

## The Holy Spirit and the Incarnation<sup>1</sup>

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"The Holy Spirit and the Incarnation" is a title which can be understood in various ways. The most obvious would be: What was the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the incarnate life of Jesus? But that is not the question with which I shall primarily be concerned; and that for two reasons:

1. Professor Lampe has recently published an essay on "The Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ."<sup>2</sup> I am in substantial agreement with the way in which he deals with the question. There is not a great deal that I would want to add to what he has said.

2. More importantly, the question is essentially an exegetical and historical one, rather than a properly theological one. Before it could be satisfactorily tackled, it would need, I believe, to be rephrased in some such form as: What views of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the incarnate life of Jesus are to be found in the various New Testament writers and in the earliest Church Fathers? The evidence, particularly for the New Testament, is not only varied but highly complex, and I am not qualified to assess it with the degree of expert knowledge that would be required. I would feel more at home with the Fathers. But in any case, such an investigation would lead only to a number of differing historical answers. And I am doubtful whether as a contemporary theologian I would want to raise the issue in that particular form at all.

I propose therefore to approach my task in a somewhat different way. I shall understand my title to refer to the relation of the Spirit and the Incarnation in the broader sense: the relation between the continuing work of the Spirit in history and the particular datable occurrence, or set of occurrences, which we call the Incarn-

ation. This may eventually lead me back to some of the issues that the question in its more directly Christological form would have raised. But they will appear in a rather different context, and from a rather different perspective.

Traditional teaching about the Incarnation affirms that in the person of Jesus, the Word of God has not simply found expression through words human; he has become human and spoken to us as human. The events of his life, death, and Resurrection are not merely providentially guided events expressing and furthering the purposes of God in the world; they are, in a direct sense, decisive acts of God himself. In Christ what needed to be done for us has been done; it was something which God alone could do. It neither need, nor will, nor could be done again. All this, taken by itself, would suggest that for all subsequent generations Christian faith would inevitably be backward-looking in character. The essential attitude of faith would be looking back to hear what God has said to us, to recall what God himself has done for us.

But of course such claims never have stood by themselves. They stand side by side with other affirmations about the Spirit which are oriented toward the present and the future. Nor does this second forward-looking type of affirmation simply appear where the incarnational emphasis is weak. In the Fourth Gospel, for example, which is primarily responsible for the dominance of the incarnational concept in later theology, there is an equally marked emphasis on the continuing role of the Spirit in the world and in the church. In the eyes of the Fourth Evangelist it may have been blessed to have seen and to have believed. But we do not need to pine for the days of the Incarnation, for it is more blessed not to have seen and yet to have believed. (John 20:29) The works of Jesus were great enough to be evidence of the presence of the Father in him and to be the

grounds for the disciples' believing in him, yet the disciples were to do even greater works in the future. (John 14:10-12) The words of Jesus may have been spirit and life, (John 6:63) but they were more than the immediate disciples could bear. It would need the future work of the Spirit to guide them into all the truth. (John 16:12-13)

Now, as is well known, the Fourth Gospel has a clearly drawn picture of the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit. The Spirit "was not" until Jesus had been glorified; Jesus goes away so that the Comforter may come. (John 7:39; 16:7) But this relationship is something deeper and more profound than mere temporal succession. We can best feel our way into a consideration of that deeper relationship by looking more carefully at the famous promise that the Spirit will guide the disciples into all the truth. The text has often been used by those who were anxious to find biblical support for their conviction that all true knowledge in art or science is God-given. But however true that conviction, it is not that with which the Johannine text is concerned. The text has to be understood in relation to the Fourth Gospel's specific understanding of truth, and in particular to the claim of Jesus a little earlier in the farewell discourses to be the truth. (John 14:6) Jesus embodies the truth in himself as a person, but the significance of that truth will only be grasped as it is disclosed by the Spirit in the later life of the church. That which the Spirit will disclose will be new, subjectively, in the apprehension of Christians. It will not be new absolutely, for it will already have been present and realized in Jesus. The Spirit will not be an independent source of truth; he will take the things of Jesus and declare them to the disciples. (John 16:14) Here then is a basic sketch or ground-plan of the relationship between the incarnate Christ and the subsequent work of the Spirit.

What the theologian has to do is to ask whether this sketch can be filled out in a way which does justice to our experience as Christians, and, if so, how? The issue concerns the practical life as well as the intellectual. But let us take as an example the question of the development of doctrine. In their treatment of that subject, some modern scholars have certainly used a model of precisely the kind with which we are concerned. DeLubac, for example, insists that both the starting point and the very substance of dogma are not so much a form of teaching as a person.<sup>9</sup> What exactly is implied by such an assertion?

It is certainly capable of varied understandings. Let me try to illustrate this by spelling out two possible meanings at different ends of the scale. The first would go something like this. By faith we know Jesus to be the incarnation of the divine Logos, the earthly embodiment of the very mind and wisdom of God, who is of one substance with the Father. Therefore all truth (and *a fortiori* all truth about God) must, by definition, be in him. It may not have been expressed by Jesus of Nazareth; it may not indeed have been consciously present to his mind or even available to his consciousness. But that is irrelevant. Any apparent challenge of that kind to our claim can be met by a kenotic theory of the Incarnation or some similar means. It would still be the case that all Christian apprehension of truth would be an unfolding of that which was already present among us in the person of the incarnate Logos. Now the difficulty of this kind of position will be obvious. What is believed on other grounds to be true is thereby believed to have been implicit in the person of the incarnate Logos, rather than the other way around. The claim that the Spirit does not speak on his own authority but declares the things of Jesus is made true by definition. But the link with Jesus offers no help with the vital task of discerning the spirits, of determining

what is the leading of the Holy Spirit, and what is not.

At the other end of the scale, it could be argued that nothing should be claimed as a proper part of that truth into which the Spirit is to lead us unless it can be linked to the person of the historic Jesus, either as to what he explicitly taught or as to what is implied by his life and ministry as witnessed to in the gospels and by the earliest preaching about him. But there are serious difficulties here, too. It is questionable how far we can know what was explicitly taught by Jesus. Insofar as we can, it was taught within a first century setting and needs translation before it can be taken over as truth for us. And that applies, of course, not only to the actual teaching of Jesus himself, but to the whole pattern of first century witness to him. If we spell out the relationship along these lines, then the truth into which the Spirit leads us is liable to prove far more restricted in form and scope than we will feel able to accept.

The two examples I have given come, as I said, from differing ends of a spectrum. Nevertheless, I do not think there is any satisfactory escape from the dilemma that they suggest. I am not able to find any midway position, expressed in terms of this model of the relation between the Incarnation and the Spirit, which would escape the challenge either of vacuity on the one hand, or undue restriction on the other. I do not say it cannot be done, but my own failure to find such a position leads me to regard the picture presented by the Fourth Gospel as one that does not square readily with the actual practice and experience of Christians. This should not be cause either for surprise or for anxiety. Our whole understanding of history is involved, and that is surely very different from the understanding of history characteristic of the first centuries of our era. Nor are we absolutely bound to the categories of Scripture or of the early church tradition. Let us therefore seek to reflect more generally on the

way in which Christians today interpret the event of Jesus and subsequent Christian history, without requiring any predetermined scheme of the relationship between the Incarnation and the Spirit as the framework within which to order the results of our reflections.

Jesus Christ is central to Christian faith. He is not simply the founder of the Christian church, not just the first in historical sequence. He is also the one to whom Christians look back and look up, the paradigm and the effective agent of our communion with God. The proper referent of such affirmations may not be simply the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, but neither is it simply a Christ concept or idea. The historical figure, Jesus, is certainly a part of the referent in any such claim. It is this fact that makes matters of history so central to Christian faith. If the Incarnation is to continue to play the central role it has traditionally played in Christian faith, we seem to require reliable knowledge about the man, Jesus. There would be something odd about a faith which emphasized the vital importance of a divine incarnation at a particular moment in history, but acknowledged at the same time substantial uncertainty about the actual form taken by that incarnate life. The availability of such reliable knowledge has been a central issue of theological concern at least since the time of Lessing. This is not the place to survey the vicissitudes of those debates over the last two hundred years. It is, however, necessary to attempt some reflection on their general implications. The difficulties to which such reflection points can, I think, be separated out into two kinds, one more practical, the other more theoretical.

The first difficulty, the more practical one, is the lack of any agreed results in the attempts of scholars to distinguish the individual contribution of Jesus from the continuing contribution of the church. In the attempt

to draw such distinctions, New Testament scholars have sharpened their tools to an extreme degree of precision. By the standards to be expected in such historical detective work, it can properly be said that the evidence suggests a reasonable degree of reliability in the Gospel records. But by those standards one would not expect to be able to distinguish with precision between the role of the founding figure of the movement and the ways in which his person and his teaching have been developed in the continuing tradition. Certainly there are lunatic fringe interpretations which can be excluded. Moreover, one can reasonably ascribe differing measures of probability to differing interpretations. But there is still a wide range of possibilities which remain seriously and genuinely open ones. And these affect not just details of the teachings of Jesus, but fundamental issues concerning the nature of his mission and his own understanding of it. The "new quest" for the historical Jesus may have overcome some of the particular problems of the old quest; it has not escaped its fundamental difficulty. The nature of the material available to us simply does not allow us to isolate the distinctive teaching or character of Jesus with anything more than a relatively limited degree of probability.

But the difficulty is not simply a matter of contingent limitations in the particular sources available to us. It can be set out in a more theoretical way. "No man is an island." Yet where the Incarnation is treated as involving distinct affirmations about the individual, Jesus of Nazareth, it seems to be committed to isolating him from his immediate surroundings in just that kind of way. The point can perhaps usefully be made by the citation of five affirmations which Norman Pittenger sets out in his book, *Christology Reconsidered*, as the subsection headings in the chapter entitled, "The Location of the Incarnation" (pp. 70-81).

- (a) No historical person can be understood in separation from the past history from which that person emerges and from the culture of which he or she is a part.
- (b) No person can be understood save in one's relationship with those who were associated with and were influenced by the person, as well as influencing him or her.
- (c) No person can be understood unless the consequences of his or her impact on history are taken very seriously into account.
- (d) Every person must be seen as thus focusing one's past, his or her present relationships during a lifetime, and the results of one's appearance at some given time and place.
- (e) Any interpretation of a historical figure must have regard for these factors; and if God's activity is seen in the individual, even in the most eminent sense, that activity must be taken as having occurred in and through the whole constellation of which the figure is the center; it must not be confined solely and exclusively to one as an individual person.

Now clearly this kind of emphasis can easily be overplayed. It would be absurd to suggest that there is no such thing as an individual person, or that individuals are incapable of playing a recognizable, creative role within the historical process. It is quite clear that at the very lowest estimate Jesus was such a creative individual, and we can know a certain amount about the kind of creative influence he exercised.

Nevertheless, these two difficulties raised by this historical debate are serious and their implications have to be taken seriously. Jesus, as man, was a part of a developing culture; he not only influenced but was influenced by those with whom he lived and worked. Whatever the nature of our knowledge, difficulties would arise in any attempt to identify accurately his unique contribution to the ideas and events of his time. But in view of the actual nature of the sources available to us, such difficulties are greatly enhanced. Jesus comes to us reflected through the prism of a variety of different responses to him.

What difference does all this make? It affects the terms in which the problem of the relationship of the Spirit and the Incarnation can properly be posed. There is no separable person, the incarnate Jesus, whom we can first know and then go on to relate to the subsequent events of Christian history. We know him as a creative element within a developing religious history. We know him as those who stand within a subsequent historical development and whose modes of apprehension are affected by the particular historical situation to which we belong.

To most of us all this will seem obvious enough. Am I suggesting that Christian faith in Christ is simply a matter of historical knowledge? Certainly not. But as I said at the outset, the historical figure, Jesus, is certainly a part of the referent of Christian faith in Jesus Christ. It is with the implications of that part of the referent of our faith that I have so far been concerned.

If I am (whether rightly or wrongly) so sensitive to the historical difficulties in relation to our secure knowledge of Jesus, is it possible to compensate by placing greater weight on the experience of the Spirit? Paul Tillich is perhaps the supreme example of someone who has attempted to do just that. He claims that "participation, not historical argument, guarantees the reality of the event upon which Christianity is based. It guarantees a personal life in which the New Being has conquered the old being." Tillich goes on to say that it is a consequence of historical method that it cannot be guaranteed that the name of that person was Jesus (however absurd that suggestion may be in practice). But he concludes by insisting that "whatever his name, the New Being was and is actual in this man." (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. ii., p. 131.)

But despite the careful qualifications that Tillich makes, I do not believe the approach that he pursues can do the full job he wants it to do. Brian Hebble-

thwaite's essay, in the same volume as that of Professor Lampe, to which I have already referred, entitled "The Appeal to Experience in Christology," (pp. 263-278) gives timely warning of the dangers and difficulties involved in any move of this sort. These are at the very least as forbidding as those that beset a historical approach to the understanding of the Incarnation. If historians speak with varied voices about Jesus, the variety is nothing as compared with the voices of those who claim to be declaring the direct promptings of the Spirit. Descriptions of experience can sound remarkably similar from within different religious traditions. By chance, I received through the mail this very morning on which I am writing, a popular magazine of Nichiren Buddhism. With a slight change of terminology, the correspondence columns of that magazine might well have graced the pages of any evangelical Christian journal of similar status. Yet in each case, no doubt, very real and significant experiences are seen as confirmation of a very different set of religious beliefs. The same is patently true within Christianity itself, with the great variety of its pentecostal manifestations.

But here too, as with the historical problem, the difficulty can be expressed in more theoretical terms. It is not just a puzzling contingent fact that persons interpret their experiences so differently. There is no such thing as pure experience. All experience is experience from within a tradition with meanings and interpretations already inherent in it. What we experience as the presence or the power of the Holy Spirit at work will be made up of things that our tradition associates with the Holy Spirit, or of things that we cannot readily assimilate as part of the common-sense expectations of our particular society. This is not to deny the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence or power in the lives of persons. It is to question the reliability of any claim to be able, on the basis of experience, to define the

particular forms of his presence or the nature of his working. Anglicans, who are the guests of Methodists at the present stage of inter-church relations, should be especially more aware of the embarrassments that may be involved in ascribing to the leading of the Holy Spirit the particular aspirations or decisions of ecumenical growth or lack of it. Yet it would be equally embarrassing to maintain that the Holy Spirit was not involved at all.

Where then do these considerations lead us? The structure of Christian experience certainly requires at least these two reference points: a reference to that partly hidden but creative figure, Jesus, and the responses to him that characterized the earliest, formative years of the Christian community; and a reference to the immediate experience of grace, of a power greater than ourselves, which characterizes Christian experience today, both individually and corporately. The two cannot be wholly separated. But we need to emphasize now one, now the other aspect. Each may be for us the focusing point through which we may know and experience the presence of God in our lives. God is, of course, never at our disposal. No procedure can guarantee that what we claim to be knowledge of God really is such. We live by faith, not by sight. But it seems to me a part of a characteristically Christian position to insist that neither of these two forms of reference is dispensable. It is the interrelation between the two with which the Fourth Gospel is concerned in its paradigmatic account of the relation between Christ and the Spirit which I took as my starting point. Traditionally, this has been developed in terms of distinct persons of the Trinity. Christ is the incarnate Son, the embodiment of the second person of the Trinity. The experience of the believers and of the believing church is the sphere of the work of the Holy Spirit. The unity of the two is secured, because it is a coequal and co-

essential Trinity which Christians affirm. Thus, there can be no conceivable difference in context or character in that divinity with which we are involved in each case.

But this scheme of interpretation leaves two puzzling questions. The Son does not cease to be living and active when the incarnate life is over. The risen Christ continues to be with his disciples to the end of the world. Is this something to be distinguished from the presence of the Holy Spirit? And if so, how is the relation between the two to be understood? And similarly, despite the "Spirit was not" of John 7:39, the Holy Spirit did not begin his existence or his activity only at Pentecost. He was operative before that—including the life of Jesus, as accounts such as those of the annunciation and the baptism imply. But what then was his relationship to that of the incarnate Son?

Such problems, I want to suggest, are not insoluble merely for lack of evidence. They are insoluble because they are wrongly conceived and wrongly posed. It was for this reason that I did not interpret my title along those lines. I hope that the more general lines I have pursued do not appear to be an evasion. Let me now try to say something a bit more positive in answer to the question: How should we speak about the Incarnation? And, in particular, how should our understanding of the Incarnation be linked to the theme of the Spirit?

In the course of the article referred to at the beginning of this chapter, Professor Lampe lists three major considerations which deterred the early church from developing a Spirit Christology—i.e., a Christology whose fundamental category would be possession by the Spirit of God rather than the incarnation of the Word or Son of God. These three are: (i) suspicion "of any theory which might seem to imply that Jesus was a 'mere' man;" (ii) "orthodox fear of patripassianism;" (iii) the difficulty of distinguishing "as or-

thodox theology required, between God-in-Christ—the divine being who pre-existed, was incarnate and is exalted to the right hand of the Father—and God-in-Christ’s-people—witnessing to the former and assuring them of sonship to the Father in him.” (pp. 120-1)

I believe this to be a fair statement of the historical position. But I would like to suggest that in the light of the subsequent history of doctrine, these three considerations might well be considered not as deterrents against developing a Spirit Christology but as positive incentives for doing so.

I take the third consideration first. A central theme here has been the inextricable interconnectedness of our knowledge of God-in-Christ and our knowledge of God-in-Christ’s-people. They are not necessarily identical, but our understanding of each is mutually dependent on our understanding of the other. There are, therefore, distinct advantages in trying to understand them with the aid of a paradigm which emphasizes their intimate interrelation. The position in relation to Professor Lampe’s first consideration is very similar. What can be objected to as possibly implying “mere manhood” can also be acclaimed as expressing the archetypal role of Christ for Christian faith better than traditional incarnational concepts—despite all the sophisticated developments those concepts have undergone in the attempts to enable the incarnational idea to fulfill that role. Finally the second, patripassian objection can be briefly dealt with. Once the Word or Son was firmly asserted to be coequal and consubstantial with the Father, the same difficulty had to be met once more. In what sense could God in his full “godness” be understood to be involved in all the sufferings of the incarnate? Spirit Christology is hardly more vulnerable than a traditional incarnational theology on that score.

Language about the Holy Spirit as it comes to us

from Scripture and from traditional usage in our own time seems to me to express primarily two essential themes. It speaks of a communication between God and the person, a real presence of his grace and power in the lives of Christians individually and corporately. But in addition, it makes clear that such ideas are not to be understood in a purely emotional sense, in static terms of private experiences. They are to be seen in relation to a continuing purpose, the achievement of God’s purposes within history. Now these are precisely the things we want to say about the Incarnation. Christ is for us the paradigm of human life in its fullest relationship to God; he is also the supreme case of the realization and furthering of God’s purpose in the world. A Spirit-Christology, a picture of Jesus as the spirit-filled man, would be a highly appropriate way of expressing such convictions. This would not necessarily be in competition with an incarnational theology—though if it were taken with appropriate seriousness it would certainly modify the way in which incarnational theology is understood. We need, I believe, a variety of models in seeking to understand and to respond to that which God has done and continues to do for us through the person of Jesus. The Spirit blows when it wills and one cannot tell where it comes from or whither it goes. To believe it to be either possible or desirable to define the role of the Spirit in the Incarnation with any kind of precision would be to be untrue to that basic fact about the Spirit. But to speak of the person and work of Jesus quite freely in Spirit language may be a very valuable way of giving expression to the mysterious and creative character of that which God gives to us through him. We do not need to be anxious that they may weaken the sense of the specialness of the Incarnation. It will certainly need to be supplemented by other language and other imagery. But we should rather be concerned with its positive potential.

And that, I believe, might be to bring home to us more effectively than much traditional language the figure of Jesus as one in whom the transforming presence of God to the world is to be seen, and through whom his love and purposes can be made effective in our own lives.

## Notes

1. The issues discussed in this paper are dealt with at greater length in my book, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (S.C.M., 1974).
2. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, editors, *Christ, Faith, and History* (C.U.P., 1972), pp. 111-130.
3. "Le point de départ et le substance même du dogme est moins un enseignement qu'une personne" (*Le Problème du développement du dogme*, RSR XXV, 1948), p. 158.