

The Holy Spirit in the Teaching of Charles Simeon

Churchman 66/4 1952

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The theology of Charles Simeon “must be sought in the gigantic *Horae Homileticae*,” said one of his undergraduate protégés who later became one of his biographers, and it is in the XXI volumes of that work, consisting of no less than 2,536 sermons, that we find the theology of the preacher. A clear guide is given on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in a course of sermons preached before the University of Cambridge on that subject in November, 1831, at the age of 72, exactly five years before his death. These form a systematic statement of the doctrine which may be liberally expanded from the rest of that vast work. In addition, other sources are available such as notes taken by Abner Brown at his sermon-classes and undergraduates’ Friday evening parties, as well as several biographies and essays.

It is immediately apparent that Simeon’s theology is pre-eminently Biblical theology. His preface to the *Horae Homileticae* makes this clear from the beginning, and the quality of the volumes which follow confirm his claim that “he has endeavoured to derive from the Scriptures alone his views of religion; and to them it is his wish to adhere with scrupulous fidelity. . . . He is aware that he is likely, on this account, to be considered by the zealous advocates of human systems as occasionally inconsistent: but if he should be discovered to be no more inconsistent than the Scriptures themselves, he will have reason to be satisfied”. That he had no party axe to grind has already been suggested by Canon Smyth in his Birkbeck Lectures for 1937-8, where he states that “to Simeon himself the existence of ecclesiastical parties appeared regrettable”.¹ This corroborates the judgment of Brown made in 1863 that, if Simeon had lived then, “it is far from improbable that he would have become, without wish or effort on his own part, the leader of a very large middle party, not based on what are called broad Church principles, but on a simply scriptural avoiding alike of the extreme Church party, and the extreme Evangelical party”.²

It cannot be expected, therefore, that Simeon’s contribution to Anglican theology should be either extravagant or speculative. “His theology shows in him no special power as a thinker; and it ceases to interest when it ceases to be immediately practical.”³ This judgment is reasonably accurate, for on the level of dogmatic theology we find that in his doctrine of the *person* of the Holy Spirit, Simeon was an orthodox Anglican with no special insights to offer. But on the level of pastoral theology, and therefore especially in the doctrine of the *work* of the Holy Spirit, he had a practical contribution to make. Two words sum up his contribution to pneumatology, as to theology: it is scriptural and it is practical. This alone goes far to account for the fact that his doctrine of the Spirit was largely responsible for a revival within the Church of England, giving a dynamic life to his ministry at the turn of a century which had all too often believed that the equation, Christianity equals Morality, was the only truth worth knowing.

I

His starting-point was that of an essentially apostolic and unspeculative doctrine of God. Whilst Father, Son and Spirit are One and are therefore concerned in every divine activity, each has a proper function within the economy of redemption. Therefore the only way to a

full knowledge of the Trinitarian God is to know each person in His fulness. This meant that Simeon, unlike many of his successors, gave full weight to the Father and the Spirit, and would not allow “the fulness of Christ” to overshadow either. The adequacy of our doctrine of God is in exact proportion to the degree in which we have experienced the presence and power of each person of the Godhead in our own lives.

“How astonishing are our obligations to each person in the Sacred Trinity! The Father is the great source and fountain of all our blessings: Christ is the procurer of them, and the medium through whom they come: and the Holy Spirit is the agent by whom they are conveyed to us. Let us hold fellowship with each in his distinct office and character, and acknowledge with gratitude their united exertions” (Sermon 2002).

The phrase “let us hold fellowship with each” is the key to Simeon’s theology, as indeed to all theology, as Professor Turner reminds us when he says that “The *lex orandi* was . . . always prior to the *lex credendi*”.⁴

The distinct personality of the Spirit is demonstrated very simply from scripture. “He sustains the offices of a person, being a Comforter (John xiv. 16-17), an Intercessor (Rom. viii. 26), a Teacher (Jn. xiv. 26), a Witness (Rom. viii. 16). He also performs the acts of a person; commanding (Acts xiii. 2-4), forbidding (Acts xvi. 6-7), judging (Acts xv. 28)” (Sermon 1752). There is no attempt to define what is meant by personality in relation to the person of God beyond the mere statement that “in reference to this subject we use the term persons because there is no other so suitable” (Sermon 2465). Simeon is content to assert, as Peter’s opening words to Ananias, “Why hath Satan filled thy heart to lie to the Holy Ghost?” (Acts v. 3) make clear, that to the Apostle the Holy Spirit is a person and not an abstract quality; so his closing words, “Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God” (Acts v. 4), make it plain that He is God. Beyond this, the divinity of the Spirit is seen most clearly in the realm of soteriology where the equality of the Father, Son and Spirit claim our faith. “For as, if Christ be not God we can have no hope from His death, so, if the Holy Spirit be not God, we can have no hope from His agency” (Sermon 1982).

The statement of the *Nicaenum* that the Holy Ghost “proceedeth from the Father and the Son”, is equally simply interpreted.

“To exercise mercy was God’s desire: and that he might exercise it in consistency with His own immaculate holiness, He determined to give His only-begotten Son, that through Him, and in His Sacred Person, His hatred of sin might be made manifest; and to give His Holy Spirit also that, through His effectual agency, His love of holiness might be displayed” (Sermon 1221).

In this sense there is a true subordination of both the Son and the Spirit to the Father, not within the economy of personality, but within the economy of redemption. The Son proceeds from the Father, and the Spirit from the Father by the Son. Hence, whilst the Father is the source of the Spirit, the way in which He has made Him available to man in His fulness is through the Son, the plain meaning of the New Testament being that the Glorified Christ received the gift of the Spirit in His plenitude from the Father in order to give Him to His Church. This being so, then the Spirit proceeds in a special way from Christ, albeit “according to the Father’s will” (Sermon 1246).

The headings of Simeon’s sermon on “The Personality and Office of the Holy Spirit” (Sermon 1701) give a useful summary. “He is a distinct Person. . . . Yet, though distinct from the Father he is, in his essential properties, equal to him. . . . Nevertheless, in some respects

he is subordinate both to the Father and the Son.” The first respect in which he is subordinate is “in the order of subsistence, as the Father is not of the Son, but the Son of the Father, so neither the Father nor the Son proceeds from the Spirit, but the Spirit from them, inasmuch as he proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son”. The second aspect of His subordination is “in the order of operation”, that is, in His office in the economy of redemption. Canon Fison has diagnosed the Spirit’s subordination as resulting from His “incurable tendency to self-effacement”,⁵ and Simeon notes the four ages of this trait in His divine character.

“Before the time of Christ’s incarnation . . . he inspired the prophets to foretell the things in relation to His sufferings and glory. During the days of our Lord’s ministry on earth . . . it was by the Spirit that Christ cast out devils, and performed his other miracles. . . . After He had ascended into heaven it was then that the Spirit began fully to execute the office assigned to him, and to ‘glorify Christ’ before an ungodly and unbelieving world. To this very hour does the Spirit bear the same part ‘convincing the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgement’ in order to magnify Christ and to enlarge His kingdom” (ibid).

There is, then, an orthodox subordination of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. “But the inferiority is not personal, but official; not as the Sacred Three subsist in themselves, but as they sustain and execute their respective offices in the economy of redemption” (Sermon 1863). Such is Simeon’s statement of the person of the Holy Spirit. It is deficient in that it has no deep insight into the unity in Trinity beyond its mere statement as a fact. It has, however, what the generality of Christians lack: that is, a fully scriptural appreciation of the Spirit’s person deduced from His work in redemption. The result is a sound orthodoxy which will never allow Him to be relegated to “a poor third” and consequently thought of, however unwittingly, as less than personal.

II

Whilst we must depend most fully on the observed work of the Spirit in redemption and post-Calvary experience for our knowledge of Him, the fact remains that the relationship between man and the Spirit began, not at Pentecost, but at the moment of creation. Simeon reminds us, as we come to consider the work of the Spirit, that “None but he who moved upon the chaos, and formed it into order and beauty can new create the soul” (Sermon 2192). St. John began his Gospel with the formula of Genesis i. 1 because the re-creation of man made possible through Christ and made effective through the Holy Spirit is the new creation directly parallel with the original creation. Fr. Lionel Thornton has spoken of “the essential repetition inherent in spiritual truth”, and this must be the basis for all legitimate typology which seeks, not to distort the old to verify the new, but to see the unchanging pattern of the divine activity running through both. The Λόγος [Word] and the Πνευμα του Θεου [Spirit of God] are seen at work in both of the covenants of God. In Gen. i the ‘ruach Jahweh’ [God’s Spirit/breath] is joined with the ‘dabar Jahweh’ [God’s Word] as the creative ενεργεια [working]. The New covenant *is* new, because in it a new creation comes into being by a second concerted act of the Word and the Spirit. This is stated by Simeon with a deceptive naïveté when he says, “Methinks there is some analogy between the first creation of all things and this new creation which takes place in the soul of man” (Sermon 1117). It is, however, the ruling thought in all that he wrote and believed concerning “the Lord and Giver of Life”.

During the interim period between the Fall and the Atonement the work of the Spirit was to glorify Christ as the promised Saviour. “It was by the Holy Ghost that Christ spake in the ministry of Noah to the antedeluvian world (1 Pet. iii. 18-20), and instructed all his people in

the wilderness (Neh. ix. 20). It was by the Holy Ghost that he moved the prophets in succeeding ages to declare future events (2 Peter i. 21), and especially to predict his sufferings and the glory that should follow” (Sermon 1863). From the Fall at least (which is the only period we know) the Holy Spirit has revealed the mind, will and purpose of God to those who have sought to be reunited with Him, inspiring many of them to record His revelation in the written word. Record and revelation, both before and after Pentecost, are the work of the same Spirit who interprets them to the seeker in every age. Therefore the primary medium of His inspiration and revelation is the Holy Bible because the gift of prophecy in men is an awareness of His activity in redemption in their own generation, verifiable not so much by its fulfilment as by its distinctive pattern.

We should therefore expect the New Covenant to begin with the work of the Spirit in creation and we find it in the Virgin Birth, which is not seen as an isolated miracle but as the only possible beginning to a new order which must be sustained by the Creator-Spirit at every point. This creative activity of the Spirit is the primary fact of the New Creation, seen by Simeon not merely in the genesis of our Lord but in the whole of His ministry both on earth and in heaven. He “qualified the man Jesus for his work, and upheld him in it, and wrought miracles by him in confirmation of his mission and raised him up from the dead, and bore witness to him in a visible manner on the day of Pentecost” (Sermon 165). At His baptism our Lord “was consecrated to his prophetic office by a visible unction of the Holy Spirit” (Sermon 1004). Immediately, He was impelled by the Spirit to meet the devil on the battleground of His own heart” and by that same Spirit was enabled to vanquish that mighty foe” (Sermon 1863). Having therefore defeated the evil one in Himself by the power of the Spirit of holiness He was able to defeat Him in others. “It was by the Spirit that Jesus cast out devils and performed his other miracles” (Sermon 1701), as He Himself said (Mt. xii. 28).

“By the same divine Agent also was he assisted in offering himself a sacrifice upon the cross; for ‘through the Eternal Spirit, he offered himself without spot to God’” (Sermon 119: Heb. ix. 14). By Him also was He afterwards resurrected, for “the Spirit raised him from the dead and thereby declared him to be the Son of God with power” (Sermon 2230; Rom. i. 4). The Ascension falls naturally into place as the culminating triumph of a life whose purpose was union with God. But it was a triumph in the Roman sense in which Christ entered into glory. “As conquerors in their triumphs were wont to scatter gifts and largesses among the people, so he received from his Heavenly Father the Holy Spirit, and poured him forth upon the Church in all his gifts and graces” (Sermon 2108).

This pattern of Christ’s incarnation is the pattern for His Church as the extension of that incarnation. As the Holy Spirit was the motive power in Christ, and as Christ is the ἀρχηγός [Prince] of the redeemed community, so the Holy Spirit is intended to be the dynamic in us, and Simeon can say that, “as Christ is ALL in procuring salvation *for* us, so the Holy Spirit is ALL in imparting salvation *to* us” (Sermon 1329). The Incarnation was, in essence, “the Holy Spirit co-operating with the Lord Jesus Christ in effecting the redemption of a ruined world” (Sermon 165). The revelation of that Incarnation, culminating in Atonement as reconciliation and Pentecost as re-creation, is that there is One God in Three Persons and that He is Love. This is the basic statement of the New Testament, wherein “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are represented as concurring in the great work of Redemption: the Father sending his Son into the world; the Son laying down his life for us; and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, to apply that redemption to our souls” (Sermon 487). It is here, in the work of the Spirit in the application of Christ’s Atonement to the individual, that Simeon’s main emphasis appears.

The prevenience of the Holy Spirit is summed up in the epigram, “As Christ died for all, so does the Holy Spirit strive with all” (Sermon 2459). Wherever a man begins to look to Christ for salvation the initiative has been supplied by Him whose purpose is to glorify Christ. St. Paul cautioned the Ephesians not to “grieve” the Spirit (iv. 30) and the Thessalonians not to “quench” Him (v. 19) because there can be neither salvation in the first place, nor sanctification in the second, where He is ignored. Especially is this true when He speaks through His primary medium of revelation, the Holy Bible. “The Church has received light from God in all ages and a mass of knowledge has thus been acquired for the benefit of the Church. But the Holy Spirit while he has thus been teaching, has never explicitly pointed out whether He has taught this man or that man; whether he has taught this truth or that truth; but has given us only one standard of all—that is, Scripture. Hence we may hear all the interpretations which have ever been given, but we know not that one of them is more true than another, save by comparing it with the mass of Scripture.”⁶ It is, in fact, most often by this Word, and always in accordance with it, “that God acts. Miracles gave credibility to the testimony which Christ and his Apostles bore: but it was the testimony itself, as applied by the Holy Spirit to the soul, that wrought effectually upon the hearts of men. And in all ages it is the same word, either read or preached, that is effectual to convert them to God” (Sermon 2214).

III

The purpose of the Spirit’s striving with men through the Word is to bring about their re-creation or re-birth in Christ, which must then be followed by a lifetime of sanctification. Our Lord said that, “Except a man be born from above (R.V. marg.) he cannot see the Kingdom of God” (Jn. iii. 3), and amplified this statement by defining the new creation as being “born of water and the Spirit” (Jn. iii. 5). Since this was the *raison d’être* of the Incarnation, Simeon reminds us that “we must seek the renewing influences of the Spirit because our nature is altogether corrupt. . . . When therefore we hear of the indispensable necessity of being born again, and of the impossibility of being saved except by faith in Christ, let us remember that these are not the dogmas of a party, but doctrines consequent upon our fallen state, and therefore of universal and infinite importance” (Sermon 1861).

Man really needs salvation, and since “a thing must exist before we can know that it exists . . . therefore the knowledge of our acceptance with God cannot precede that acceptance” (Sermon 1662). Therefore the work of the Spirit in convicting the world in respect of sin, righteousness and judgement (Jn. xvi. 8-11) refers not only to the κόσμος [cosmos] as the Johannine antithesis of the spiritual world, but also to the individuals who are part of that world-order until they are united with Christ. Until the Spirit begins His work of conviction a man cannot see that he is alienated from God. There is an external testimony of the Spirit to the κόσμος [cosmos] which remains the same in all ages. There is, within that external testimony, an internal testimony to those who are part of that world in every generation. “To them the Spirit shews the number, the greatness, the malignity of their sins; and particularly, the guilt, the danger of that unbelief in which they have ignorantly lain” (Sermon 1702). By this means the need of man is consciously aroused in him by a Spirit-given brokenness, an office which can only be described as παρακλητος [paraclete] (“one called to assist another’s need”).

In the second place, the Spirit's work is to convince the world of the righteousness of Christ. His death bore the signs of criminal execution, but when the Spirit came He vindicated the stigma of the Cross and showed it to be a case of murder. In the individual, the corresponding Work is to indicate the Cross as the place where man's implication in the rebellion of the κόσμος [cosmos] against God is proved and expiated at the same time "For this also a divine agency is wanted, as much as for the souls before God. We may indeed acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is the appointed Saviour. We may even contend for it as an article of our creed, and write learned dissertations upon it; but all this is widely different from that kind of view which the Spirit of Christ gives to the believing soul" (Sermon 1865).

In the third place this leads to the conviction that judgement has been pronounced with *einmaligkeit* [unique] certainty. Pentecost proved to the world that God had acted in history and liberated His people. "He shewed to the first Christians that Satan was a vanquished foe: by the descent of the Spirit it was manifest that Christ had triumphed" (Sermon 1702). In the individual this κρισις demands unconditional surrender to the Victor, and when this is made the Holy Spirit cooperates with Christ in an act of new creation, achieving thereby the logical end of salvation in man.

"To state precisely how this work shall be wrought in us is beyond our power" (Sermon 1117). "It is called in Scripture 'a new creation'; and a man can no more create himself anew than he could create himself at first" (Sermon 1864). But whatever may be the mechanics of this transformation it is clear that what God has provided in the economy of redemption is atonement, re-creation and sanctification—in that order. "God provides for our acceptance with him, through the blood of his dear Son; for our renovation after his own divine image, through the influences of his Good Spirit; for our perseverance in the ways of holiness even to the end" (Sermon 307). It is therefore only at this point that Simeon passes with equal prolificacy and conviction to the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, through his treatment of which runs the theme that the fruits of the Spirit are the signs and assurances of His primary work in salvation as the Agent of Christ, and therefore cannot precede it.

In such a statement of the doctrine there is much that is conspicuous by its absence and notably any real attempt to define the κοινωνία [communion/fellowship] of the Spirit and reach a balanced statement of the relation it must have to the Spirit-filled individual. But it is also true that it serves to redress an equal omission in another direction. Theology has often asked, "What will the Holy Spirit work in us when we are Christ's?" But perhaps there is a prior question. "What will the Holy Spirit work in us in order that we may be Christ's?"

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Endnotes:

- 1) *Simeon and Church Order*, p. xi.
- 2) Abner Brown, *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev. Chas. Simeon, M.A.* (1863), pp. 64-5.
- 3) Simpkinson, *Typical English Churchmen* (1902), p. 284.
- 4) *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (1952), p. 13.

- 5) *The Blessing of the Holy Spirit*, (1950), p. 11.
- 6) Abner Brown, *ibid.*, p. 297.