

# The Church and the Trinity I: The Church of the Spirit

Geoffrey Preston OP

*We are commemorating the tenth anniversary of the death of the outstanding young preacher Geoffrey Preston by publishing this trilogy. It was written not very long before he died and has not appeared in print before. Its other two parts, 'The Church of the Son' and 'The Church of the Father', we will be publishing in our July/August and September numbers.*

The Church is a communion, a fellowship, a togetherness in life and liturgy. And this togetherness, this *sobornost*, is rooted and grounded in the togetherness, the *koinōnia*, of the three-personed God. To this communion we have all been given access through the incarnation of the Word of God, by his own entering into *koinōnia* and *sobornost* with us. Those who share in this togetherness of *koinōnia* are in the Greek termed *koinōnoi*, a name that cannot be rendered in English with a word which preserves the same linguistic form as 'fellowship' or 'communion', and so will have to be translated 'partakers'. Christians partake with one another of goods both material and spiritual, and this is based on their common partaking in the life of the Godhead itself.

God's divine power has granted you all things which pertain to life and holiness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue, by which he has granted us his precious and exceedingly great promises, so that through these you may be *partakers (koinōnia)* of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world.

(2 Peter 1: 3—4)

Christians, then, according to this Second Letter of Peter, are said to have a fellowship with God which is a real sharing in the life of God as he is in himself, in his holiness, the way in which God is God. 'God chastens us for our profit', writes the author to the Hebrews, 'so that we may be partakers of his holiness' (11:10). So the fellowship is with the Father, with the Son made man, and with the Holy Spirit; in this fellowship lies the deepest nature of the Church.

'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!' (2 Cor. 13:14). Thus Paul's

270

closing words to his Corinthian converts. This fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the *koinōnia* of the Paraclete, can be appealed to by Paul, writing this time to the Christians at Philippi, as an unassailable datum, a given:

So if there is any comfort in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, fulfil my joy, that you be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind, doing nothing through faction or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting the other better than himself, not looking each of you to his own things but each of you also to the things of others. (2: 1–4)

Then follows the famous hymn about Christ who was in the form of God but humbled himself, emptying himself so as to be highly exalted. Christ here is put forward by Paul as a model for the Philippian fellowship: ‘Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who ...’ (2:5). We have here therefore on the one hand an assumption about the fellowship of the Spirit as a datum of Christian experience, and on the other a demand that this fellowship be expressed in the way people live together in a style of life based on that of Jesus himself. The Letter to the Hebrews also speaks of this same fellowship, describing Christians as those who

once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift ... were made partakers (*koinōnia*) of the Holy Spirit and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. (6: 4–5)

But what exactly is this ‘fellowship of the Spirit’? Is it perhaps the fellowship produced by the Holy Spirit? Or again is it rather an actual fellowship or partaking in the Spirit himself?

The Hebrews text I have cited clearly bears the latter meaning, but then it does not speak explicitly of ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’. If we look at that phrase’s grammatical form it is quite possible that the fellowship in question is a fellowship between men and women produced by the Holy Spirit in his activity among Christians. It would then be another name for the Church, the Church seen under the aspect of the fellowship of members with one another. There could be no objection of principle to this understanding, even if it were not (as seems likely) the strict meaning of these particular texts. There are those who argue strongly, for example, that the phrase *unitas Spiritus sancti*, ‘the unity of the Holy Spirit’, in the doxology at the close of the Canon of the Mass, refers precisely to this: the unity produced by the Holy Spirit, which we call the Church. Equally, however, from a grammatical point of view, the ‘fellowship of the Spirit’ could also suggest that the Spirit himself is what all Christians possess in common, in *koinōnia*. This would make better sense in the context of the Pauline greeting formula: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy

Spirit be with you all'. The people are to share in the Holy Spirit as the living source whence flows that *koinōnia* they have amongst themselves. The *koinōnia* produced by the Holy Spirit was and is a result of the *koinōnia* in the Holy Spirit. So, for example, in the Book of the Acts, the *koinōnia* to which the Whitsun converts commit themselves flows from the Spirit which has been poured out on the Church, the Spirit promised in Peter's Pentecost sermon to anyone who would be baptised in the name of Jesus. This gift of the Holy Spirit, for the author of the Acts, was the most significant *koinōnia* of those who repented and were baptised. It was a gift whose presence was ascertainable by a number of signs, mainly charismatic; and if it appeared not to have been given at baptism then steps had to be taken to remedy this deficiency. When people had received the Holy Spirit and become partakers of him then the Spirit produced a unity between them and their fellow-Christians. The unity, however, did not produce the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit in the Church is the gift of the Father. Paul speaks in the Letter to the Romans of 'the love of God which has been poured abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given to us' (5:5). The love is 'poured abroad' just as the Holy Spirit was 'poured out' on the disciples in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. Every time a man repents and is baptised what happened for the whole Church on that occasion happens for him as an individual. He enters into the communion of the Holy Spirit which the whole Church already enjoys, and through that communion in the Holy Spirit comes into communion with all his fellow Christians. The Church is the result of that communion of each person with the Holy Spirit. As Paul tells the Corinthians, it is 'in one Spirit that we are all baptised into one body' (1 Cor. 12—13). The Spirit produces the body of Christ, not the other way round, even if it is through the body that God pours out the Spirit of Pentecost. As we shall see in 'The Church of the Son', this means that the doctrine of the Church runs parallel to the doctrine of the Incarnation: as the physical body of Jesus is produced by the Holy Spirit from Mary the Virgin, so the Church-body of Jesus is also produced by the Holy Spirit in whom all believers share when they themselves enter into the experience of Pentecost. In the Lucan writings that experience is compared to the annunciation of Mary. The Holy Spirit comes down on the Church as on Mary—that Holy Spirit who is the 'power of the Most High', the 'power from on high' which Jesus promised the apostles at his last appearance to them after the Resurrection (cf. Luke 1:35; 24:49). This Pentecost experience sets the tone for the rest of the time of the Church, the time between Pentecost and the Parousia when, in Lucan terminology, 'this Jesus who was received up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as you beheld him going into heaven' (Acts 1:11). The Church between Pentecost and the Parousia is the Church of the Spirit.

As we have seen already, God gives the Spirit to all who believe and are baptised, and this gift is expected in the New Testament to have observable effects. Paul can tell the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit; he can assume that the Galatians knew they had received the Spirit through the hearing of faith; he can make the experience of the varied gifts of the Spirit in the Roman Church the basis for an appeal for unity and holiness. Rudolf Schnackenburg points out how the phrase 'God has given us the Spirit' in the Johannine letters has all the appearance of being a fixed formula from the early Christian catechism (cf. *Die Johannestriebe*, Freiburg 1965, pp. 209—215). The early Church understood that it was through this Spirit that her work was undertaken, through the Spirit that her own internal life was founded and her task of spreading the Gospel carried forward. In the Acts of the Apostles, time and again it is the Spirit who inspires the missionary activity of the Church. It is the Spirit who tells Philip to go and run alongside the Ethiopian's chariot; it is the Spirit who catches Philip away after the Ethiopian has been baptised; when the persecution that Saul has launched comes to its end with his conversion it is in the comfort of the Spirit that the Church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria is built up and multiplied; it is the Spirit who tells Peter that three men are looking for him after he has seen the vision of the sheet let down from the sky—the beginning of the story of Cornelius, the Gentile Pentecost; it is the Spirit who tells the Church at Antioch, 'Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them' (13:2). Similarly, it is in the Spirit that John sees the visions of the Apocalypse, and the Spirit who speaks words of support or judgment to the Churches mentioned in that book.

From the experience of the activity of the Spirit of God, from what the Spirit does and says to the Church at particular times and particular places, the move is made to an understanding of the abiding presence of the Spirit in the Church and in each believer. The Church can now be seen as the very sphere of the Holy Spirit. The most obvious image for the Church as the locus of the continuous presence of the Spirit is that of the temple. So Paul can ask the Corinthians:

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. (1 Cor. 3:16—18)

Or, again he may tell the Ephesians that the Gentiles are no longer strangers and sojourners, but they are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner-stone, in whom every building, fitly framed together, grows into a holy

temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together into a habitation of God in the Spirit. (2: 19–22)

The Temple is constructed 'in the Lord' as well as 'in the Spirit'. The work of building is the work of the Spirit, but the building has the pattern and plan of Jesus. It is not as though the Church is simply some institution with its basic charter or constitution laid down by its founder at some point in the past. The Church is a reality in the Spirit. The Spirit of God, which can only be spoken of in terms of wind and fire and water, is the agent for the building up of the Church. As such he is as important a pole of the mystery of the Church as is the Son himself. Not that he is free-floating or altogether unpredictable, a fluid element beside the fixed point of Jesus of Nazareth. We do not discern the working of the Holy Spirit on the basis of our own distorted psyches, by some sixth sense or hunch or whatever—even though it may feel like that at times. The pattern for the Spirit's activity is already set in the historical life of Jesus. Any activity which would run counter to that life cannot be seen as proposed by the Spirit of God, the Spirit whom God pours out on the crucified Jesus and through him on all who repent and are baptised into the death of Jesus.

The implication of this is that there must be no radical cleavage between Spirit and institution. If an institution really does snuff out the Spirit than it is not a Christian institution in the form in which it is presenting itself, although even then it may need radical reform rather than suppression. The work of the Spirit may be expected to produce institutions, to be a structuring activity. It may be expected that the Spirit's work will be of a piece with the creation of the fleshly body of Jesus of Nazareth, an incarnating activity, a love seeking to express itself in forms. This is the pattern we meet with in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Pauline Letters. The Spirit produces not only the charisms to be found in the churches but also their ministries and offices, their institutions. Thus, in Paul's farewell speech at Ephesus, he tells the elders of the Church: 'The Holy Spirit has made you *episkopi* to feed the Church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood' (Acts. 20:28). Likewise, the Council of Jerusalem believed that it had seemed good to the Holy Spirit as well as to them to lay upon Gentile Christians no greater burden than necessary things, precise requirements of a highly formal kind. Whatever tension Christians may experience between the work of the Spirit and the work of the Son, it must be said that there can be no ultimate incompatibility between Spirit and institution, Spirit and embodiment. The trinitarian form of the Church's *koinōnia* rules this out.

This trinitarian form of *koinōnia* is expressed liturgically in a number of ways. The greeting with which we began this discussion fits into a liturgical context, following as it does on Paul's invitation to the

brethren to 'salute one another with a holy kiss' (2 Cor. 13:12). It is the Spirit which makes all Christian liturgy possible. As Paul remarks in the Letter to the Romans:

As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the Spirit of bondage again unto fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by which we cry *Abba* (Father). The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs. (7: 14—17a)

And again, in the Letter to the Galatians:

When the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying *Abba* (Father), so that you are no longer a slave but a son; and if a son then an heir through God. (4: 4—7)

The work of the Holy Spirit in making us one new Man, the whole Christ, involves putting us in the position of Jesus vis-à-vis the Father, the position of those who come with frank openness before God and address him as *Abba*. In the liturgies of the Christian Church this is clearly recognised. So, for example, the Holy Spirit is called down on the waters of the font to make them capable of bringing into being people who will be sons of God, sons in the Son, born anew from water and the Holy Spirit. At confirmation, the Holy Spirit is called down on people to conform them still more closely to the Jesus who is filled with the Holy Spirit and gives the Holy Spirit. And, according to a very significant eucharistic tradition, the Holy Spirit is called down on the bread and wine to make them the Body and Blood of the Lord, to incarnate Jesus in the place of these elements so that we may be made into the body of Christ, living with his life. And whether or not a specific eucharistic prayer contains an explicit epiclesis of the Holy Spirit on the gifts, in every case the Father *does* consecrate the gifts by the action of the Spirit.

Again, in the sacrament of the forgiveness of post-baptismal sins, many rites make a particular appeal to the Church as the sphere of the activity and indwelling of the Spirit. In the Syrian rite, for example, much is made of a text in Genesis 6: 'My Spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for in their going astray they are flesh'. Pentecost is understood as the reversal of this sentence, just as the miracle of tongues reverses the judgment of God at the Tower of Babel. As the sin of man brought on the flood, the reversal of creation, the return of the primeval chaos, the taking away of the Spirit, so Pentecost is the new creation, foreshadowed by the dove, an image of the Holy Spirit, in its flight home with the olive branch in its beak, the branch that produces the oil of the Holy Spirit.

Restoration to the Church is parallel to the restoration of *koinōnia* in the Holy Spirit, and so the rite of reconciliation has to do with expressing this return of the Holy Spirit. As an ancient Syrian text, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, puts it:

The laying on of hands takes the place of baptism for the sinner, for we receive the communication of the Holy Spirit both through the laying on of hands and through baptism. (X)

In the sacrament of healing in the modern Roman rite, the prayer is that through this holy anointing and his loving mercy God may help (the sick man) by the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that (he) may be set free from his sins, healed and raised up.

In being thus the moving force behind the Church's prayer, and the means whereby God answers that prayer, the Spirit already puts the Church within the age to come, within the present of Jesus which is the future of the world. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of the last times, of the *eschaton*, of the reign of God. The Spirit, after all, was the promised Spirit. As Peter puts it in his Pentecost sermon (slightly adapting here the original text of the prophet Joel):

And it shall be in the last days, says God, I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh. On my servants and on my handmaids in those days will I pour forth of my Spirit, and they will prophesy. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the day of the Lord comes, that great and notable day. (Acts 2: 17a, 18, 20)

The Holy Spirit already puts Christians in some way into the last days, and yet the last day has not finally come in such a way that there is nothing left to hope for. The New Testament preserves this tension by talking about the Holy Spirit as 'first-fruits' or 'earnest'. The first metaphor is taken from Jewish ritual practice, in which at harvest time the first of the crop was dedicated to God; in accepting it, God accepted the harvest as a whole and assured it of his blessing. The Holy Spirit as presently experienced is a foretaste and a guarantee of the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the end, of the complete realisation of the reign of God. In experiencing the working of the Holy Spirit here and now (in charisms, in institutional ministries, in prayer and liturgical celebration) Christians are experiencing the reality of the age to come. At the same time they are not definitively there, not yet wholly and entirely in that age. 'Earnest' refers to the down-payment on money promised. In giving this earnest God has bound himself to give his kingdom in full. The Spirit already works in Christian lives, for the coming of the Kingdom in power. He produces in those lives his own fruit which Paul identifies as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance. It is in just such as these, he tells us, that the Kingdom of God consists. 'For the Kingdom of God is not

eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17). The Spirit who is the first fruits and earnest of the age to come also works and prays for that age to come. 'The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!"' (Apoc. 22:17). It is the Spirit who will at the last raise up our mortal bodies.

The Church which is the body of Christ is also, then, an epiphany of the Holy Spirit under the conditions appropriate to the in-between time, to the 'eschatological pause'. This is an epiphany in flesh, in the realm of the concrete and particular, of the given and historical, of what can be seen and heard. Peter says at Pentecost,

Being exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has poured forth this which you see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

The Spirit is not of its nature hidden and inaccessible. Rather, consistently with the action of God by his Spirit in the whole biblical tradition, it epiphanises in flesh and blood. It does so by its transforming activity, whether that be of a spectacular sort, as in some of the charisms, or of a less spectacular, as in such fruits of the Spirit as gentleness and faithfulness. It will epiphanise most typically (which does not mean in a timeworn way) in the difference it produces in the whole of the life of the community, institutions and all, in the increasing intensity of the one life we live with all men. It is on all flesh that the Spirit of God is poured out. All living things, insofar as they are alive, are manifestations of the Spirit of God. The Spirit poured out in the end-times is meant to make them what they were made to be, to incorporate them in the re-creation of the world which was created in the Word of God. The Spirit always goes with life. The resurrection life which has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth is a life which Christians share in already, and also a life to which they look forward at the last day. That life they share now by their *koinōnia* in the Holy Spirit, through whom God raised Jesus from the dead. That Spirit is now revealed as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the source of the new life which the Father gives to the Son. It is only possible to speak justly of the Spirit if we acknowledge him as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the go-between God, the God who joins Father and Son in love, and makes us sons in the Son, and thereby one flesh, one body.

The Spirit, then, is given by God when men repent and believe. He is the divine response to faith in the story of Jesus, the real presence of that story within us and amongst us. How this *koinōnia* of the Spirit is also a *koinōnia* with the Jesus whose story we have heard and believe we shall see in the next article.