



Where the Spirit is
There is Freedom

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CHAPTER ONE

The Holy Spirit: What's It All About?

by Dr. Paul Newman

Systematic theology has been described as an attempt to offer a maximum amount of information with a minimum number of explanatory principles. This isn't to be confused with skating fast over a lot of thin ice. When we ask, "What's the Spirit about?", it would certainly be desirable if the answer included the maximum amount of information. It would also be good if the explanatory principles weren't too numerous or complex. If it's true that a picture or diagram is worth a thousand words, perhaps a diagram might suggest more information than any other approach. I encourage you to draw the following diagram for yourself or just imagine it as it's developed.

The Spirit is God "present" - God "active" in the world. Let's start with a big circle to represent the world. The Spirit is the living God who lives and acts in the world. What the Holy Spirit is about is what God is about when God is present with us. God's work in the world has been described under the broad categories of creation, redemption and consummation. We'll look at creation first.

In the creation of the world, God as Spirit organizes the chaos. That organization consists of establishing systems of creation. In the diagram, these systems of creation can be represented by seven smaller circles inside the big circle of the world. To start with, there are physical or inorganic systems - all the systems that existed before the appearance of life and still continue to exist. Another set of systems might be called the biological systems: botanical, zoological, physiological and ecological. Yet another set of systems is the psychological systems that govern a great deal of human activity. Again, there are sociological systems, which have to be distinguished from the psychological. Our picture would not be complete without a circle to represent economic systems that have so much to do with the way the world exists. Economics and politics might be classified as sociological

systems, but it's useful to draw them as separate circles within the larger circle. The final circle can represent aesthetic orders and systems.

The Spirit's work in creation consists of organizing chaos into various systems, including systems that have life and living agents in them.

These systems or orders of creation were intended by God to function for God's good purposes but, as we know too well, they have typically gone astray or been distorted and put to improper use. Systems of creation are what the New Testament calls "the principalities and powers." We usually think of principalities and powers as strictly the "bad guys" in creation, but this isn't true to the Bible. According to Colossians 1:15-17, the principalities and powers are part of what was created in Christ. They are part of all the things that are held together in Christ. The world could not exist without the systems, orders, organisms and organized powers that the Bible calls principalities and powers.

To be sure, the powers or systems are corrupted and alienated from God. If we return to our diagram, we can quickly list a few of the corruptions in the world's main systems. In the physical or inorganic systems, there is pollution of many kinds, like acid rain. There is resource depletion and the possibility of what might be called "terminal explosion." In biological systems, there are ecological disasters, species extinctions, addictions, physical disorders, illnesses, deformity and more. In the psychological segment, there is guilt, which powerfully damages health. There is the fear of death and denial of death. There is scape-goating and phobias, anxieties and psychoses—we could go on and on. In the sociological segment, there is racism, sexism, ageism, ethnocentrism and family breakdown. If we looked carefully at such basically good organizations as the Church or our legal system, we would still find some alienation from God. In the economic systems we find class conflict, North-South disparities, rich and poor everywhere and horrendous starvation. In politics, there is destructive nationalism and unjust oppression everywhere. In the aesthetic sphere there is art which is prostituted to manipulative purposes of one kind or another.

While world systems are originally the work of God as Creator Spirit, their sinful corruption is the situation to

which God as Redeeming Spirit comes to bring salvation. Salvation can be described as new life, liberation or in a variety of other ways. However, there is no better way to describe it than in the terms Jesus apparently used most frequently: salvation is the Kingdom or Reign of God.

The Spirit is all about the coming of God's Reign which overcomes corruption and destruction in the systems of creation. The Reign of God is the cure for the corrupted reign by principalities and powers.

What actually happens to corrupt these world systems is that they claim too much authority and power and come into conflict with each other. To be more precise, we give the systems too much authority and power and treat them like gods. In fact, they aren't gods and can't do the work of God adequately. They are too weak to be the real God and fail miserably when they are treated like gods. We worship the creature instead of the Creator and the results are disastrous.

The old story of King Midas gives a good illustration of how the powers conflict with each other and, in the process, show their weakness. Midas wanted economic power to be pre-eminent. He asked that everything he touched be turned into gold. He got his wish and then, without thinking, kissed his beloved daughter, who turned into solid gold. His economic system was in tragic conflict with his sociological and psychological systems.

Gold wasn't capable of being pre-eminent. It simply didn't have what it takes to reign over all things. Instead of consuming or fulfilling Midas' life, it tore his life apart. It brought tragic conflict instead of peace. That is what the powers typically do when they are treated as idols and are not obedient to the purposes of God.

Acid rain, for example, is the result of a conflict between economic and ecological systems. Addictions are conflicts between a whole cluster of powers. Alcoholism can be the result of our custom of social drinking, plus the economic power of advertising, plus certain psychological needs or powers all combined in conflict with the individual's biological system and our sociological relationships in family and workplace. Individual and social life is torn apart whenever any of the systems or powers assert themselves in ways that go beyond God's purposes for them. Looking again at our diagram, when one of the circles is inflated out of its

proper proportion, it crushes other systems, causing damage and malfunctions.

As Karl Marx knew so well, the power of money is one of the worst offenders. However, we could easily show that any of the powers in the world can be destructive when they function apart from the Reign of God. This includes even the religious law itself, as Paul argues in Romans and elsewhere. God is the only power capable of being God. Only God can hold the world together in peace. Only God can keep the systems in their proper places and functioning as they should. God does the work of salvation. God brings peace, healing and wholeness by being present and working in people as Spirit.

Some people like to think of salvation in terms of just one or two systems that govern life in the world. They want, for example, to reduce salvation to sociological, economic or political matters. That covers a lot of ground, but it isn't the whole of salvation because it doesn't deal with the whole of sin. Others insist that psychological matters such as guilt or fear of death are the main agenda for the Spirit's saving activity. This, too, is a reduction of the full gospel of God's Kingdom that Jesus taught and lived. The Reign of God is God's saving presence in any or all of the systems of creation. Let's now look at four ways in which God as Spirit is present for us.

First, God as Spirit is present in energy or power that comes through our bodies. The corrupted powers can only be redeemed and reconciled to God if there is another kind of power within the world. This power moves to bring us back, or forward if you like, into the Reign of God. This great power of God's Spirit comes not only into our minds but into our bodies (perhaps even more readily into our bodies than our minds).

The Hebrew people were not as mind-oriented as the Greeks. They spoke of the Spirit moving in people's bodies as breath - breath that gives life itself; and not only as breath, but as power that works in virtually every part of the body: heart, throat, blood, liver and even kidneys, which were thought to be the organ of good judgement.

Charles Davis, in a book entitled *Body as Spirit*, argues that God as Spirit comes to people in and through feelings as well as thoughts. Feelings are bodily phenomena. He says

that we need to learn to trust our feelings and act on them if we are to be responsive to the Spirit of God in us. According to Davis, the Spirit also comes in and through such bodily activities as dancing and sexual activity. Viktor Frankl, the great Jewish psychoanalyst, wrote a book entitled *The Unconscious God* in which he speaks of God as Spirit entering human life below the level of consciousness. Jesus spoke in bodily terms of hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of the Kingdom and we are all familiar with those who have "fire in their belly" for some good cause.

There can be no re-creation of the world unless there is an infusion of energy that works for healing and overcoming the corruption of systems. You might say there can be no salvation without regeneration. God is present as energy inside our physical being to start activity for the Kingdom's sake. God's energy fuels the work of salvation in the world. If we are to be co-workers with God in the re-creation of the world, we will have to wait upon the Spirit to give us the energy that the work of salvation requires. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Creation's return to the Reign of God requires the energy of the Spirit for regeneration. However, energy by itself can be chaotic or frenzied. Only energy with purpose or meaning is creative and re-creating. Paul Tillich defined Spirit as the unity of power and meaning. So the second point to be made is that God is present as "meaning" as well as power. God is present as Word and Wisdom as well as energy in the work of saving the world. God as Spirit gives ideas as well as energy. These ideas of God are the stuff of what we believe.

There is no more important idea than the idea of God and the Reign of God. The idea that the world and everything in it belongs to God is an idea that can change the world. This faith or belief is a gift of God as Spirit. The idea that we human beings are children of God and that God loves and forgives us is a transforming idea when accepted in faith. It helps us overcome the anxieties of guilt, meaninglessness and denial of death. The idea that the systems of the world are God's and that God has good purposes for the principalities and powers is also a transforming idea. It forces those who believe it to pursue the purposes of God's Kingdom for every

system that exists in the world.

These life and world transforming ideas are the content of our faith. We don't cook them up or create them for ourselves. They are enlivened in us by God's living Word which God as Spirit gives to us. It's the Spirit who takes the things of Christ and brings them home to us.

We have the task of interpreting what faith means for the systems of the world. If you look again at the diagram you've drawn, you will see some of the main ideas that we in the modern world use to analyse and understand systems of creation: physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, psychology, economics, politics, philosophy and so on. Our beliefs meet with these ideas and we have to work out the implications of faith for each of them. If we confuse the ideas with faith we may be serving the creature again instead of the Creator. However, if we refuse to relate our faith to prevailing ideas, the result is a distorted and reduced faith which doesn't hear God's purpose and intentions for the world. One example of confusing faith with ideology is people who insist that Christian tradition, especially the Scriptures, provide the authoritative foundation for a capitalist economic system. One example of refusing to relate faith to a prevailing ideology is the attack by Vatican authorities on liberation theologians who think Marxist sociological analysis can be useful in helping faith address corruption in the world's economic order. It's possible to compromise Christian faith with the influence of Marxist or other ideologies, but it takes willful bias to accuse these theologians or the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops of doing it.

In any case, if there's no Word of God in us relating to sociological or political ideas or, conversely, no Word of God that relates to personal or psychological aspects of life, we can be sure we're blocking the Spirit's redemptive work. According to John, Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, the Spirit will guide you into all the truth...he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine" (John 16:13-15). The whole world is God's. God calls people into covenant with the purpose of realizing the Reign of God in all the world: and with the purpose of bringing all the principalities and powers back into God's plan for them. God as Spirit gives the ideas of faith to people and helps them prophesy the implications of faith for all the systems and orders of the world.

A third way God as Spirit comes to re-create the world is as the power and meaning of love and trust.

Donald Evans, a United Church minister, has written what Gregory Baum calls a "modern classic" entitled *Struggle and Fulfillment*. In his book, Evans analyzes what he calls life-enhancing and life-destroying attitudes. Among the life-enhancing attitudes is trust, as well as concern, generosity, passion, friendliness and contemplation, which are all various forms of love. The world can't be redeemed, sanctified, re-created or liberated unless love and trust are present. It's God as Spirit who brings love and trust to life. According to Evans and many others, love and trust come first as gifts and then we struggle to enhance and increase them. We can't create love and trust by our own determination. They come as the power and meaning of grace. So we say, along with Protestant reformers: *Soli Deo Gloria* - "to God alone be the glory." Our part in salvation depends entirely on the gift of God's grace, God's very presence in and among us as Holy Spirit.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian and philosopher, spoke about the Spirit of God present for humanity in "the sphere between." The sphere between is the space where two or more people meet in the Spirit of love and trust. God as Spirit moves between and among people to draw them into "I-Thou" relationships. In "I-Thou" relationships people treat each other with love and trust. They don't manipulate each other like things, as in "I-It" relationships. God, present as the Spirit in "the sphere between", reconciles people to each other by re-uniting them in the Holy Spirit of love and trust. Love, Buber says, is to step into the presence of the other and listen. Again, he says, love is the responsibility of an "I" for a "you".

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, spelled out the nature of love in unforgettable terms. We are left with no doubt that the world can be redeemed and fulfilled only if love is given and received. "We may have faith strong enough to move mountains, but if we have no love, we are nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

When God as Spirit is present as love and trust, a miracle of grace transforms the world's people and systems. Walls of hostility are broken down. Fears are cast out. People are emptied of their greed, injustice and pride. Individuals and systems are healed and the world is restored to the Kingdom

There is one final way that God as Spirit is present in the world. It has to do with the fact the world exists in time. In time, everything is subject to coming into being and passing away. Time creates the difference between the way things are now and the way they might be in the future. Time marks change and all created things continually change. "All flesh is grass... the wind passes over it and it is gone and its place knows it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16).

God as Spirit is present to human beings in time and change, providing people with an essential element for the fulfillment of the world. That essential element is hope.

Without hope there could be no patient and persistent obedience in the work to which God has called humanity. Hope is as vital to human fulfillment as food and drink.

Viktor Frankl discovered in the Nazi concentration camps that even mundane, ordinary, everyday hopes, like the hope of rejoining a brother or sister for Saturday nights at the beer garden, could keep people alive and persevering in conditions that were killing most other people. Frankl developed methods of helping people discover their life-giving hopes and it became a prominent school of psychiatric treatment.

Theologians of hope, beginning in the early 1970's, rediscovered that the God we know in the Bible is a God who makes promises and fulfills promises. God's promises have a two-fold effect on people: they provide a judgement or critique on what presently exists and they suggest the good possibilities for the future. In hope, people confront the world's corruption with the promises of God. At the same time, hope announces the gospel of what God intends for the world's systems and the people who live under them.

Hope is like the light of a new day dawning, like the breath of a new wind blowing for change. Hope is the power and meaning of God as Spirit coming to us from the future with judgement and promise, visions, dreams and prophecy. The hope that we are given as followers of Jesus is the hope of God's victory over all the principalities and powers in the world.

In Jesus' death and resurrection we see the dynamics of hope in a definitive way. Hope is always a two-edged sword that judges as well as promises. This was true for Jesus. The hope Jesus had for the Kingdom of God impelled him to announce the Kingdom's claims against the principalities and

powers of his day—especially the Temple system. At the same time, he died trusting in God's promise that the Kingdom would come despite that death. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that he offered himself "through the eternal Spirit" and that "for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame" (12:2). The way of the cross for Jesus was the way of hope and the way of the Spirit.

We enter into the way of hope and the way of the Spirit when we take up the cross and follow Jesus. We enter when we announce the claims of God's Kingdom against the ruling powers and systems of the world. We enter when we proclaim God's promise for the Kingdom, which Paul calls a Kingdom of "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

God's presence as Spirit is the down-payment of the Kingdom. Part of that down-payment is the tenacious reality of hope that endures the cross and despises the shame. Jacques Ellul, in his book *Hope in an Age of Abandonment*, points out that hope occurs in situations of genuine darkness. The Spirit gives the power of hope when there is no salvation in sight. There is a story about an old Arab who was caught in a terrible sandstorm and, after many hours of struggle, barely made it back to his tent. Inside the tent, he lit a candle and took out the only food he had left—a few dates in a small bag. He pulled out a date, held it up to the candle and saw that it was all wormy. He opened the tent flap and threw it outside. He pulled out another date and looked at it. It, too, was wormy so he threw it outside. Then he blew out the candle and ate the rest of the dates. Hope is the power of survival that comes into our darkness and enables us to hunker down and make the best of bad situations. Paul, in Romans 8:24 and make the best of bad situations. Paul, in Romans 8:24 says, "We are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope." Hope is not the triumphant certainty that we see in the evangelists of our day who are certain that the secret rapture will rescue them from the impending apocalypse. Hope is more like the stance of Jesus in Gethsemane, more like groaning in travail while we wait for the glorious liberty of God's children.

There is much darkness and travail in our present world. We have to confess that we can't see solutions to many of the worst problems. We seem to be in a form of global Gethsemane. However, there is a big difference. We enter our

Gethsemane in the fellowship of Jesus. He entered in the presence of God alone.

We share the way of the cross with Christ. Our hope is decisively influenced by him. We even celebrate together while not denying, in any way, the darkness and conflicts of the principalities and powers. Our two main liturgical celebrations, baptism and holy communion, represent Jesus' dying and rising and our dying and rising with him. These are the means of grace through which God as Spirit empowers us with hope for our Gethsemanes. We rejoice in that hope.

In conclusion, what is the Holy Spirit about? The Spirit is about God present in the world, creating, redeeming, summing and working in covenant with people to realize the Reign of God over corrupted, alienated and broken individuals and systems. The Spirit is about God coming with the energy of regeneration, the ideas of faith, the reconciling power and meaning of love and trust, and the judging and promising visions of hope that mark the way of the cross. Thanks be to God for the Spirit's inexpressible gifts.

BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

