



Presbyterian Historical Society

COMMENT ON THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Author(s): Neill Q. Hamilton

Source: *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1962-1985), Vol. 61, No. 1, RECONCILIATION AND LIBERATION—THE CONFESSION OF 1967 (SPRING 1983), pp. 66-70

Published by: Presbyterian Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23328415>

Accessed: 19-01-2017 20:02 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Presbyterian Historical Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1962-1985)

COMMENT ON THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

By Neill Q. Hamilton, *Professor of New Testament, Drew University*

It is the genius of the *Confession of '67* that it turned a seemingly mild theological theme, reconciliation, into a rallying cry for Christian responsibility in society. In so doing it became a bridge from the *Barmen Declaration* to contemporary theologies of feminism and liberation. It also provided an organizing hermeneutical principle that drew the rest of the *Book of Confessions* in its train. As such it was of unique import to the history of Presbyterianism in America. Ever afterward no Presbyterian individual or congregation may claim that their faith is authentic without explicit concern for justice.

What piety does this concern require to serve its agenda adequately? This is the question Dr. Stine and I are addressing. We agree that the *Confession's* piety or spirituality is not adequate. We disagree about the spirituality that would be.

I was pleased to hear Dr. Come acknowledge that the *Confession* intended to break new ground in christology and ecclesiology. It did not pioneer in things having to do with the Spirit. In my opinion this is its weakest section, therefore the inadequacy of its spirituality. That is not by chance. The two theological pillars of the *Confession* were both mystiphobic. Barth always contrasted the Gospel with mysticism. Reinhold Niebuhr suspected that Paul's Christ mysticism bordered on magic. No wonder neo-orthodoxy was shy of spirituality. Neo-orthodoxy's heir, liberation theology, displays the same reluctance to deal with experience of Holy Spirit. If we ever get fully past neo-orthodoxy and pass on to neo-feminist and neo-liberation theologies, it will be when those theologies display in common an adequate spirituality.

The first step toward that spirituality should be the reappropriation of an apocalyptic perspective on our world which the *Confession* does not contain.

I agree with Dr. Stine that the *Confession* viewed the human situation with too much equanimity for our experience since '67. Although avoiding the pitfall of triumphalism, it clearly expected significant progress on each front of social responsibility it listed. Since then we have found the world much more resistant to transformation so that the cry of the deutero-Pauline school to which Dr. Stine alluded has become our cry (Eph.6:12). We need a spirituality equal to the defeat of ERA, to withdrawal from affirmative action, to increased funding for nuclear holocaust, to preparation for a draft that causes mere ripples on the pond of public opinion.

This is not to say that the *Confession* is without apocalyptic elements. Actually, the *Confession's* frame for a doctrine of the Christian life is apocalyptic. As I exegete the *Confession* I locate the key to its spirituality in paragraph 21 which speaks of the reconciling work of Jesus. "His cross and resurrection become personal crisis and present hope for all when the Gospel is proclaimed and believed." The spirituality of the *Confession* places us in an apocalyptic interim between crisis and hope without however an apocalyptic sense of the end. In this interim we are dependent for resources on the direction of the life of Jesus (§ 24). The Holy Spirit is restricted to enabling the believer to initiate response to this life (§ 21).

If I look for an analog to this way of describing the Christian life, I find its closest parallel in the discipleship of the synoptic gospels but especially in the gospel of Mark where the faithful "tough" it out in a relatively empty interim between cross/resurrection and the return of the Son of man. In the meanwhile the faithful grin and bear it with true gospel grit as in the *Confession*, "living in freedom and good cheer . . . on good days and evil days" (§ 23). In this form of spirituality the only time the Holy Spirit acts directly on behalf of disciples is before federal courts of Jews and Romans when their lives are at stake (Mark 13:11). To be sure *Christ* was empowered and sustained by the Holy Spirit in his ministry. But for disciples, baptism with the Spirit remains merely a promise.

I do not hear Mark, C'67, liberation and feminist theologians, or Dr. Stine telling us how the promised Spirit comes to us as She did to Jesus or how She manifests Her power in our lives as She did in Jesus' ministry. Without that anointing we are on our own with only the circle of disciples for support. I admire the heroism of such a view of the Christian life but I doubt its adequacy—especially for the long haul. It only worked for the Marcan community so long as the triumph of the end seemed near at hand. Even then their endurance was fraying under pressure of conflict and resistance. "And if the Lord had not shortened the days, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days" (Mark 13:20). Mark miscalculated and so did C'67. We find the days going on and on and ourselves frayed with the minimal spiritual resources at our disposal. Unless we expand those resources we are unlikely to hold out, let alone live in "good cheer." The great flaw in liberation theology's use of its favorite text, Luke 4:18, is its total neglect of the anointing announced at the beginning of the verse. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" grounds all the liberating action that follows. The mandate for the liberation of the oppressed clearly assumes some prior experience of Spirit.

The New Testament church's answer to the inadequate support offered in synoptic, apocalyptic spirituality was to add the versions of spirituality found in Luke's second volume, Paul, and John. But before we turn to these there is an aspect of apocalyptic perspective that C'67, feminist, and liberation theologies, and I think Dr. Stine, overlook. Intra and interpersonal life is just as prey to demonic oppression as are social systems. I find Dr. Stine as sanguine about personal life as C'67 is about social life. The gospels however carry their apocalyptic perspective on the world over into personal life. Their metaphor for personal oppression is demon possession. Especially in Mark, the major paradigm of the kingdom drawing near to persons is exorcism which Jesus carries out explicitly by the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:19-30). This is the beginning of synoptic spirituality, but only a beginning. Matthew and Luke recognize that unless the Holy Spirit fills the void left by exorcism "seven other spirits more evil. . . enter and dwell there; and the last state of the person is worse than the first" (Luke 11:26; Matt.12:45).

The versions of the new life found in Acts, Paul, and John do not take resistance of the world to gospel action any less seriously than apocalyptic, but they do fill the widening gap apocalyptic hope leaves with an expanded offer of the new life as life in the Spirit. We need to remedy our similar situation with a similar exposition. To sustain theologies of feminism and liberation we need more than anything else a transition beyond the resources of discipleship to life in Spirit. Just at this point Luke introduces the experience of Holy Spirit in the reverse order I hear Dr. Stine suggesting. The disciples have indeed sought out the outcast other and reached out as they shared the mission of Jesus. But after the crucifixion and resurrection they are forbidden to return to mission until they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). They receive this experience as they wait together with insiders (Acts 1:12-14; 2:1). The point is that although they may have engaged in mission to outsiders before, there comes a time when they must follow the order of spirituality modeled by Jesus. As Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism before he could launch his ministry, so disciples must one day stop whatever mission they may be pursuing and be equipped with an explicit experience of Holy Spirit before they continue.

John makes the same point with his prescription for the experience of the Spirit as rebirth (John 3:5). This is not a prescription for entrance into discipleship but for a transition to life in the Spirit as a prerequisite for continuing Jesus' mission after he goes to the Father. The Spirit only becomes available to disciples when the resurrected Jesus breathes Her upon them (John 21:21). The whole burden of the farewell discourses is that experience of

Spirit as Paraclete is the pre-requisite equipment for continued mission to the outsider (John 13:31-17:26).

In the discourses John's Jesus makes another point the exact reverse of Dr. Stine's suggestion. The major condition this Jesus sets for the receipt of the Spirit is the new commandment to love one another (John 13:34, 35). We often misunderstand this commandment by supposing that in it John offered a license for sectarian withdrawal. Nothing could be farther from his intention. John was more engaged with the whole pluralistic range of hellenistic culture than any other single New Testament author, for example, as the prologue, the visit of the Greeks seeking Jesus and the trilingual superscription on the cross indicate. He found it far easier to love the free wheeling and spontaneous devotees of hellenistic religiosity than the cramped and cranky members of the traditional people of God. His community concluded that unless disciples matured to the point of reaching out in love to touch the insider first, their offer of themselves to outsiders would be empty of the Paraclete's power.

Paul made the same point with his doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ. The Spirit comes in mutual complimentary gifts to the believing community as it assembles in worship (I Cor.12-14). Only when believers relate to one another in love (I Cor.13) do they build one another up to the point of being effective in contact with outsiders (I Cor.14:23).

I find particular relevance in Paul's doctrine of life in Spirit for a long and conflicted haul against entrenched injustice. His spirituality is holistic in the sense that his apocalyptic analysis of the world outside carries through consistently to the personal worlds of self-consciousness and personal relationship inside. He reckoned with a continuing struggle within the believer between flesh and spirit. Without this note of internal, personal, existential struggle with evil we are likely to fall prey to what Donald Meyer in *The Positive Thinkers*, calls "a highly American-Protestant response to. . .psychological depth. . .destined to be echoed in the optimistic, liberal, 'American' depth-psychology of the so-called neo-Freudians. . . In common to all of those was the cultural, 'American' assumption that in 'depth' there was nothing inherent to be feared, nothing that made for conflict, for tragedy."¹ The gospel of Pauline spirituality looks unblinkingly on the struggle with evil at depth within each person and yet declares that those who walk and pray in the Spirit are enabled thereby to stay on top of the struggle (Romans 8).

Lest all of the above spiritualities seem to suggest that the experience of Spirit comes only in the presence of others, they also teach that the Spirit comes in solitary intimacy with God. Jesus modeled solitary spirituality at his baptism when he alone

saw the dove and heard the voice (Mark 1:10, 11). The Spirit drove him into the wilderness of temptation to be alone with Satan (Mark 1:12, 13). He withdrew alone for prayer (Mark 2:35). He taught disciples to do the same (Matt.5:6). Luke made the climax of disciple prayer the lonely request for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). Paul agreed with the rest of the early church that the cry of "Abba! Father!" in direct, private intimacy with God is the mark of the Spirit praying in our prayers (Rom.8:15). Certainly, the whole New Testament church reached out in mission to touch the other as outsider. But it did so finally and maturely only on the basis of a prior experience of Holy Spirit. She inevitably leads us to the other, but until She equips us, the touching of the other can as easily be oppressive and destructive as liberating and graceful. Until the Spirit comes for the long haul, the encounter with the other is as likely to lead to burnout as to joy.

To conclude let me put my counter thesis: the whole weight of the spirituality recommended in the New Testament presupposes that our greatest and most mature service in mission to the other as outsider comes only when we carry to that encounter a prior experience of equipping with the Holy Spirit which we receive and sustain in company with other believers and in solitude with God in the intimacy of prayer. Apart from that prior equipping we are as likely to share illusion as grace and experience burnout as joy.

NOTE

- ¹ Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers*, (New York, Pantheon, 1980), p. 87.