Chapter 11

**The Spirit**

This third section of the Creed is, like the Father’s, short and to the point. Of course this is a theological point, so there really is nothing short about it. The importance of Trinity to the understanding of Revelation and the Economy of Salvation cannot be stated often enough or strongly enough. Often the Spirit seems to be the Ringo of the Trinity, everyone seems to know there is a Holy Spirit but no one really talks about or knows much about the Spirit.

**The Words**

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| ***Nicene Creed*** | ***Some Biblical References*** |
| *I believe in the Holy Spirit,*  | Jn 14:26 |
| *the Lord the giver of life,* | Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor 3:17; Gen 1:2; Jn 3:5 |
| *who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],*  | Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:14-15 |
| *who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,*  | Mt 3:16-17, 28:19; 1 Jn 5:7 |
| *who spoke through the prophets.*  | I Sam 19:20; Ez 11:5, 13; 2 Pt 1:21 |

**God As Spirit**

Before we just jump into this one, we probably need to understand the word ‘Spirit’ in order to discuss this very important person. “Spirit” is used in various ways throughout the Scriptures. At one time it is used for the “soul” or the animating thing within us (which God put there). At others it means the power of God. And finally it is used in a *personae* way, indicating the third person of the Trinity.

Like the word “Son” this means that the word “spirit” is used throughout the Bible and to various meanings, not all of which can lead us to understand the third person. The term “*Holy Spirit*” does not always appear even when the author is speaking of the said person. To top it off, the New Testament gives us no clear teaching on the Holy Spirit. What we do know is that the term “*holy*” tells us of the nature and origin of the Spirit. “*No one is good but God alone*” (*Lk* 18:19) Jesus tells us. So in kind of a circular argument, if the Spirit is God’s then it must be holy and if it is holy then its origin must be with God.

The understanding of the Spirit as God is driven by the very nature of God as we have discussed it so far. God is a living God, not just a God of the past, but a God who creates and sustains.

**The Problems**

Usually most problems with the Spirit tend to come from those who in some form or fashion deny the divinity of Jesus. For the Sabellianists of the early 3rd century, God the Father and Jesus the Son and God the Spirit were not distinct persons but basically modes of the same person who appeared when we needed them; the three persons of the Trinity only existed in God’s relation to humanity, not in substance. The Arian’s insistence of the non-divinity of Jesus begged the question that if Jesus is not divine, and the spirit is given by the Son (cf. *Jn* 20:12), how could a non-god give us God? In fact, another Arian-based denial was part of the impetus for the Council of Constantinople in 381 (Nicene-Constantinople Creed – remember?) and its update of the Creed. Not only was the Arian heresy was finally cleansed from the Creed, the Council also condemned the Arian bishop Macedonius (late 4th century) and his followers. They denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit because the Spirit was a creation of the Son and therefore did not to proceed from the Father.

But even more, Paul’s letters, so essential to Christianity, often deal with the Spirit within the communities he is addressing. In fact, we can look at it this way – without all of the problems in those communities, their lack of/mis-use of the “gifts of the Spirit” many of those letters would *never have been written*.

**The Solutions**

The actions of the Spirit throughout Scripture give us the clue as to the nature of the Spirit. From Creation even unto today in the Church, we rely upon the Spirit. One cannot speak about Jesus or the nature and actions of the Church without understanding the Spirit. As with the Son, he only solution is to declare Revelation, that the Spirit is God as well. So against Macedonius’ thought, the Council Fathers forced the profession of the consubstantial nature of the Spirit with the Father and the Son that we say today. But the question remains: if the Spirit is not really well defined in Tradition, then what drives this profession?

**The Lord**

Wait, have we not heard that before? Twice? Of course we have and so we understand that right off the bat we are declaring the One God once more. This title carries with it all that we have said about the Father and the Son. But it also carries the unique nature of the Spirit.

But, in the end, is the Spirit God? Before we answer that, we must answer if the Spirit is God like the Son, that is, is the Spirit another Son? Gregory Nazianzus answers both questions this way “*What then, say they, is there lacking to the Spirit which prevents His being a Son, for if there were not something lacking He would be a Son?* *But the difference of manifestation, if I may so express myself, or rather of their mutual relations one to another, has caused the difference of their Names. For indeed it is not some deficiency in the Son which prevents His being Father (for Sonship is not a deficiency), and yet He is not Father. According to this line of argument there must be some deficiency in the Father, in respect of His not being Son. For the Father is not Son, and yet this is not due to either deficiency or subjection of Essence; but the very fact of being Unbegotten or Begotten, or Proceeding has given the name of Father to the First, of the Son to the Second, and of the Third, Him of Whom we are speaking, of the Holy Spirit that the distinction of the Three Persons may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead. For neither is the Son Father, for the Father is One, but He is what the Father is; nor is the Spirit Son because He is of God, for the Only-begotten is One, but He is what the Son is. The Three are One in Godhead, and the One Three in properties; so that neither is the Unity a Sabellian one, nor does the Trinity countenance the present evil distinction.*

*What then? Is the Spirit God? Most certainly. Well then, is He Consubstantial? Yes, if He is God*…” (*On the Deity of the Holy Spirit*, 9-10)

We state that the Spirit is “*the Lord the giver of life*” meaning that without the Spirit, in concert with the Father and the Son, Creation would not happen. This fact we see in the very beginning. As the Word was with the Father at Creation, so is the Spirit: "*with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters*" (*Gen* 1:2). The term we translate as “might wind” is the Hebrew word *ruah*, which literally means “*spirit or breath of God*”. The whole of the Economy of Salvation involves the Spirit. “...*nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, 'Jesus be accursed.' And no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the holy Spirit*.” (*1 Cor* 12:3)

**Procession**

We are not talking about an Easter Parade here. What we explore here is the “how” of the Spirit. How is the person of the Spirit manifested? If the Father is the creator/sustainer, and constantly interacts with Creation, and if the Son is begotten of the Father before all ages, and the Son enters Creation through the Incarnation, how does the Spirit enter the world? Through Revelation we know the Spirit to be there as well, but the sense of how the Spirit operates is sometimes somewhat beyond our grasp.

We definitely want to fight the human inclination to compartmentalize God and keep to the Revelation, the mystery of the Trinity. We might feel that there are individual relationships with each of the persons, or may be drawn to a particular person due to personal preference. We might want to think in human terms of the progression of a relationship but we always end up with the same problem – modalism. Think about many of the prayers of the Liturgy: we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. The whole of the Trinity is in concert and we pray to one God.

So as the Son is “begotten” of the Father, the Spirit too “comes from the Father.” A better way to think of it is “comes *out of* the Father.” Like the Son, the Spirit comes out of the Father, out of the same substance. Go back to Genesis 1. The Spirit is the breath of the Father and the Son is the Word the Father speaks. This is the idea of “procession.” Of the many we could (and should) look at in John we see two passages in particular that I will point out: “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate*...” (*Jn* 14:16-17) which speaks to the Spirit coming from the Father and “*he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit*.” (*Jn* 20:22) which mimics the Father’s breathing out of the Spirit. The fathers of the Council of Constantinople chose the phrase from yet another passage to place directly into the Creed “*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*” (*Jn* 15:26 – my emphasis) because they felt that it spoke for itself. But in context of the full pericope one can see where even that phrase causes problems.

***Filioque***

Okay so that can cause some confusion, right? In fact Paul often alludes to the fact (cf. *Rom* 8:9; *Gal* 4:6; *Phil* 1:19). Without delving deeply into the language, the idea of “double procession”, i.e. from the Father *and* the Son, while not new, was not a necessary doctrine by the Council of Nicea. It is later controversies (religious and political) which bring it to the forefront. Several Western Fathers, like Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose adhered to it. In the East, Epiphanius of Salamis and Cyril of Alexandria, also used the idea to offset various groups. It is also opposed at the same time by several Eastern Fathers. It really is not until the Council of Chalcedon (451) when things are hammered out.

The problem comes in, as spoken of above, with the lack of definition of the mystery within Tradition. The passages about the Holy Spirit do not provide sufficient proof against the various heresies. Some felt that by adding “and the Son” one reinforced the divine nature of Jesus, in opposition to Arian and Arian-like sects. It was a more precise wording of the mystery of the Trinity, and fell into line with Scripture. Others felt that it unnecessary and removed a function of the Father, lessening God. In this case it is unnecessary hair-splitting. We return to the idea of the “*absolute source of divinity*” that we spoke of in chapter 9 when thinking about the Father.

It is not until the West officially adds it to the text of the Latin translation of the Creed at the Third Council of Toledo (589) that any official sanctioning of the idea takes place. While it was the subject of some debate, it is only later, during the political struggles of the East and West during the 9th century that the phrase brokers any kind of official condemnations[[1]](#footnote-1), and only in the East. In the West the thinking is that it points to the one-ness of God, that is, there is a commonality between the Father and Son which must extend to the procession of the Spirit. In the East the thinking is that the one-ness implies the single source of divinity and just as the Son is begotten of the Father alone, the Spirit must proceed from the Father alone. Both positions fall within the viable realm of stating the one-ness of God in three persons.

Several compromise phrases have been put forward, the most popular being “*proceeds from the Father, through the Son*” which seems to answer the problems with the Scriptural references.

**The Trinity**

The problem lies in the approach. In the West these are seen as semantic differences, not really substantive whereas in the East it is seen as involved in the very nature of God, and not semantic at all. Both hit on the main idea of Trinity – that of relationship. If we think of the Spirit, as Augustine says, as the Love that binds the Father (Love) and Son (the Beloved) together (cf. *The Trinity*, 8) then we see the nature of the relationship of each person to the other as they work in concert. But if you think of the Father as the source of the relationship then to place the Son between the Father and the Spirit is to imply that the Father is not the source of anything. All that means is that theologians often talk at cross purposes, using the same language but meaning different things, hoping to reach the same conclusion.

So again, all of this can only be understood in light of the Revelation of the mystery of the Trinity. Without the Three in One, none of the other teachings make sense. The Economy falls flat and we lose the richness of salvation. The Trinity must exist, each person must be distinct in their role and yet each must act together and be of the same substance in order to be able to do so. Each role must remain distinct and each must be thought of as related to the other. Being distinct does not imply independence. The nature of the Trinity implies an interdependence which requires the constant effort of all three. Of course, when Love is the driving principle, there really is not a problem with that.

**The Speaker**

So once we establish the nature of the Spirit and the Spirit’s place in the Trinity we can explore the actions of the Spirit. We see the action of God the Spirit d Scripture and every day in the Church. Again, this history of the Spirit before and throughout created time only reinforces the necessity of understanding the mystery of the Trinity as part and parcel of our understanding of the one God.

Prophecy is a staple of Judaism and Christianity. It is hard to understand either if you do not understand that they are religions of prophecy. But what is the nature of prophecy such that the Spirit is the responsible party for it? Prophets are inspired to make God’s will known to the world. Not just the one in which they live, though that is certainly their primary function, but due to the nature of God, at all times in all places.

We speak of in-spiriation, the infusion of the Spirit within someone to make known God’s will, usually through human words. So for that reason the writers of Scripture and the prophets speak God’s Revelation, and so we call the Scriptures “inspired.” But the allegory of the prophets and the stories of Scripture are at best still only as good as the human words used. We know that human words fail to describe the fullness of God. We also know that God does not let His word return to Him until it has done His will (*Is* 55:11). The nature of Revelation, those truths which are beyond our rational ability to discover or communicate, means that the Spirit has completely told us everything about God, but through human vehicles. “*The divinely revealed realities, which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*. …*God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, hey, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted*.” (*Dei Verbum*, 11)

The gifts of the Spirit to write, to read and understand, to speak in tongues and to understand such speech, etc., energized the Early Church. They spoke to the presence of the Spirit, the gift the Son presented them, within the community. But, as we saw with Montanus and his prophetesses, being charismatic is not the same thing as having charisms. The idea of being a prophet meant that you spoke for God, but at the same time those same inspired Scriptures and teachers warned of false prophets.

So “*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious*” (*Phil* 4:8) is the focus of the prophet, not new public revelation. “*Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers: all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change*.” (*Jm* 1:17) The prophet reminds, cajoles, exhorts but does not create. The Spirit both speaks the truth and guides us in understanding what is true and what is not.

**Putting It Together**

We cannot speak of the Spirit without speaking of the Father and the Son. We also cannot speak of the Spirit without speaking about the Church. In order for the Incarnation to happen, in order for the constant nature of creation to make sense there must be some aspect of God which maintains the intimate relationship with Creation. It is the gifts of the Spirit which inform us of the nature of God, of the truth about the persons of the Trinity, and of God’s will for us.

The totality of God is something that human words cannot contain, whether they be the words of teaching or the words of Tradition, including inspired Scripture, and especially in terms of theological speculation. We must not limit God or ourselves by human words. We must however seek out God’s Spirit in order to understand God’s will and Revelation.

So as for the scar of the *filioque* that divides East and West, we must look to the overtures of Fathers to express the understanding as expressed in Scripture and in the recent popes to re-cast the problem and show a willingness to update or even remove the language as the indicator of the importance of the words we use to express this mystery.

 *“The hocus-pocus phantasm of a God like another Cerberus, with one body and three heads, had its birth and growth in the blood of thousands and thousands of martyrs... In fact, the Athanasian paradox that one is three, and three but one, is so incomprehensible to the human mind, that no candid man can say he has any idea of it, and how can he believe what presents no idea? He who thinks he does, only deceives himself. He proves, also, that man, once surrendering his reason, has no remaining guard against absurdities the most monstrous, and like a ship without a rudder, is the sport of every wind. With such persons, gullibility which they call faith, takes the helm from the hand of reason, and the mind becomes a wreck.”*

**Thomas Jefferson,** Letter to James Smith discussing his hate for the doctrine of the Trinity, 1822

“*I perceived or thought of the Light of God and in it suspended one small mote (or millions of motes to only one of which was my small mind directed), glittering white because of the individual ray from the Light which both held and lit it...And the ray was the Guardian Angel of the mote: not a thing interposed between God and the creature, but God's very attention itself, personalized...This is a finite parallel to the Infinite. As the love of the Father and Son (who are infinite and equal) is a Person, so the love and attention of the Light to the Mote is a person (that is both with us and in Heaven): finite but divine, i.e. angelic*.”

**J.R.R Tolkien,** *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*

**Anonymous**

1. Officially official in 864, when the Patriarch of Constantinople condemned it as completely contrary to all the teachings of the Church Fathers (at least all of the Eastern ones). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)