

ON THE SPIRIT AS LOVE*

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Abstract

This contribution explores the relationship between the Spirit and love within the context of trinitarian theology. The theological fecundity of the idea of the spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son is examined in seven theses. The article concludes with some reflections on the implications of these considerations for the “filioque” controversy.

1. The basic idea – the Spirit as love

The idea of the Spirit as being love has become a leitmotif of western theology. Its speculative roots are to be found in the psychological models of the trinity that began with Justin Martyr’s Christology, were developed to a high point in Augustine’s thought and were polished by the medievals. Its biblical roots are to be found in the close connection made by several texts between the Spirit and God’s works of love. Jesus speaks of the Spirit in the context of unity and love (Jn 14:15-31), Paul ascribes the pouring of God’s love into our hearts to the Spirit (Rom 5:5) and love is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit’s presence (Gal 5:22).

Moreover, if one traces the entire biblical picture of the Spirit, one major thread of thought is that the Spirit is the way in which God is actively present amongst God’s people. In the New Testament, the Spirit becomes also the way in which Christ is actively present amongst his people. The most characteristic mark of the Spirit, therefore, is divine “presence”. And God’s presence is a manifestation of God’s love.

However, it is doubtful if the centrality of the idea of the Spirit as love would have taken root were it not for Augustine, who explicitly spoke of the Spirit as the love bond uniting Father and the Son, the “inexpressible communion”, as he put it, between Father and Son.

As it developed in western thought, then, the Spirit came to be connected with God’s love. More precisely, the Spirit came to be seen as the love that Father and Son shared and had in common for all eternity.

2. The development of the idea – two streams

The idea of the Spirit as love expressed itself in medieval times in two ways.

The first way was one that saw the Spirit as being not strictly love but rather the *fruit* of an act of love. We find this development taking place in Anselm of Canterbury’s thought and brought to its climax in that of Aquinas. Aquinas drew a strict parallel between the Son’s procession from the mind of the Father and the Spirit’s procession from the will that Father and Son held in common.

The idea of the Son proceeding from the mind of the Father goes right back to at least Justin Martyr. The basic image here is that of our minds producing an idea, a mental

* This essay is a gathering together in one place of ideas already published elsewhere, mostly in my book *The Spirit of Love*, London: Chapman, 1987. For this reason this contribution has been left uncluttered with numerous academic references, which can be found in the book in question. The purpose of this contribution is therefore to draw together in one place material that are scattered throughout the book so that the central link between the Spirit and love and the implications thereof can stand out more clearly.

“Word”. Just as our minds do that, so too does the Father produce a radiant image or idea or “word” of himself. The Son, whom the scriptures call the image, the word of God, is that inner divine “idea”. He is the fruit of a single divine act of self-understanding.

Aquinas applied the same reasoning to the Spirit. Just as an act of intellection results in an inner idea so too an act of love, within the divinity, results in an inner reality. However, Aquinas had no name for this inner reality because we have no psychological experience of an act of love terminating in such an inner reality. But for him the Spirit was the fruit of an act of divine love in exactly the same way as the Son is the fruit of an act of divine self-knowledge.

As noted above, this position does not, strictly speaking, see the Spirit as love. Rather does it see the Spirit as something *produced by* love. The love that generated the Spirit is seen as one flowing from the single will shared by Father and Son and directed towards the divine nature, more specifically towards the divine goodness. Father and Son love the goodness that they share in common and from it flows the Spirit – almost as an offspring, as one medieval theologian, Richard of St Victor would put it.

The second way in which the idea of the Spirit as love developed was more in line with Augustine’s own thought. This was to see the Spirit not simply as the result of an act of love by Father and Son for the divine goodness but as the very love binding Father and Son to each other. Here the image is not of a love for a third reality – the divine goodness – producing some inexpressible fruit that is the Spirit. Rather is it an image of Father and Son turning to *each other* in love and the Spirit being the very love that binds them to each other. Here the Spirit is identified with love itself and not simply with something produced by love.

Of course, this does not mean that the Spirit is not a person. As classical Trinitarian theology pointed out, the divine “persons” are nothing other than the three “shapes”, for want of a better word, in which the undivided divine nature subsists for all eternity. The Spirit, then, would be the divine nature existing in a third “shape”, viz., as the love proceeding from Father and Son.

While both perspectives are enriching theologically, I believe that the second way of viewing the Spirit as love is the preferable of the two – viz., that the Spirit is love itself, the bond of love binding Father and Son to each other. It brings about a better synthesis of a variety of aspects of Christian belief about the Spirit. Let me give some examples of this.

3. The theological fecundity of the idea of the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son

3.1 It reflects more accurately the Spirit’s role of mediating Father and Son to us and of uniting us to each other

If the Spirit appears in the scriptures as the way in which Father and Son are present to us then, on the ancient theological principle that the economic trinity reveals the immanent trinity, we can argue that this is so because the Spirit is the way in which Father and Son are present to each other. To see the Spirit as the very bond of love uniting Father and Son to each other fits more logically into that picture than the idea of the Spirit as nothing more than the fruit of an act of love for the divine goodness possessed in common by Father and Son.

Moreover, it explains better why it is the Spirit that is seen as the one who brings about unity. For as the bond of love within the divinity, the Spirit is also the bond of love binding us to Father, Son and each other.

3.2 It explains what differentiates the Spirit's procession from that of the Son

One of the earliest conundrums that speculative theology posed concerning the Spirit was Origen's question: why is the Spirit not a Grandson – the Son of the Father's Son. Behind this seemingly frivolous question was the more serious one of what was it about the Spirit's procession that distinguished it from that of the Son. The Son's procession was conceived of as the sort of thing required to produce offspring: a generation. This was of course rooted in the biblical tradition that Jesus was the Father's only begotten Son. But what about the Spirit's procession?

The east was not able to give a satisfactory speculative answer to this question, as far as I know. The most that was said was that it was not a generation and that its character was affected by the prior presence of the son.

In contrast, the west was able to provide an answer by distinguishing between a procession that flows from the divine intellect and one that flows from the divine will. Again it was Aquinas who took up the ideas preceding him and welded them into an impressive theological synthesis.

The procession from God's mind has as its purpose the production of an image of the Father – the Word. And since Aristotle had defined generation as being the production of like from the substance of like, such a procession fulfilled the basic definition of a generation. On the other hand, the procession of the Spirit flowed from an act of love. As such its purpose was not the production of an image but something more immediately related to action. Hence it did not fulfil the definition of generation and so had to be a distinct procession.

This explanation was one made by the proponents of the idea that the Spirit is only the fruit of love, not love itself. It remains valid within that perspective, since the point of the argument is that love is not directed towards producing an image, which is an essential component of the concept of producing offspring.

However, the explanation is given still further support if one holds that the Spirit is the bond of love itself, between Father and Son. For this position removes even the semblance of the Spirit being an "offspring" of the love that Father and Son have for the divine nature.

3.3 It makes love something specific to the Spirit and not just an 'appropriation'

One of the objections to the idea that the Spirit is love is that love is something common to all three of the divine persons. The most one can say, it is argued, is that love is "appropriated" to the Spirit because of the Spirit's immediate role in our sanctification. In similar fashion, the act of creation is "appropriated" to the Father, even though both Son and Spirit were equally involved in it.

As is well known, the doctrine of appropriations rested on the principle that whatever the divinity did that had an effect outside of it, *ad extra divinitatem*, was common to all three persons. The reason is that all three share a single divine nature and therefore every divine action directed to the created world must proceed equally from all three persons. Indeed, Aquinas took this so seriously that he somewhere remarked that strictly speaking not only the first but also the second and third persons of the trinity are our "Father". Which shows how haywire you can go when you indulge in the sort of speculation I am indulging in here.

What went wrong was that while it is true that every divine action flowing beyond the borders of the divinity proceeds *equally* from all three persons, it does not flow *indistinguishably* from all three. Every such action flows always from the Father and the

Father alone as *source*, from the Son and the Son alone as *image* and from the Spirit and from the Spirit alone, as the love that binds Father and Son to each other.

Being source stamps the Father's nature and is unique to the Father. The Father indeed is love too. But what qualifies the Father's love is that it is the ultimate source of all love within the divinity and the entire creation. Hence, being a source rather than being love is specific to the Father. Being an image, being the revelation of the Father is what stamps the Son's nature and is unique to the Son. The Son is indeed love too. But what qualifies that love is that it is the image of the Father's love, the revelation of the Father's love. Hence, it is being an image rather than love that is unique to the son. What about the Spirit? If one accepts the idea that the Spirit is not just the fruit of love but the very bond of love uniting Father and Son to each other, then the answer is that the Spirit's nature is stamped by being such a bond. Like Father and Son, the Spirit too is love. But unique to the Spirit is the fact that that love is not qualified by something other than love's bonding character. What defines the Spirit therefore is something intrinsic to the very nature of love. Hence, love is not simply an appropriation but a *proprium*, a defining characteristic of the Spirit.

3.4 It explains the Spirit's 'facelessness'

Both Father and Son have clear images, images that we can grasp and identify with. We all know what a Father is. We all know what a Son is. And these images give us some insight into the nature of both. The images we have for the Spirit are not as helpful. While it is true that the root image – wind, breath – gives us some insight into the idea that the Spirit is the way in which God is actively, powerfully present amongst God's people – such images do not give us any direct insight into the Spirit's nature. The images of dove and fire are not more helpful for that purpose either. In short, the Spirit has always been in a sense the "faceless" one of the Trinity. Why?

Reasons given have varied. "Spirit" is a mysterious thing. For Aquinas, the reason was that we had no experience of the internal fruit of an act of love and therefore no experiential image to draw on. However, if one views the Spirit as the bond of love binding Father and Son to each other, the reason becomes clear. As love, the Spirit seeks no face other than that of the beloved. Love seeks not to draw attention to itself but rather to draw attention to the beloved. The very facelessness of the Spirit is therefore a pointer to the Spirit's nature: the love that binds, the love that seeks not its own face but that of the beloved.

This is confirmed by the biblical evidence to the Spirit's nature. The Spirit is always in the Old Testament *God's* Spirit and in the New Testament the *Father's* Spirit or the Spirit *of the Son*. The Spirit is always mediating the Father to us or the Son to us. The Spirit does not seek to implant its own face but the face of the Father or the Son – or of neighbour – into our hearts.

This is also why it is theologically impossible to appeal to the Spirit as bringing a revelation that is irreconcilable with or totally independent from that of Christ. One cannot solve the problem that religious pluralism poses to Christianity by separating Christ and the Spirit and giving a wider or more independent or more authoritative form of activity to the latter. That was the mistake made by the Montanists and it has been repeated down the ages.

3.5 It gives a satisfying answer as to why the Trinitarian processions end with the Spirit

Another theological conundrum that has faced speculative theologians has been why there are only two processions, giving rise to only three persons within the Godhead. What is it

that makes the Spirit not only the third but the final person within the Godhead, the final completion of the divinity, as theologians put it from patristic times?

One obvious response to such a question is: we aren't God and therefore we don't know. The scriptures tell us nothing about it and so we should observe similar reverential silence. But the process of faith seeking understanding must be prepared to face such questions too, if there is any possibility of finding an answer.

And so answers were given. The most enduring one is that God's two faculties of intellect and will are exhausted through an infinite act of knowledge and an infinite act of love. For Richard of St Victor, the twelfth century theologian, the Spirit's presence is necessary for the completion of God's love. The Father, he held, is gratuitous love, the Son is received love and the Spirit prevents this cosy twosome from becoming a selfish one by being the fruit of their turning away from each other, whereby they produce a third form of love, a *condilectus*, a co-beloved.

But the answer that I would provide is drawn from the Spirit's character as the bond of love. And it focuses on the unity of the divinity. The unity of Father and Son has always been founded on the physical fact of their sharing one undivided divine nature. However, that is but a "physical" unity, for want of a better word. For such a unity to be the personal unity that is at the heart of Trinitarian theology it needs to go beyond the physical and become a unity in love. In short, my explanation is that the Spirit completes not simply the divine nature but the divine unity by bonding Father and Son in a never-ending love-relationship. That, one could surmise, is why no further processions or structuring of the divine nature is needed. Needless to say, one can do no more than provide what seems to be the most meaningful explanation, aware of the fact that it can never provide a logical proof for the inner structure of the Godhead.

3.6 It illuminates how the Spirit guides us into all truth

Part of the Christian tradition is that the Spirit guides us into all truth. How does the Spirit do this? The normal answer is by illuminating our minds, by giving us insights that we would otherwise not have. But how is *this* done? Well, obviously the ways and the workings of God are mysterious and some questions we simply cannot answer because we are not God. But some things can be ruled out and some other things need to be brought in. First of all, we can rule out the idea that the normal way in which the Spirit guides us into all truth is by pouring new information into our minds. Apart from the fact that such a procedure would by-pass the sort of historical creatures that we are, there is also the other obvious fact that the Spirit's guidance in no way frees the Church from error. Our very divisions indicate that. But the same errors make it clear that there is an element within us that makes our grasp of the truth prone to error, despite the promptings and guidance of the Spirit.

What is that element? Well, clearly the limitations of our brain constitute one important such element. But another element is our sinfulness. Our sinfulness blinds us to the truth. If that is so, then our sanctification must go hand in hand with a greater openness to the truth. And since sin is at root the refusal to love and sanctification is freeing up of our ability to do so, then a major factor in our grasp of the truth is the extent to which we love: love God, love neighbour and love the truth.

It is quite a sobering thought that the amount of error that has crept into our communities, taken root there and entrenches our divisions, our bickering of who is right and who is wrong, our inability to see where our separated brothers and sisters are coming from – it is sobering to think that all that is there because none of us love enough. People often use the phrase "let the Spirit breathe" and by that they mean, pull down institutional

barriers to freedom. However, the Spirit's breath is the breath of love and it is our own lack of love that stifles the Spirit far more than institutional structures. Indeed, often enough those structures are but the expression of our lack of love.

The Spirit's nature as the bond of love therefore gives us this insight into how the Spirit guides us into all truth: it does so by giving us a love for the truth and since the foundational truth is love of God and love of neighbour, it does so by stirring up within us a love for God and neighbour.

One of my particular interests has been the relationship between love and truth and the role played by love in illuminating our minds. That love illuminates is an idea that goes right back to the early Church. In John 7:17 Jesus tells us that being prepared to do God's will is the key to seeing the truth that he comes from God. However, it was especially Augustine who developed a theoretical framework to underpin love's epistemological role. This framework consisted of three basic elements. The first element was that love conformed one to God. If God is Love, then the more we love the more like God we become and therefore we are able to understand God's truth so much better. For like is understood by like. The second element is that love united one to God. Hence one knew God not simply abstractly but concretely – through being in immediate touch with God. The third element was that love focused the mind's eye on the beloved.

These ideas were taken up and repeated in medieval times, especially by the monastic theologians. In particular the idea that love united one to God flowered into a theology of the Spirit's gift of wisdom that saw wisdom's special property as being a combination of intellectual and experiential knowledge. One not only saw God with the mind's eye but "tasted" God through the unity forged with God by the Spirit within us. Hence one finds repeated endlessly the text "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8), in which vision and experience were seen to be linked.

There is then a wealth of material in the Christian tradition for the thesis that the Spirit illuminates and guides by empowering us to love and by uniting us in love to the God whose truth we seek to understand. The idea that the Spirit is love itself, the very bond of love binding Father and Son to each other and us to them and to each other – that idea provides the best theological basis for such a thesis.

3.7 It provides grounds for discerning the Spirit's presence beyond the visible borders of Christianity

When one examines the history within biblical times of the signs of the Spirit's presence, we can see a shift from focusing on the spectacular (speaking in tongues, the miraculous, etc.) to what can counted as ordinary (e.g., love).

The spectacular signs of the Spirit remain ambiguous without love. That is why Paul wrote that he could speak with the tongues of angels or even become a spectacular martyr to the Christian cause and it would all be worthless without love. It is love that turns everything into a genuine sign of the Spirit's presence. This too, I believe, is why Paul's reflections in Corinthians on the gifts of the Spirit end with what he calls a "better way", viz., the way of love. In its context, that comment makes of love the greatest of the gifts of the Spirit and as such the greatest sign of the Spirit's presence. And in Gal 5:22, love and its normal accompaniments are listed as fruits of the Spirit's presence.

A good case, therefore, can be made out for the thesis that love is *the* sign of the Spirit's presence. And this of course makes eminent sense if the Spirit's distinguishing characteristic is love, the love-bond between Father and Son and between us and them and each other. And if this is so, then *wherever* we see genuine love in action, there we can

discern the presence of the Spirit of love. For just as no one can “Jesus is Lord except through the Spirit”, so too, I believe, no one can love unselfishly in this sinful world of ours except through the same Spirit.

And of course, where the Spirit is, there too is Christ, since the Spirit is the way in which the risen Lord is present to his people. So love becomes the sign also of Christ’s presence in the world and those who put their faith in the value of love are putting their faith, whether knowingly or not, in Christ and the transforming power of his Spirit.

The universal appreciation of the importance of love is of itself a binding factor amongst all religions and provides an important bridge for mutual understanding. From the Christian perspective that bridge is underpinned by the fact that such love is a sign of the Spirit’s and therefore of Christ’s – and the Father’s – presence.

Many other examples can be given of the illuminating and enriching character of the idea that the Spirit’s specific characteristic is love, the love that bonds Father and Son together. In fact, one would have to cover all the aspects of our faith, since the Spirit is the one who gives life, through love, to all of them. But let me close by commenting briefly on the biggest ecumenical obstacle to the point argued here. And that obstacle is the *filioque*.

4. The *filioque* as an objection to the idea

Clearly the position argued here depends for its viability on the idea that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. If the Spirit is the bond of their love, then the Spirit must flow from both Father and Son in some way or other. Is then the price to be paid for this otherwise enriching theological idea the perpetuation of the split between East and West?

The issues raised by this are too large for me to go into here. All I can do is to point out the options open to someone who embraces the idea that the Spirit is the bond of love binding Father and Son to each other.

Option number one is to say that the split is there, the West cannot abandon its *filioque* at this stage (well, the largest chunk of the west, viz., Catholicism) and so one may as well continue to explore the riches it offers.

But a better option is to point to the work being done to overcome the *divisive* character of this difference. The insight of the 19th century Russian orthodox theologian, Bolotov, built on by the Catholic patristic scholar Garrigues and taken up also by the Reformed theologian Moltmann provides great hope that this will happen. The core of this approach comprises a clarification and a distinction.

The clarification is that the Father is only Father in relation to the Son. Hence the Spirit – all must agree – can only flow from the Father of the Son. Hence, this brings the Son into the picture in some way or other.

The distinction is between dogmas, or, if you wish, truths by which the Church stands or falls, and doctrines of lesser authority. Thus, Garrigues argues that the dogma (on which all can agree) is that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (i.e., as begetting and therefore in relation to the Son). The Son therefore plays some role in the procession of the Spirit. But what that precise role is, can be a matter of difference within a united Church.

Thus, the East will no doubt go no further than the idea contained in its tradition that the Son’s prior presence contributes to the Spirit’s specific character but is not the source of the Spirit’s very being. Were we to apply this to idea of the Spirit as the bond of love, one could argue that the Spirit’s being proceeds from the Father’s act of love for the Son. But Spirit’s character as *bonding* love is due to the fact that that gift of the Father to the Son returns to the Father to be the bond uniting them to each other. Of course, no matter how precise one tries to be with one’s language, one is walking here in a minefield of linguistic

traps. But that is the case with any attempt to analyse with some degree of precision the conceptual implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Finally, the West can be left in peace to pursue its conviction that while the Father is the primary and underived source of the Spirit, the prior presence of the Son means that the Son must also be a source of the Spirit's very being. And those like myself who see immense depths of meaning in the idea that the Spirit is the bond of love binding Father and Son to each other can remain friends with the Orthodox while doing so.

5. Conclusion

My conclusion can be brief. All I wished to do here was to remind us of a theological tradition that, I believe, is of tremendous value in illuminating the Spirit's nature and mission. It is that the Spirit is love – and not just the fruit of an inner divine act of love, but the very love that proceeds from Father and Son, binding them to each other and turning their merely physical unity into the infinitely joyous personal one of love. That same Spirit is given to us to transform us to the point where we too, like the risen human being, Jesus Christ, can enter fully into that love-life, where we will be inside each other as Father and Son are, enjoying a never-ending life of self-emptying in order to be filled with and discover endless new delights in each other.