

The Spirit and the Spoken Word

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The greater part of biblical scholarship now seems to acknowledge the lack of textual evidence for the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity. This failure to find Trinitarian theology in the biblical text is most obviously associated with the lack of textual evidence for ecclesiastical Christology: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, means, in its biblical context, that Jesus is the ideal human representative of God — the anointed King, as well as Prophet and Priest, of God's coming kingdom — not "God the Son, the second Person of the Godhead," the God-Man of ecclesiastical mythology. The scholarly challenge to ecclesiastical Christology would obviously seem to call for a radical reappraisal of the role of the NT Jesus in Christian faith. Less obvious are the implications of the corresponding challenge to ecclesiastical pneumatology: that the prophetic-apostolic holy spirit of God is not "God the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Godhead" calls for an equally radical reappraisal of the role of God's spirit in Christian faith.

The most obvious adjustment required by a rejection of the Trinitarian Spirit is a change of pronouns, from "he" to "it" (NT Greek allowing for either pronoun). While "God the Spirit" might be a *Someone*, the spirit of God would seem necessarily to be a *something*. To conceive of God's spirit as a thing rather than a Person, however, is to raise a more definitive question: Is the spirit of God a thing-in-and-of-itself? That is, does the spirit have a metaphysical existence of its own? Or does the phrase "the spirit of God" signify a thing-other-than-itself? That is, is *spirit* a metaphorical expression rather than a metaphysical essence?

Metaphysical Essence or Metaphorical Expression?

The word "spirit" is a transliteration rather than a translation, rendering the OT Hebrew word, *ruach*, and the NT Greek word, *pneuma*, the literal translation of both words being "breath" or "wind." The Latin word for "breath" or "wind" is *spiritus*, transliterated into English, then, in the form of "spirit." The problem with biblical transliterations, whether from the original language of the text (as with, for example, "baptize," a transliteration from the Greek *baptizo*, which literally means "immerse") or from another language (as with "spirit" from the Latin *spiritus*), is that they allow interpreters to engage in acts of rhetorical invention: transliterations allow interpreters to redefine and reemploy biblical terms in ways alien to their biblical meaning and function. The rendering of

pneuma as “spirit” by English versions of the New Testament has rendered less apparent the rhetorical invention by ecclesiastical theologians of a metaphysical essence, called “God the Spirit,” the existence of which (or Whom) must be read into the text itself.

When *pneuma* (spirit, or breath) and *theos* (the Greek word for “God,” or “god”) were connected in the minds of first-century Greeks, these terms probably conjured up the mythological image of a god blowing a mighty wind with his breath, indicating that the NT *pneuma*, like the OT *ruach*, is a metaphorical expression, that is, an expression of something other than itself. A metaphor is “a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another different thing by being spoken of as if it were that other.”¹ That is, a metaphor expresses not identity but similarity despite literal difference, as in, for example, the NT Jesus’ reference to himself as “the good shepherd”: in the metaphor, Jesus is likened to a shepherd, which (in literal terms) he was not; in regard to Jesus, then, “shepherd” signifies something other than itself, that is, a herder of sheep, that *something other being an activity*, specifically, Jesus’ wise and loving guidance of his disciples. This is typical of both biblical metaphors and metaphors in general: they substitute a concrete image for an abstract activity, in order to bring the existence and significance of that activity to light (as well as to cause that activity to register emotionally): in the case of Jesus as “the good shepherd,” then, “shepherd” refers not to anything corresponding to itself — a herder of sheep — but to Jesus as the one whose word provides guidance and support to the faith of his disciples, *as* a shepherd provides guidance and support for his sheep; likewise, that God is called “Father” means not that God has a heavenly wife through whom He has begotten children but that God loves His people and provides for their needs, the word-image of “Father” representing the providential activity of God, who cares for His people and has worked out their salvation according to His promise. If God’s spirit is to be understood figuratively rather than literally, then, it must signify something other than itself, that is, something other than literal (as in physical) breath. If *pneuma* is a figure of speech to which another different thing is being likened, what is that other different thing?

According to the NT Jesus, the life-giving activity of God’s spoken word is metaphorically likened to spirit, that is, breath: “The words that I have spoken to you are *spirit* and life” (John 6:63); and so, “the testimony of Jesus is the *spirit* of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10). Which is to say that the spoken word of God, that is, the testimony of Jesus about the kingdom of God, proclaimed among the nations by the apostles and their prophetic associates, is *like breath* from God, in that it *gives life* — that is, the hope of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom of God — to whoever hears and believes it.

¹ *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition*, Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1964.

This metaphorical, and decidedly non-metaphysical, interpretation of the “spirit” of God seems born out by the Hebrew Scriptures: “In the beginning...the Spirit of God [also translated ‘a wind from God’] was hovering over the face of the waters,” by means of which God proceeds to speak creation into existence (Gen. 1:1ff). The typical OT effect of God’s spirit on its human recipients is *inspiration*, which is to say, prophesying (see Num. 11:25-26; 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23; 2 Sam. 23:2; 2 Chr. 24:20; Neh. 9:20, 30; Isa. 59:21; Eze. 2:1-5; 11:5; Mic. 3:8; Zech. 7:12; see also 1 Pet. 1:10-12; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). In terms of the OT metaphor of the spirit, God breathes and a divine wind blows; as a result, the prophets speak, God’s word is revealed, and God’s power is manifested.

The major pneumatological development that occurs in the NT Scriptures is the announcement of the fulfillment of Joel’s OT prophecy regarding “the last days...that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17, 18; Joel 2:28, 29). As a result of the resurrection of God’s Messiah, then, the gift of prophecy — now in the form of the inspired message about Jesus and the kingdom of God — would be entrusted not to solitary prophets as in OT times but to the apostolic community of faith in its entirety, led by the apostles to become an international community — encompassing “all flesh” — in fulfillment of God’s promise to bless all nations in Abraham’s seed (see Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 18:18). Which is to say that the foundation of the Christian community would be the inspired message, the speaking and hearing and believing of which would be the tools of its construction (see Eph. 2:19-22; 4:11-16).

Both OT and NT accounts of God’s spirit, then, identify the spirit with the inspired message: *To receive the spirit of God was either 1) to be inspired by God to speak the message or 2) to hear and believe the inspired message.* If *pneuma* is a metaphor, then, “the spirit” refers not to anything corresponding to itself, as if God literally inhaled and exhaled like a human being; like any metaphor, it refers to something other than itself. God’s *pneuma* refers to the life-giving activity of God’s spoken word, which is, in NT terms, Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom (see Luke 8:1, 5, 11; 1 Thess. 2:2, 13; 1 Pet. 1:23-25): just as breath empowers the body with life, so Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God, when spoken and heard, is the rhetorical conduit through which God empowers believers with the hope of life in the age to come.

Not only human life but also human speech is activated by breath, insofar as one’s breath gives voice to one’s thought. To interpret *pneuma* literally with reference to God would be to engage in an anthropomorphism, that is, to conceive of God as if God were a human being, animated by breath, and as if God literally breathed whenever God’s word was spoken. Unlike human beings, for whom thought is internal and speech is external, however, for God, thought and speech are one in the form of “the word” (Greek *o logos*, the original meaning of which included both thought and speech, knowledge and language, reason and persuasion). The connection between human breath and the life and speech it activates makes *pneuma*, when predicated of God, a fitting metaphor for

the life-giving activity of God's spoken word, by which God originally generated all things (see Gen. 1:1-3), by which God inwardly regenerates the community of faith (see Tit. 3:4-5), and by which God will outwardly regenerate all things in the coming kingdom (see 2 Pet. 3:3-7, 13). How God did, does and will do these things by means of "the word" is beyond literal expression, but "God's spirit" is the biblical metaphor which expresses the creative, life-giving activity of God's spoken word.

Written Artifact or Spoken Message?

Biblically speaking, the prophetic/apostolic work of God's spirit is also called "revelation" (Greek *apocalypsis*, lit. an unveiling): the inspired explanation of God's will to human understanding. The metaphor of the spirit represents the revelatory work of God's spoken word in terms of *inspiration*, which means *a breathing in*, metaphorically expressing the reception of God's word. Paul's claim, "All Scripture is inspired by God [Greek *theopneustos*, lit. God-breathed]..." (2 Tim. 3:16), is derived from the belief that the OT prophets received their spoken message, which was later preserved in Scripture, from God; similarly, the NT apostles, after having received their message from Jesus, both before and after his death and resurrection, continued to receive guidance from God in their proclamation of the message (see Matt. 10:19-20; John 14:25-26; 16:12-15; Acts 1:1-5, 8), which was later preserved, like the proclamation of the OT prophets, in Scripture. Which is to say that, in revelatory terms, the spoken message — signified by the metaphor of the spirit — always preceded, and thus informed, the written artifact.

Inspiration, as *the reception of God's word about Jesus and the kingdom of God*, can be understood in both a primary and a secondary sense: *primary inspiration* having to do with the *proclamation* of the apostles and their prophetic associates, this apostolic proclamation being preserved in the NT writings; *secondary inspiration* having to do with the *persuasion* of "the one who hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:23), "hold[ing] it fast in an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15), persuasion by apostolic proclamation continuing until Jesus comes again with the kingdom of God.

The NT Jesus speaks of both primary and secondary inspiration: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). That is to say, God's existence in the world of the present age is a matter of primary inspiration, that is, a prophetic/apostolic revelation: insofar as Christian faith is concerned, *God is breath* in that God's presence is mediated, and therefore known, through God's spoken word, as it has been preserved in Scripture. To worship God "in spirit and truth," accordingly, is not to have a *religious experience* of "surrender" in which "the Spirit" somehow "takes control" of one's life; it is, rather, to have a *rhetorical experience* with God's spoken word about Jesus and the kingdom, wherein God, represented by *the*

primary inspiration of proclamation, receives the true spiritual worship of faith, which is *the secondary inspiration of persuasion*.

In terms of primary inspiration, *how* God inspired His messengers with the revelation of His spoken word is not itself subject to revelation in that it cannot be articulated in literal terms; consequently, it is summed up in the metaphor of spirit, *as if* God breathed His life-giving word into His messengers, who subsequently spoke on God's behalf, *as if* God were speaking through them. Jesus' claim that "God is spirit" identifies God's spoken word as the only mediator between God and humanity, that word heralding the faith and truth of Jesus (see also 1 Tim. 2:5-7).

That "God is spirit" echoes the words that open the prologue of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God" (John 1:1). Far from identifying "the word" as a pre-existent Person of the Godhead, that "the word was God" identifies "the word" as the God-given mediator between God and humanity: "In the beginning," God ordained that "the word" would represent God — would, for all intents and purposes, *be God* — to God's people and to the rest of the world: "the word was God." This explains why God's inspired messengers (including, most significantly, Jesus himself) are sometimes called, by way of delegation, "gods" (Ps. 82:6; John 10:34-35) or, in individual terms, "God" (Exod. 7:1; Zech. 12:8; John 20:28): they stood in God's place before God's people to speak on God's behalf. "In the beginning...the word was God" in that God's presence in creation, from its inception onward, would be located in "the word" so that the inspired messenger would be *as God* — God's chosen representative — in the presence of God's people. That "the word was God" and that "God is spirit" both assert the function of the spoken message as mediator: God is present whenever, wherever, and by whomever God's word about Jesus and the kingdom is spoken.

The NT metaphor of *spirit* signifies not only God's revelation in the form of the message spoken by the apostles about Jesus and the kingdom but also false revelations, which the NT Gospels call "unclean spirits" and "demons"; these spirits are portrayed in terms of voices speaking through those whom they possess (see Matt. 8:28-29; Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37; also Acts 16:16-18). Whether or not the NT accounts were intended to ascribe personality to these spirits, their primary significance lies in their prophetic, or revelatory, associations²:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus

² Editor's note: In the NT, demons and evil spirits are never *identified* as revelations. They are supernatural personalities, demons, who transmit false information and inflict other forms of harm. The term "revelation" cannot be exchanged with the word "demon" without violence to the text (cp. James 2:19).

Christ has come in the flesh [i.e., is a human being] is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God...Whoever knows God listens to us [i.e., the apostles and their associates], and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:1-3, 6).

A variety of miraculous “signs” invariably accompanied the proclamation of God’s inspired messengers for the purpose of *signifying*, or verifying — of providing evidence — that their message was, indeed, the word of God (see Mark 16:20; John 2:11; 20:30-31; Acts 2:22; 14:3; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:3-4). Acts of the Apostles is a narrative, from beginning to end, about the activity of primary inspiration in the first-century Christian community, from the appearances of the risen Jesus for the purpose of “giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles...about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:2, 3) to Paul’s inspired proclamation of the kingdom of God in Rome (see Acts 28:31). In that the only apostles whose acts are detailed are Peter and Paul, it has aptly been said that a more accurate title of the document would be Acts of the Holy Spirit, in that the activity of primary inspiration for the purpose of spreading Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom to all nations is its theme (see Acts 1:8). I am persuaded that this activity of primary inspiration, which equipped the earliest disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem to become an international community of faith through their inspired proclamation of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom among the nations, ceased with the passing of the apostolic generation.

While primary inspiration ceased with the apostolic generation, whose inspired proclamation is preserved in the NT writings, the activity of secondary inspiration, or *persuasion*, continues until the coming of the kingdom. That is, the purpose of primary inspiration is secondary inspiration: *proclamation is intended to produce persuasion*. Primary inspiration is “the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone,” upon which is built, through secondary inspiration, the international “household of God,” also called “a holy temple in the Lord” and “a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-22). Being persuaded of the truth of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom is inspiration in a secondary sense in that it is, metaphorically speaking, also a *breathing in* of God’s spirit: to hear (i.e., to understand) and to believe (i.e., to be persuaded of) the spoken word of God is to receive the spirit. Which is to say that to be understandingly persuaded of the truth of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom is to be *inspired* — empowered — with the hope of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom of God. This is the sense in which the spirit is a “deposit” on God’s promised “inheritance” in the coming age (Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5): whenever Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom is spoken, believers are inspired to joyfully anticipate the coming of the kingdom of God.

NT references to inner, or mental, renewal (see Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10; Tit. 3:5) and behavioral transformation into the image of Jesus

(see Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18) signify this *pneumatic* (i.e., spiritual) process of persuasion: spiritual renewal and transformation occur in believing minds and lives, respectively, only as Jesus' gospel of the kingdom is continually being spoken and heard, believers — those who are persuaded — being inspired with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), empowered by the hope of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom to love one another and others as God has revealed through Jesus' gospel — specifically, in Jesus' death on the cross — that He loves them (see Rom. 5:5-8; Gal. 5:5-6; Eph. 3:16-17).

The misidentification of the word of God with the written artifact rather than the spoken message has led to a failure to make the biblical connection between the spirit's past-tense work of inspiring the speakers whose words were preserved in Scripture (see 2 Tim. 3:16) and the spirit's present-tense work of indwelling the believing hearers of the inspired message (see Rom. 8:9). (In that they occupy the position formerly held by the prophets and apostles, the Scriptures are, collectively speaking, not the inspired message but the inspired messenger, providing ongoing access to the message originally spoken by Jesus and, subsequently, by his apostles and their associates to all nations; the primary purpose of Scripture, then, is that the inspired message continue to be spoken by and to each new generation.) Biblically speaking, both the past-tense and the present-tense work of the spirit are the work of the spoken word of God about Jesus and the kingdom.

The spirit's past-tense work of primary inspiration applies to the Scriptures in terms of their preserving the word originally spoken by the inspired messengers, so that the word might continue to be proclaimed in the future: “But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture — ‘I believed, and so I spoke’ — we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence” (2 Cor. 4:13-14). The spoken message about Jesus and the kingdom is, then, “the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture.”

The spirit's present-tense work of secondary inspiration applies to the believers in terms of their receiving the word spoken by the inspired messengers and, having been persuaded by the apostolic proclamation, engaging in persuasion within and among themselves. To believe, then, is to speak, for as long as the testimony of Jesus remains unspoken, confined to the words of Scripture, it lies inert, dormant, powerless to effect salvation:

But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved...For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:8-10, 13).

To “confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord” is to speak God’s word and, thus, to activate the power of God’s spirit in that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3), which is to say that the lordship of Jesus is a revelation of the spoken word of God. To “believe in your heart” by the persuasive power of the spirit occurs only as one continues to “confess with your lips” the truth of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom. Only, then, as Jesus’ testimony is translated *from written artifact into spoken message* does it become in the present what it was in the past — the word of God — and so enter believing hearts as the persuasive power of salvation.

The ongoing work of the spirit of God and of Christ in believing hearts and lives is synonymous with the ongoing activity of the spoken word of God in the everyday lives of Christians as they hear (i.e., understand) and believe (i.e., are persuaded by) Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom. In the *pneumatic* process of persuasion, Christians are not only hearers of God’s spoken word but also speakers of the word; the community of faith is no longer dependent on the comings and goings of inspired speakers of the word insofar as the Scriptures give them access to Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom, enabling them to translate the gospel from the written word of Scripture into the spoken word of God on a daily basis.

The pneumatic process of persuasion pertains not only to proclamation but also to prayer, which consists of speaking the truth of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom back to God: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are sons of God, and if sons, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:15-17); which is to say that when Christians address God as “Father” and pray for the coming of the kingdom, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from evil (see Matt. 6:9-13), they are confessing to God their faith in Jesus’ gospel, asking God to keep the promise which He has already fulfilled in the experience of His Son, through Jesus’ coming, death and resurrection, and which He will yet fulfill in their own experience when Jesus comes again with the kingdom. Prayer, as the confession to God of faith in God’s word of promise, *is* the intercessory work of God’s spirit in that prayer is laying claim to what God has already promised and fulfilled in the experience of Jesus, according to the gospel testimony. Rather than seeking to persuade God to act, as if God needed to be persuaded to keep His promise, NT prayer is, instead, seeking to be persuaded by God: in prayer, Christians seek to be persuaded by God to believe more fully in and to behave more faithfully to Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom; the persuasive power to believe not just with the intellect but “in your heart that Jesus is Lord” is the power of the spirit in that it comes through the speaking of the word. Jesus’ gospel itself is the believers’ intercession even as their prayers take the form of “sighs too deep for words” in that, to whatever extent the word is spoken in prayer, “the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26, 27). (When it comes to prayers regarding what God has not promised, the question is whether or not

these prayers can be offered “according to His will”; see 1 John 5:14-15; Jas. 1:5-8; 4:3).

Whether, then, with regard to prayer or proclamation, the work of God’s spirit is the work of God’s spoken word, which has been preserved in Scripture but must be presented in speech in order to do its work.

Personal or Mediated Presence?

Revelation, then, is not a matter of the direct, unmediated — person-to-Person — experience of God. Through the rhetorical invention of “God the Spirit, the third Person of the Godhead,” however, ecclesiastical Christianity has usurped the role of God’s spoken word, presuming to make itself the mediator between God and humanity and its rules and rituals of worship the avenues through which God’s immediate, personal presence can be experienced by its adherents.

Thus has the rhetorical invention of “God the Spirit” by ecclesiastical Christianity had the effect of pushing the spoken word of God about Jesus and the kingdom — the life-giving breath of God — to the margins of Christian faith. As “the third *Person* of the Godhead,” the Trinitarian Spirit ostensibly constitutes *the personal presence* of God in the lives of Christians, the Divine Agent through Whom Christians *have a personal relationship with* — that is, a person-to-Person experience of — God. The Trinitarian Spirit is not thought to play a mediatorial role between God and God’s people, that is to say, is not presumed to be *God* in any representative sense, as is God’s spoken word; the Trinitarian Spirit, rather, is supposed to be God-in-Person (albeit in the third rather than in the first Person). Which means that the Trinitarian knowledge of God is not a knowledge of faith, mediated through God’s spoken word (as, indeed, no Trinity can be found in Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom); this knowledge of God is, rather, *an unmediated, direct, person-to-Person knowledge of God* (i.e., a Gnostic form of knowledge), the Trinitarian Spirit ostensibly constituting the *personal presence* of God in the lives of Christians, conveying to them a *personal relationship* with God.

As a result, the spoken word of God has been marginalized in the sense that it plays no active role in the ecclesiastical Christian life. Having been taught to identify the word of God with the Bible, most Christians are ignorant of the biblical fact that the word of God *is* Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom; that faith itself is a function of *hearing* Jesus’ gospel in that “faith comes from what is heard [lit. *from hearing*], and what is heard [lit. *hearing*] comes through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17); that believing God’s spoken word and receiving God’s spirit are the same experience, as confirmed by Paul’s rhetorical question: “Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard [lit. *hearing with faith*]?” (Gal. 3:2). Misconstruing faith and the spirit in terms of religious intuitions and sensations mediated by “the Church,” ecclesiastical Christianity has packaged and compressed its multiple versions of “the word of

God” in the form of Sunday sermons, many of which are only loosely based on the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures, Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom (the NT word of God) remaining conspicuously absent. Accordingly, ecclesiastical Christians are taught to rely on professional clergy to speak “the word of God” to them on an occasional basis rather than being taught to speak Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom to God (in prayer), to themselves (in meditation), to one another (in mutual edification), and to unbelievers (in persuasive discourse) on an everyday basis. Besides the “worship services” of “the Church,” the province of God’s spoken word is thought to be “the mission field,” in the limited, far-off sense of “somewhere out there,” where a “gospel” is often heard that has little or nothing to say about the kingdom of God.

The spoken word of God, however its content may be understood, plays such a marginal role in ecclesiastical Christian faith because the knowledge of God is not thought to depend on the mediation of God’s spoken word, which is the spirit of the Father and the Son; instead, the knowledge of God — conceived in terms of a “religious experience” in the form of a “personal relationship” — ostensibly depends on the personal presence of “God the Spirit” mediated by “the Church.”

The Trinitarian Spirit’s presence is inseparable, of course, from the personal presence of the Trinitarian Jesus, “the second Person of the Godhead.” The Person of Jesus is presumed to enter the believing heart when invited by means of “the sinner’s prayer” or Christian baptism or some other initiatory rite. The personal presence of both God the Father and “God the Son” are believed, in some ineffably mystical sense, to occupy the Christian life in the Person of “God the Spirit.”

This despite the apostolic claim that the person of the risen Jesus is seated at God’s right hand in preparation for God’s coming kingdom (see Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 1 Pet. 3:22). If this is the case, the risen Jesus cannot enter believing hearts *in person* now in that he — as far as his person is concerned — possesses his own resurrected bodily existence, which will be seen only at the end of the present age when he comes with the kingdom of God, wherein “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The most commonly used NT term for the second coming of Jesus is *parousia*, the literal meaning of which is “presence” but which includes the sense of arriving: the second coming is, then, Jesus’ *arrival-to-be-present*, which is to say that not until his *parousia* will the personal presence of the risen Jesus become a matter of direct, immediate experience for God’s people.

For the present, then, Jesus’ pledge to his disciples to “be with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20) must, of necessity, be the pledge of his mediated rather than his personal presence. And so it is according to the NT writings, which equate Jesus’ presence with his gospel of the kingdom, which is, in turn, identified metaphorically with his spirit. The presence of both God the Father and Jesus the Son are mediated to the Christian life through faith, which is

to say, through the object and content of faith: the spoken word of God about Jesus and the kingdom. Accordingly, many NT texts refer to the proclamation of “Christ,” or “Jesus Christ,” or “him,” as synonymous with the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom as the word of God (see Acts 8:5, 12; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 1:15-18; Col. 1:28); which is to say that, for the apostles and their associates, by virtue of his resurrection, Jesus’ presence, like the presence of God the Father, is mediated through Jesus’ spoken message. Which is the same as saying, metaphorically speaking, that the risen Jesus’ presence is mediated through Jesus’ spirit, which is the spirit of God in the same sense that Jesus’ spoken message is the word of God. Paul makes this clear in his admonition of the Christian community of Corinth for its readiness “to be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3): “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough” (2 Cor. 11:4).

The status of the Corinthian Christians’ relationship to the risen Messiah, then, was determined by the “Jesus” they were hearing proclaimed, which was synonymous with the “spirit” they were receiving, which was synonymous with the “gospel” they were accepting. To hear proclaimed “another Jesus” was to receive “a different spirit,” which was to accept “a different gospel.” The NT name of Jesus, like the NT metaphor of the spirit, stands for the spoken message of the NT apostles, Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God.

Gnostic or Apostolic Spirit?

That the apostolic concept of the spirit of God should differ so radically from the Trinitarian concept should come as no surprise to Christians who have rejected the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity as unfounded in both OT and NT Scriptures. Likewise, Christians who are persuaded that the kingdom of God to which Scripture testifies is eschatological (i.e., the kingdom of God’s promised future) rather than ecclesiastical (i.e., a present kingdom in the form of “the Church”) should not be surprised by the radical difference between the eschatological spirit of God and the ecclesiastical spirit of Christianity. Recognition of this profound difference between the apostolic/eschatological and the Trinitarian/ecclesiastical versions of God’s spirit raises the question of how ecclesiastical theology can have so misconstrued the biblical testimony.

Tracing the ecclesiastical spirit to its roots exposes its genesis, at least in part, in the second-century incursion of Gnosticism into the Christian community. Which is to say that the spirit of ecclesiastical Christianity bears a far closer resemblance to what is known from historical/theological accounts of the Gnostic spirit than it does to the NT account of the apostolic spirit.

Gnosticism, according to Rudolph, “was originally a non-Christian phenomenon [coming ‘into existence on the fringes of Judaism’] which was gradually enriched with Christian concepts until it made its appearance as

independent Christian Gnosis.”³ According to Johnson, “Gnosticism was powerful, and may have taken over Christianity [in Antioch, Paul’s first-century mission headquarters] after the departure of the apostles.”⁴ Though it was ostensibly extricated from ecclesiastical Christianity during the third century, Rudolph observes that Gnosticism left an indelible mark on the Christian tradition:

One can almost say that Gnosis followed the Church like a shadow; the Church could never overcome it, its influence had gone too deep...The oldest Christian theological systems were those of Christian Gnostics. Herder has aptly called them “the first religious philosophy in Christianity,” and they had a far-reaching effect...on the subsequent formation of Christian doctrine...It has often been forgotten that Gnostic theologians saw Christ as being “consubstantial” with the Father, before ecclesiastical theology established this as a principle, in order to preserve his full divinity.⁵

As Hoeller observes, with reference to both the ancient and the contemporary world, “No sooner are Gnostics and Gnosticism declared defunct than they reappear, changed in form but undiluted in substance.”⁶

The Greek word *gnosis* means “knowledge,” specifically defined in regard to God in terms of the direct knowledge of personal experience, a concept imported, as Hoeller points out, from eastern religious faith:

The word *gnosis* is cognate with the Sanskrit *jnana*, which denotes “knowledge,” primarily spiritual knowledge...The Atman [in Hinduism] is identical with the Brahman, which means that the universal Divinity is present in miniature within each person. Similarly, in Gnosticism the pneuma [or spirit] is a spark sprung from the divine flame, and by knowing the pneuma the Gnostic automatically knows the spiritual source from whence it has come. The Hindu and the Gnostic would agree that to know one’s deepest self is tantamount to knowing God.⁷

The Gnostic claim that “by knowing the pneuma the Gnostic automatically knows [in experiential terms] the spiritual source from whence it has come” parallels the widespread evangelical belief that through the Spirit Christians experience a “personal relationship with God.” Accordingly, the Gnostic

³ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, 277, 276.

⁴ Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976, 53.

⁵ Rudolph, 368-372.

⁶ Stephen A. Hoeller, *Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing*, Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2002, 2.

⁷ *Ibid*, 178, 179.

definition of “spirit” is clearly metaphysical rather than metaphorical: “The highest principle resident in the human being.”⁸ The Gnostic spirit is, then, just as is the Trinitarian Spirit, the inner agent through which the direct — that is, unmediated, intuitive — knowledge of God is experienced, the presence of “the universal Divinity...in miniature within each person.”

The rhetorical character of this experience is suggested by Hoeller’s definition of *gnosis* as “Salvific knowing, arrived at intuitively but facilitated by various stimuli, including the teachings and mysteries brought to humans by messengers of divinity from outside the cosmos.”⁹ Which is to say that while the Gnostic God-experience itself is presumed to be unmediated, direct, intuitive, it is, nevertheless, inseparable from the Gnostic “teachings and mysteries” — that is, the various strands of persuasive discourse — that accompany it.

Likewise, the Trinitarian God-experience is equally rhetorical in that it is equally as inseparable from the Trinitarian doctrine of “God the Spirit” — in effect, a Gnostic mystery refashioned by ecclesiastical theology into Christian doctrine — made all the more persuasive by (and, thus, possessive, due to) ecclesiastical Christianity’s historical oppression and continued suppression of voices proposing the apostolic alternative. While it masquerades as a direct, intuitive, immediately personal experience of God, then, the *gnosis* of ecclesiastical Christianity is, in truth, an experience of the mysterious (which is to say, incomprehensible) words of its doctrine of the Trinity.

Perhaps the most striking, and troubling, parallel between ancient and contemporary forms of Christian *gnosis* is in their attitude, clothed in the *holier-than-thou-ness* of “spirituality,” towards faith in the biblical testimony.

The earliest Christian Gnostics viewed Christian faith as only a first, kind of baby, step towards salvation because faith in the gospel consisted of believing the testimony of another — specifically, of the apostles, who testified to their personal experience with the risen Jesus — as opposed to possessing one’s own personal experience of God-in-Christ. From the Gnostic viewpoint, the knowledge of God that came through believing the testimony of another could only be inferior to, and at best preparatory for, the truly “spiritual” knowledge of God that came through one’s own personal experience of *gnosis*. Accordingly, Gnosticism sought to replace the apostolic concept of faith-as-persuasion regarding the apostolic testimony with its own concept of faith; as Hoeller notes, “A certain kind of faith (*pistis*) is recognized as valid in Gnosticism, but it is faith in one’s experience, an abiding faithfulness that one feels toward one’s experience of inner, liberating knowledge.”¹⁰ (Indeed, this “faith in one’s experience,” in terms of one’s “personal relationship” with God-in-Christ-through-the-Spirit, seems to dwarf in importance, as far as popular Christianity is

⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

concerned, one's understanding of the gospel in regard to the Christian hope.) Accordingly, even in its incipient first-century form, Gnostic faith in the risen Jesus repudiated the hope of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 15:12, 30-34; 2 Tim. 2:16-18), replacing it with the immediacy of a personal experience of "spiritual resurrection" through *gnosis*.

In disturbingly similar fashion, contemporary Christian Gnostics — an evangelical force that crosses all ecclesiastical lines (and that would, nevertheless, adamantly disavow any conscious affinity with Gnosticism) — add the "spiritual" experience of a "personal relationship" with God through the Holy Spirit to belief regarding the biblical testimony, insisting that Christians can't just "know about God" but must "know God personally" to possess "a saving faith." A personal experience of God, they say, is the true measure of Christian "spirituality." No wonder, then, that the eschatological hope of Jesus' parousia and of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom of God has receded into the mists of ancient history, becoming at best an afterthought, as far as evangelical Christianity, as well as ecclesiastical Christianity as a whole, is concerned.

At its root, this Gnostic departure from the apostolic tradition has been due to the inactivity of God's spoken word about Jesus and the kingdom — a veritable compulsion to "quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19) — in the international Christian community. Beginning in the second century, Christians became increasingly dependent on the monarchical bishop of each local Christian community for access to the spoken word of God, which was increasingly identified with the ecclesiastical interpretation of the apostolic writings, and contemporary Christians remain similarly dependent on their clergy. As a result, God's word about Jesus and the kingdom finds little or no place on their lips and, thus, in their hearts, leaving a spiritual hunger and thirst that ecclesiastical forms of *gnosis* continue proposing and pretending to satisfy. A truly apostolic spiritual renewal will occur only as an increasing number of Christians breathe the spirit of truth — Jesus' gospel of the kingdom — into their everyday speech to God, to themselves, to one another, and to the unbelieving world.