

Chapter 2

The Spirit of Creation and Culture—The Informer and Former of Our Ethics

Introduction: As mentioned in the Introduction, this chapter reflects to a large degree a presentation I made to the Commission on Christian Ethics at the General Council meeting of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, July 7, 2011.

Though first delivered in a specific setting with certain emphases in mind, this chapter intends to put forward the matter that Spirit of God must be included as a major participant in our Christian ethics considerations.

That presentation represented the culmination of several years trying to get a handle on how to communicate with students more thoroughly with regard to Holy Spirit. One of those matters was that I'd come to the place of mentioning, naming the character without the article "the." Simply, if we talk about God, or Jesus Christ, we do not use "the," so why with Holy Spirit? A simple, but profound, concept.

As well, more and more I'd become attuned to how much congregations with which I was familiar carried on their operations with values that had more basis, bearing, and force in the culture, and with sometimes more incivility than cultural expressions. As well, conversely, there were more and more occasions that I noticed values of empathy, patience, encouragement, listening and communicating with truth, justice, and compassion were more clearly expressed from the cultural side of life.

I found myself ready and willing to enter into relationships, friendships, movements with those who had little to no congregational affiliations because they expressed in many ways more holy values than those who met Sunday by Sunday in church buildings.

The paper, the presentation, attempted, then, to pull together a conscious expression of how values like these are embedded in Creation, and its ancient and contemporary cultures. It served then as a marker of some of the transitions, my mind changing, that had happened up to that point in my career. It also served, now in retrospect, as a platform, for continuing mind changing since July 7, 2011.

Christian ethics/ethicists and Holy Spirit

A few years before the paper presentation I searched for a textbook for my Biblical Foundations for Christian Ethics course. I came across Paul Jersild's book *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life*. I chose that book for the students' reading. They and I were disappointed in it not having much more than one chapter on Holy Spirit. Jersild, an excellent Lutheran theologian, depicted the continuing situation no matter the denominational or faith tradition—the lack of holistic attention to Holy Spirit, especially with regard to congregational life.

I was able to present at the Kuala Lumpur meeting only the contours of ideas regarding Holy Spirit, and for that group of international Baptists a perspective on Baptist, Christian ethics. My observations and experience, then and now, indicate that Baptists and all the others calling themselves Christians have typically not given much more than lip service in theologizing and ethicizing with pneumatology (the study of Spirit) in mind. Rather than thinking and behaving in a Trinitarian fashion, as we claim, we articulate more a binatarian, even unitarian, theology and ethics.

One of the few Baptist, Christian ethicists, at the time of that meeting, who had developed pneumatological perspectives, was Henlee Barnette, the venerable ethicist at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955-77. He produced a textbook, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, published first in 1961 (!) by Broadman-Holman Publishers, a Southern Baptist Convention entity. One chapter, "Ethics of the Holy Spirit," provides one of the few outlines prepared specifically for Baptists: The Ethical Nature of the Holy Spirit; The Ethical Role of the Holy Spirit; The Holy Spirit and contemporary Ethics. One could have wished that Barnette had expanded that chapter into other publications. He recognized the need for such as he noted that one of the central, yet neglected, doctrines is that of Holy Spirit.

We are lesser for the lack of such considerations. We are still in the mode of neglect in this regard.

A Paradigm of Neglect

First, we must realize we have been involved in a long-term pattern of neglect regarding Holy Spirit. This neglect should be qualified as benign neglect. That is, we do give some attention to Holy Spirit, but only to what might be termed the extremes of the attention. We highlight what some call emotional exhibitionism surrounding the realization of Holy Spirit. If we are not practicing glossolalia, healing miracles, or experiencing being "slain in the Spirit" we are told we simply don't have Spirit in us. On the other hand, or extreme, any mention of Spirit is to be avoided.

The result is we pay only enough attention that Spirit is still in the mix but not enough that it looks like we're trying to change any attitudes about Spirit. The strategy becomes one of patronization, maintaining a kind of status quo for self-perceived power brokers of theological thinking. As well the strategy helps perpetuate fallacious arguments, even injustice, and lacks prophetic projection of values which could press us toward being more rather than less the people of God that we should be.

Assumptions abound with benign neglect. These assumptions are allowed to remain implicit, unspoken, but are the driving forces for how we say and do the Gospel. For instance, tipping our hats toward Spirit might come forth in comments like this: "The Holy Spirit really is the mysterious part of the Trinity; let's just move on with the assumption the Holy Spirit is unknowable and not spend a lot of time worrying over knowing the unknowable." Or, "You know, the Holy Spirit doesn't get much biblical attention until the latter part of the Gospels, and mostly in Acts 2. That must mean the Spirit is the lesser part of the Trinity."

Second, we have developed with this benign neglect a dichotomous approach to life, theology, and all matters of concern for us. We divide things into this and that, up and down, right or wrong. We reflect uncannily, especially Western culture types, the ancient Hellenistic culture, out of which we still talk about the body and soul, the sacred and secular, and reason and revelation. Each of these categories are set antithetically to the other, so that choices made are the product of identifying an either-or list of good and bad.

We have in our outreach efforts constructed offers to salvation to be presented as applicable only to individuals, missing the larger social/cultural contexts among us. So, these matters of racism, sexism, *laisse faire* economics, inhumane expressions of government have been left mostly to others to handle. Worse yet, we have brought into these resulting paradigms and baptized them

into Christendom. Therefore, we present to the world a message essentially like whatever dominant cultural paradigm is operating as we extend the invitation to follow Christ.

We cannot forget that Protestant types are children of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. Along the way, with our dichotomist style, with regard to Holy Spirit we have divided into left-brained, propositional statements, doctrines, if you please, and right-brained, more emotive, intuitivist, whom I will call expressionists. Each side of this dichotomy too often fails to recognize the value of the other.

As well, the extreme proponents of each position fail to recognize cautions offered by the Apostle Paul as to how projections of life in Spirit should or should not be projected. Paul's guidelines always came with the sense of building up the fellowship (a congregation and network of congregations) and promoting the whole Gospel. At the least, we portray experientially the need for the continuing prayer from Jesus Christ, that we might be one. For, we can recognize not just fissures, but fragmentations, the breaking down of *koinonia* as the respective representatives of the propositionalists and expressionists line up in the battle for the supremacy of position with regard to Holy Spirit.

By whatever influences we have allowed to shape our thinking and doing we have gotten to a place where we are not being Christians from as full a perspective theologically and ethically as we could be, because of neglect on our parts of Holy Spirit.

The tragedy, daily expressed all around the planet, is that we have failed to recognize the job description of Holy Spirit simply stated by Jesus Christ to those first disciples, “. . . if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.”

Certainly, there is more in the New Testament which adds some details to this job description, but all those points indicate to me Holy Spirit is the ethicist of the Trinity—the informer and former of our ethics. And, we essentially have neglected and do neglect such.

Some Suggestions Toward Recovering from the Neglect

First, let us commit ourselves to a continuing conversation on this whole matter of Holy Spirit and all of us. Academicians do have contributions to make to the study of and living in Holy Spirit. Local church ministers have perspectives and experiences valuable to this ongoing conversation about life. Bonds between the academy and the ecclesia (the church) need to be strengthened. This dimension of us reflects as much as any an example of a dichotomy we have allowed to blossom among us—that is the academics can justly be accused of operating in an ivory tower out of touch with the real world; and, the local church ministers are doing whatever it takes to survive and simply don't get the matters of hermeneutics, theological reflection and on and on. We must quit demonizing each other, and others beyond what should be overlapping circles, networks. Rather, reciprocal gifts and dynamics abide among us. Surely, we can arrive at

functional mechanisms where these two segments can become more one in emphasis and application—applied theology it can be called.

Second, we must engage the Bible more fully, more wholistically. I do not hear the phrase as much as I once did, “We are a people of the Book.” When I did, there was a platitudinous tone to the phrase. There was always a lack of truthfulness associated with that claim, particularly as I watched when this sentence was aired, or the ramifications of the sentence in action being rather tepid. There is in the phrase contention for the inspiration of Scripture on one hand, but in truth does not search the Scriptures with the sense of the Inspirer close by.

One of the challenges I offered students was that of moving from their selected canon approach to one which places significance on the whole Bible’s perspectives. In regard to this topic, we must engage Spirit’s guidance toward all parts of the Scriptures; for Spirit’s revelations are in all niches of it, but not necessarily in equal parts throughout.

Third, we must address our dichotomization of Creation and culture—the one being all good, the other all bad. H. Richard Niebuhr drew attention to the inclination for this division. In his statement regarding relationships of Christ and Culture, he noted those he included in his modality of Christ against Culture presented a knotty theological problem. On one hand they may exhort a high view of Christ, but the Christ against culture people create a dualism which moves to a division of reality. Their rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature’s God. Their circular reasoning, tunnel vision, echo chamber style of doing hermeneutics (interpretation), and delivery, fail to catch this flaw in their approach leading to a less than wholistic applied theology.

Ultimately, this rejection tempts one to divide the world into the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm guided by the spiritual God. This dividing up is demonstrated through considering reason being subordinated to revelation, even though the proponents of this perspective arrive at their conclusions through some of the most circular reasoning we can imagine and so fail to catch this flaw in their approach leading to a less than wholistic applied theology.

Also, these folks adopt, ironically, a legalistic approach over that of grace. The result is a cutting themselves off from the most viable resource of our engagement of this world with the values of the Creator God. There is at the heart of the matter, an extraction of the energies available to the Christian, an unnecessary removal from the resource which can both inform and form us to be more like Christ, more godly, more Spirit filled and led.

From Neglect to Recognition and Allowance: A Conclusion

We should recover an “organic theology.” I use the term to identify what might otherwise be called Creation Theology. The traditional term “natural law theology” can fit here, too. Retorts of “pantheism,” “humanism,” and syncretism intended to suffocate these kinds of conversations need to be confronted and their superficiality be demonstrated. Those Christians and others who live in cultures primarily tied to the earth catch these ideas more quickly than those of us who have followed the so-called developing countries’ paradigms. Being in touch with the earth can make some of these connections for us. My appeal is not to that of a theology and ethics of earthiness, but one which is down to earth.

This earth boundedness is also the core of our bondedness with the earth. We are deeply a part of the Creation—created from the dust. To reject the creative acts of Spirit is to reject our being for we are marked not only by the image of God but also God’s creation. A commonality resides.

Perhaps the resurgence of interest in the worship patterns found among the ancient Celtic people can provide some renewed interest in the Spirit of Creation. The Celts were nature worshippers when Western European Christians (Roman Christians) found them, and St. Patrick was not the first. Certainly, Patrick’s understanding of the culture as he was a slave in Ireland for some time proved a tremendous benefit in his communicating the Gospel to those people. The Celts looked at nature in a way not unlike other cultures far around the planet from them, as in those who first came into what became North America and South America.

Patrick and others capitalized on the Celts’ symbols for instance using a wild goose to represent Spirit. John Scotus Eriugena in the 9th century depicted this Celtic theology to be a way to understand nature as spanning the whole cosmological domain. God, creation, and humanity were/are of one piece.

Natural law, thus, are those dynamics God implanted into creation which are still in effect and provide order, organization, and cause and effect dynamics. To say there are physical laws in place more than implies the reality of moral laws which provide boundary markers for human behavior. There is an interesting insulation and rejection of culture of any merit toward discovering the grace of God. Irony resides here for me as I observe those who reject the idea of natural law but actually operate with a legalistic approach in their moral applications. They find comfort in the realm of “thou shalt nots” and frankly are as rational in their approaches as any they may castigate for acting out of “their fleshly minds.” They categorize revelation as general and special, with their particular perspectives of “special” being the dominating determinant toward not only discovering but applying values appropriate to a life related to God.

We must think beyond the categories of either-or with regard to justice and love. For these, in the economy of Spirit, interface. The need for justice, in spite of people being unjust, creeps up through every culture. Justice was built into Creation, and all cultures are derived in some form from created matter and means.

The image of God is a mark of God’s presence in created matter and human beings; thus, a reconsideration of theology and anthropology, and the rest of the creatures and matter with which we co-exist is needed. I am coming more and more to read Scripture and understand with created matter, nature, that, indeed, we are presented with another expression of the image of God, of the Spirit who stands behind, generates, sustains Creation and all that is in it.

Such consideration will cause us to perceive God, Creation, humanity before Genesis 3 so as to explore the content of Genesis 1-2 for our own time. To do so, will bring the creating Spirit’s intentions to bear more fully upon us. Discernment is needed to recognize which is what, how the ideas/principles, those shapes, levels of intent and motives, assumptions involved have come to us, as well the degree to which they have influenced us. From more perspectives than we may have imagined open up for Spirit’s impact upon and in us.

Creation theology presses upon us the need to consider that which is of God toward which the Kingdom of God moves. That is, the eschatological realms are reflections of what creation was headed toward but now must be recovered. The two dynamics—creation and eschaton—can

provide parentheses for understanding our present more clearly—from what we have sprung and to what we should be headed.

In short, reason, revelation, Creation, and the created ones can be mutually supportive toward not only identifying and describing the fallenness of what we are a part. Each of these facets can contribute to the living of our Christian lives. These are the emphases Jesus maintained, not on whatever awaits after humans' mortal lives, whether heaven or hell, but upon how to live within the time span they have of mortal life.

The contemporary emphases on “salvation,” particularly among those who dismiss the place of Spirit ignore Creation theology as a basis for helping others recognize the transformational processes of God in us. The next chapter takes up this dismissal, however, with the exchange between the Apostle Paul on Mars Hill providing a model for such conversation in the developing, pluralistic global society of our time.

Conclusion: The intent of this chapter has been to expand and deepen your/our/my concept of Holy Spirit. At the least, if these lines can give incentive to want to understand a more intimate, up closer than our heartbeat and breath, presence of Spirit, then the ordering of them has not been too much in vain. Perhaps, now, you can order lines based on your growing experience with/of Spirit.

For Further Discussion:

1. How does the description of Holy Spirit as “the ethicist of the Trinity” strike you?
2. Read Psalm 8 as a guide to understanding more of what can be called “Creation Theology.” Meditate on it and make note of insights that come to mind toward how the psalm does inform us in matters of “Creation Theology.”
3. What are some points of actions, laws, behaviors in “culture” that bear the image of “godly virtues.” Could you agree, or disagree, that the basic source of these goes back to the Creation? What are some matters that have been called “general” revelation in your experience but you are discovering contribute to your understandings and living out of “special” revelation?
4. Take time to examine the presence of the idea of the Golden Rule in other world religions? How do you explain these similarities?
5. Compile a list of references both in the Old Testament and New Testament regarding Holy Spirit. Are there more or fewer than you had imagined? What are the actions of Spirit that you can delineate? Can you observe any of these day by day? What kind of character profile can one offer from Paul's list of the fruit (singular) of Spirit to the Galatians?