

General Neglect & Faint Glimmers of the Life-giving Spirit

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It is a legitimate question to ask about the historical response of the church to 1 Corinthians 15:45b. Even if one does not ascribe to a notion of a formal magisterium as the determinant of doctrinal significance and orthodoxy, there should be a willingness to gauge some sense of significance in Paul's statement by examining the response of believers to it since the inception of the church, following the resurrection of Christ. A review of prominent figures in church history, beginning with the Apostolic Fathers and extending to the present, reveals that little significance has been attached to Paul's declaration that the last Adam, Christ, became a life-giving Spirit. In fact, there has been a general neglect and only faint glimmers of the life-giving Spirit in the massive, combined writings of the church. A brief survey can quickly confirm this finding. The cause of this neglect requires some thoughtful consideration, not only about the possible significance or insignificance of the teaching of the life-giving Spirit, but also about the church's theology of the Triune God, its understanding of the goal of God's salvation, and its expectations of the experience of the Triune God.

Surveying the General Neglect

A survey of representative writers from different periods in the history of the church indicates that there has been only a limited grasp of the significance of the second "becoming" of Christ. Of the two major steps or "becomings" of Christ, there has been a thorough examination of the matter of the Word becoming flesh through incarnation. However, there has been a general neglect of the matter of the last Adam becoming a life-giving Spirit through resurrection. In part, this neglect can be attributed to the tendency of traditional theology to be rigidly intolerant of anything that even implies a hint of confusion among the three of the Trinity and to be cautious of any implication of division in the essence of God. An overzealous safeguarding of the former proposition can lead one dangerously close to a tritheistic understanding of the Trinity, while the latter may cause one to erroneously regard the economic coinherence of the Triune God as a challenge to His essential oneness. Just as there is distinction, but not separation, in the essential Trinity, there is distinction, but not separation, in the economic Trinity.

Even though the life-giving Spirit is the realization of the Triune God, bespeaking the possibility of a marvelous union between God and man, none of the Apostolic Fathers make reference to 1 Corinthians 15:45b. The same is generally true of the Apologists and early theologians. For example, Justin Martyr says nothing. In "Against Heresies," Irenaeus refers to the verse in the context of the Spirit bringing communion and life, but no word is clearly given as to the identity of this Spirit. In his treatise "Against Marcion," Tertullian identifies the life-giving Spirit with "Christ Himself," but he says nothing further (450). While Athanasius makes no explicit comment on 1 Corinthians 15:45, he comments on a corresponding verse, 2 Corinthians 3:17, in his first discourse against the Arians, remarking that "it is the Son who is signified" in the phrase *And the Lord is the Spirit* (312). He writes nothing further on this point. While not mentioning the life-giving Spirit, Hilary of Poitiers writes:

According to the Gospels and the Prophets both Christ is a Spirit and God is a Spirit. If they confine this Christ the Spirit within the bounds of shape and body, such a corporeal Christ will not be the likeness of the invisible God, nor will a finite limitation represent that which is infinite. (151)

However, he does not write of the reasons for the Lord to be the Spirit. In his "Commentaries on Isaias," as quoted in Jurgens's *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Jerome relegates the believer's continuing and glorious transformation in life by the "Lord Spirit" in 2 Corinthians 3:18 to a future time "when from men we shall progress to angels" (208).

Augustine says nothing about the life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15. In "On the Gospel of St. John," he does make reference to the phrase *the Spirit gives life* from

2 Corinthians 3:6 and thereafter acknowledges that the Son is a spirit “because God is a spirit,” but he is concerned for nothing more than this (442). In “Letter 145,” again alluding to 2 Corinthians 3:6, he writes, “Wherefore unto them that believe and call on Him the quickening Spirit is given, lest the letter without the Spirit should kill them” (496). In “The Trinity,” Augustine makes the following statement on 2 Corinthians 3:17:

Indeed, so is the Holy Spirit unmistakably called Lord—where the apostle says, *And the Spirit is Lord* (2 Cor. 3:17); and in case anyone should consider that he means the Son, and is calling him spirit because of his immaterial substance, he goes on to add, Where the Lord’s Spirit is, there freedom is too (2 Cor. 3:17). And no one can doubt that the Lord’s Spirit is the Holy Spirit. (111)

This appears to be a good example of being attentive to the possibility of confusing the three of the Trinity, which, nevertheless, diminishes the all-inclusiveness of the One. In “On the Holy Spirit,” Ambrose, Augustine’s mentor, similarly alludes to this concern: “If you cavil at the letter, you cannot injure the Unity; if you wish to separate the Unity, you confess the Spirit Himself as the Lord of power” (149). In “Letter 148” Augustine also seems to agree with Jerome in reserving the experience of 2 Corinthians 3:18 for the future.

In the vast output of Thomas Aquinas, there likewise appears to be very little on the matter of the life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15:45b. In his *Summa Theologica*, he acknowledges that the Holy Spirit “is possessed by man, and dwells within him, in the very gift itself of sanctifying grace. Hence, the Holy Ghost Himself is given and sent.” Later, he writes, “Although the Son can be known by us according to other effects, yet neither does He dwell in us, nor is He possessed by us according to those effects” (221). In fairness, Aquinas, in the very next Article, says, “Although the effect of grace is also from the Father, Who dwells in us by grace, just as the Son and the Holy Ghost...” (222). In the succeeding Article, this “dwelling” is more clearly defined: “The whole Trinity dwells in the mind by sanctifying grace, according to Jo. xiv.23: *We will come to him, and will make Our abode with him*” (222). In contrast to 2 Timothy 4:22, which says, “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you,” and 1 Corinthians 6:17, which says, “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit,” some of the luster of Aquinas’s notion of indwelling pales in comparison to the brightness and clarity of the divine revelation. This is not a small point, if one considers that the realization of the Triune God as the life-giving Spirit becomes effectual in the lives of the believers as we know, experience, and are joined to the Triune God in our human spirit.

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin does not identify Christ with the life-giving Spirit, stating that Paul

contrasted “the life-giving spirit that the believers receive from Christ with the living soul in which Adam was created” (189). Here, the Spirit is only “from” Christ. In Book 3 Calvin makes his most direct comment on verse 45b:

Also, we ought to know that he [the Spirit] is called the “Spirit of Christ” not only because Christ, as eternal Word of God, is joined in the same Spirit with the Father, but also from his character as the Mediator. For he would have come to us in vain if he had not been furnished with this power. In this sense he is called the “Second Adam,” given from heaven as “a life-giving spirit” [1 Cor. 15:45]. This unique life which the Son of God inspires in his own so that they become one with him.... (539)

The life-giving Spirit appears as more of a “power,” and He is still somewhat separate from the Son. In Book 4, while commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:6, Calvin again stresses the matter of power, this time in Paul’s preaching; and as the goal of this preaching, he lists “inward illumination and moving of the mind” (1286). Finally, in Book 2 Calvin identifies Christ with the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:6, 17, “who quickens the letter that of itself is death-dealing” (351). The goal of this quickening, however, is not the inward impartation of the divine life; rather, it is the outward fulfillment of the law. Anxious to protect and pass on right teaching, many of the most recognized teachers in the history of the church have almost singularly ignored the focal point of the Triune God’s purpose and economy, which is the Triune God Himself being realized as the life-giving Spirit to be dispensed into His chosen and redeemed people for His eternal expression.

Surveying the Faint Glimmers

More recently, writers have made valuable, though quite isolated, observations on the matter of the life-giving Spirit, honestly acknowledging the pure Word of God. Despite these faint glimmers, there has been little expansion or development beyond the acknowledgments themselves. For example, J. N. Darby, in his *New Translation of the Bible*, makes an important observation regarding 2 Corinthians 3, stating in a footnote that verses 7 through 16 are actually a “parenthesis” by Paul (1392). This connects “the Spirit quickens” in verse 6 with “the Lord is the Spirit” in verse 17. Darby thus indicates that the Lord is the Spirit who gives us life. In his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, he acknowledges that Christ became the life-giving Spirit (269), but does not touch on the process that Christ went through or the purpose of His second becoming. In *Word Studies of the New Testament*, Marvin R. Vincent comments, “The Lord Christ of ver. 16 is the Spirit who pervades and animates the new covenant of which we are ministers (ver. 6), and the ministration of which is with glory (ver. 8)” (308). Again, there is a proper identification of Christ with the Spirit, but there is nothing further on the process and purpose of His becoming.

Vincent says only that Christ became a life-giving Spirit in resurrection “after which His body began to take on the characteristics of a spiritual body” (284). Even though Andrew Murray’s deep insights include the fact that Christ’s humanity was included in the “Spirit of the glorified Jesus,” there is no chapter devoted to the life-giving Spirit in *The Spirit of Christ*.

In *The Holy Spirit in Thought and Experience*, Thomas Rees, referring to 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Romans 8:9, Galatians 4:6, Philippians 1:19, and 1 Corinthians 15:45, notes that “Paul appears actually to identify the Spirit with Christ” (102). In *Union with Christ*, Lewis B. Smedes not only recognizes the identification of Christ and the Spirit, but he also begins to draw out some of the implications for our Christian experience.

The Spirit is the living contact between the victorious Jesus and all who are united with Him. There is a Spirit of Jesus Christ. Between Him and us there is no gulf in time or space. This Spirit brings us into so intimate an association with Jesus Christ that Paul can speak of Christ being in us. Thus, we must assume that the Spirit Himself lives in an even more intimate union with Christ. For it is He who “brings” Christ to us over the gulf in time and space.

A few notes from Paul may serve to underscore what has just been said. After His resurrection, says Paul, Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, “became a life-giving Spirit” (I Cor. 15:45). Whatever weight is given to the verb “became,” it is clear that it comes close to identifying the risen Jesus with the divine Spirit. In one perplexing sentence Paul says, “The Lord is the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:17). Had he said, “The Lord sends the Spirit” or “The Spirit is divine,” he would have made things simpler. But we have to deal with what he actually says...brushing aside all nuances of context and grammar, we can say this much without further examination: Spirit and Christ are inseparable. *How they are united is another matter.* (26-27)

Later in the same book, Smedes notes:

In his penetrating study of the relationship between the Lord and the Spirit in Paul’s letters, Ingo Hermann concludes that the Spirit is the “christological category of realization.” This is an illuminating phrase. It means that when Paul speaks of the Spirit he is talking about the Christ at work realizing the goals of redemption. Hermann speaks about an identity of function between Christ and the Spirit. But he means more than the word “function” may suggest. He does not mean that the Spirit is merely

on the same team with Christ. Rather, the Spirit *is* Christ in his redemptive functions. The Lord has, in Hermann’s understanding, not changed; but He has a way of bringing His finished work of atonement into the present time, and that way is the way of His Spirit. (52)

In James D. G. Dunn’s article, “1 Corinthians 15:45— last Adam, life-giving spirit,” several crucial points of application to the spiritual life of the believers are made. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:45, he notes the identity of the Lord in resurrection with the Spirit:

In this verse Paul seems to say not only that the central, constitutive element of the corporate Christian life is the experience of God’s Spirit; but also that Jesus can be fully and adequately understood in terms of this Spirit. Not only is the earthly Jesus lost in the shadows behind the exalted Lord, but the exalted Lord seems to be wholly identified with the Spirit, the source of the new life experienced by believers. (127)

This new life to be experienced by the believers is not something separate from Christ, even as it is being realized in and through the life-giving Spirit. Dunn, commenting further, notes:

The primary focus of his [Paul’s] thought at this point however is the believer’s experience of the life-giving Spirit. How so? Because in this experience the believer finds himself being steadily transformed to become like Christ. *Paul’s own experience of the life of the Spirit bearing the imprint of Jesus’ character and conforming him to that image is the ground on which Paul asserts the representative significance of Jesus’ risen humanity.* (136)

Of the illustrious teachers throughout church history, few approach the level of insight displayed by Smedes, Dunn, and, as a previous article indicates, Witness Lee. It is precisely their emphasis on realization, experience, and union, however, that elevates a consideration of the life-giving Spirit above the level of insignificance. A failure to see this has resulted in a general neglect of the life-giving Spirit, and as a consequence, there have been only faint glimmers of the life-giving Spirit.

Considerations of Significance

A few voices in the face of a long-standing tradition of neglect may not be enough to convince one that there is a basis for attaching significance to the life-giving Spirit. The sheer weight of the neglect is daunting. Surely, the most tenable position would be to defer to the instincts of

the likes of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. An argument could even be forwarded that an attempt to elevate 1 Corinthians 15:45b to prominent heights falls within the confines of Peter's admonition that "No prophecy of Scripture is of one's own interpretation" (2 Pet. 1:20). Such an argument, however, would have to ignore the numerous verses in the New Testament that point to the economic identification of Christ and the Spirit (e.g., John 14:15-20, 26; Rom. 8:2, 9-11, 26, 34; Rev. 5:6) as well as verses that indicate the special attribution of "life-giving" as being related only to the Son and the Spirit (John 5:21; 6:27, 63; 17:2; 2 Cor. 3:6). Rather than attempting to further prove the significance, it may be more instructive to examine the factors that have contributed to the historical neglect of the life-giving Spirit. If these factors can be shown to be significant, then perhaps there will be enough counterweight to cause one to prayerfully reconsider the implications of the last Adam becoming the life-giving Spirit.

At least three factors have contributed to the neglect of 1 Corinthians 15:45. The first factor is a deficiency in any theology of the Triune God that systematically imposes a sharp, theological differentiation between the essential Trinity and the economic Trinity. As stated earlier, just as there is distinction, but not separation, in the essential Trinity, there is distinction, but not separation, in the economic Trinity. In recent years Karl Rahner has begun to address this artificial differentiation:

The thesis which Rahner proposed, and which has been much discussed as a protest against the scholastic tendency of the textbooks for Catholic seminarians to equate the doctrine of the Trinity with only the immanent or ontological Trinity (thereby neglecting the economic Trinity), is: *the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity*. If this means that we can say nothing of "God-as-God-is-in-himself-as-Holy Trinity" then, as we shall see, the thesis is overstated. Further, if it means that God as the One God became in eternity a Trinity of Persons for the purpose of becoming the Creator of the world, then it is false. However, if it means that the Lord God, whom we know through his self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is identical with the God who is eternally in himself the Holy Trinity, then it is an acceptable thesis. (Toon 47-48)

If we accept the identification of the persons of the economic Trinity with the persons of the essential or immanent Trinity, then we must also be willing to accept the consideration that the relationships between the persons of the economic Trinity are rooted in the same ontological principles of coexistence and coinherence, as exhibited in the essential Trinity. As such, we readily and willingly should declare that the last Adam (an economic appellation for the second of the Trinity) is the life-giving Spirit (an economic appellation for the third of the Trinity) by means of their mutual, economic coexistence and coinherence. Conversely, a declaration that


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Christ and the Spirit are completely separate and distinct in our experience of the economy of the Triune God should raise a concern that we may be adhering to an unconscious belief in a tritheistic, essential Trinity.

The second factor in the neglect of the life-giving Spirit throughout church history has been an inadequate understanding of the goal of God's salvation. Romans 5:10 reveals that there is more to God's salvation than just a judicial, objective reconciliation with a once, wrathful God, who has been appeased by the death of His Son. This verse, in fact, covers the three stages of a person's existence before God, which are addressed by the all-inclusive nature of God's judicial and organic salvation: Romans 5:10 says, "For if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled." Prior to reconciliation, a person is but an enemy of God. In unregenerate flesh, nothing good dwells; there is only sin, which separates, offends, and ultimately kills (7:18, 11; 6:23). In such a condition, only the wrath of God can be revealed from heaven upon those who must be regarded as enemies (1:18). Reconciliation begins the second stage of our existence before God, and it is made possible by the death of His Son on the cross on our behalf. The redemption of Christ, however, is not just an objective "ticket to heaven"; rather, it is our entrance, our access, into an organic realm of grace, which is God Himself being freely given to us as life (5:2). This is the organic aspect of our salvation, and it involves the organic life of God spreading from our spirit to our mind and ultimately to our body with its redemption in glory (8:10, 6, 11). Following judicial reconciliation, the stage of our experiencing "His life" begins and continues throughout the remainder of our life. This is the "much more" aspect of salvation that Paul speaks of in Romans 5:10.

If our view of God's salvation is limited to the first two stages of our existence before God, we do not need the life-giving Spirit; we can relegate Him to insignificant status. If the Christian message involves only "four spiritual laws," then our sinful record before God can be forgiven and erased by our acceptance of His Son as the propitiation of our sins. We can laud the work of Christ on the cross, admire a physical Jesus, sing of His amazing historical grace, and never realize the abundance of grace through which we can reign in His life in this age. The organic aspect of God's salvation necessarily involves a receiving on our part (2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 3:2). Consequently, it also necessarily involves a dispensing, a giving, on the part of God. What He gives is His life, and how He gives it is by the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit.

The third factor in the neglect of the life-giving Spirit throughout church history relates to our failure to realize that the Triune God has made Himself economically available for our experience and enjoyment of Him. Our God is not, first and foremost, a God of legal ledgers and accounts. To be sure He is "high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1, KJV), righteous (Rom. 3:4), and holy (Lev. 11:45); but the lifting up of Christ on the cross has bridged the great chasm between a wrathful Creator and His sinful creatures. Now there is a more intimate relationship available to the believers. He is not just our God—He is our Father. And His life is fully able to take us from being sinners to sons, enjoying all the benefits of His organic life through its regenerating, shepherding, sanctifying, renewing, transforming, building up, conforming, and glorifying. In order for us to be processed through these experiential stages in life, God Himself has been processed, first by becoming flesh through incarnation and second by becoming the life-giving Spirit through resurrection.

Rather than speaking to the insignificance of the teaching concerning the last Adam becoming the life-giving Spirit, the general neglect of the church speaks more to the need of the church to be corporately enlightened to see the full, organic aspect of the mystery of the Triune God's will. May the general neglect of the life-giving Spirit dissipate as, more and more, the church rises above its narrow, judicial perspective of the Triune God and His economy, and may the faint glimmers begin to shine brightly as the experience of His organic economy becomes the hallmark of our Christian living. 

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