . the spirit is life through righteousness. But if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you . . ." The dwelling of Christ within the believer and the dwelling of the Spirit within him mean precisely the same thing. Similarly in 1 Cor. 2.9-16 Paul interchangeably says we have divine wisdom because we have the Spirit of God and because we have the mind of Christ. At 1 Cor.15.45 Paul says that the second Adam "became a life-giving spirit", applying to God the Son the chief attribute of God the Spirit. This conflation of Son and Spirit is not merely Pauline. According to the Fourth Gospel Jesus said he would send the Spirit to abide with his disciples for ever (14.16) and remind them of his teaching (14.26), but in the same discourse he said he would himself make his abode with them (verse 23), and in the next chapter we read that Christ is to be as intimately related to his own as a vine is to its branches. It would appear that the early Church was convinced that their Lord in consequence of his resurrection was alive and active in the world, ready to take up his abode in the hearts and lives of his people, so that they could live as his agents, speak his words, and carry out his will. But if this was true of Christ the Son, what need was there of a third person of the Trinity? By all means talk of the spirit of Christ (with a small s, according to our modern orthography) and the spirit of God, meaning the divine influence exercised upon those who commit themselves to God through faith in Christ; but why call this influence God, in the same sense as Christ is God? Why did they not rest content with what is in fact the religion of many Christians today to whom the Holy Spirit is no more than another name for the risen Christ, so that for practical purposes they are binitarians?

Professor G.W. Lampe in his Bampton Lectures (*God as Spirit*, 1977, pp. 133, 144, 168-9) discussed the question why the early Church found it necessary to distinguish Jesus as God and the Holy Spirit as God. His solution to the problem is not very clearly expressed, but he seems to have thought that the Christians felt the need of a Mediator between God and this world, a Mediator who would unite the divine and human natures and therefore different from the universal Logos or Spirit postulated by the Stoics. It was not sufficient to identify the existing presence of the risen Christ in the hearts of believers with the Holy Spirit, because the Christians looked forward to a personal encounter with Christ at his return to earth — an encounter not adequately described in terms of Spirit. This explanation is less than convincing because it ought to have been possible for the writers of the New Testament to speak in terms both of the indwelling Christ here and now and the future person-to-person encounter at the *parousia*, both of these concepts being closely connected with God's power and influence, without the need to deify that power and influence as a separate entity under the name of the Holy Spirit.

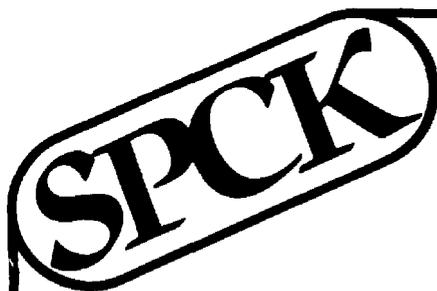
No doubt the early Christians found it necessary to distinguish between Christ the Second Adam or incarnate Logos and the Spirit which inspired his works and prophetic utterances on earth (Luke 4.1, 18); no doubt also it was

convenient to distinguish between the exalted Christ who was to come again as Judge and the Spirit by which in the mean time he gave life to believers; but why did they think of this Spirit as God and not just as the power or influence of God?

It would seem that the problem is not soluble so long as we start from the deification of Christ and then go on to consider why it was necessary to deify the Spirit also. It is however questionable whether this was the way that the Trinity took shape as a matter of history. It is unlikely that the earliest Christians would have identified Christ with God immediately after his resurrection; in those days resurrection from death was not thought of as a unique act of which only a god could be capable. It is probable that only gradually did the Church come to the conclusion that Jesus had been God himself on earth; it was perhaps twenty years before the hymn quoted in Philippians was composed. But while Christology was taking shape it is not at all unlikely that a separate doctrine of the Holy Spirit was rapidly developing as a result of the experience of Pentecost. Whatever actually happened on that occasion, those who experienced it must have thought it quite unique — something new in the history of Israel, literally an epoch-making event. They may not have immediately understood it in terms of another manifestation of the risen Christ, for

there was no visible sign of the person of Jesus, but they would at once have seen it as a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy that in the last days the Spirit of the Lord would be poured out on all flesh, i.e. on Jews and gentiles alike. It was clear to those who had been through the experience of Pentecost that the Spirit of the Lord God who had anointed Isaiah (Is.61.1) was now animating all the Lord's people.

So the problem before the first Christians was not "If Christ is God, how are we to think of the Spirit?", but rather "If God is personally present by a novel outpouring of his Spirit, how are we to think of Christ?". They could not identify him with the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit — God's creative and enlivening power — cannot be thought of as assuming human form, dying, rising, ascending to heaven, and returning visibly to earth in judgement. But God in Christ, intervening for the salvation of the world, could hardly be given lower status than the Spirit of God so powerfully present at Pentecost and in the other divine manifestations displayed by believers as a consequence of their baptism. Therefore if the Holy Spirit is God on earth, no less honour must be given to Christ who must be thought of as also God on earth and now seated at the right hand of the Father. No doubt it took some time for the Church to clarify the distinction between the Son and the Spirit, but this account may explain how it was that the Church became trinitarian and not binitarian.



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