

LOGOS QUESTIONS

What does it mean that the Spirit of
God indwells the believer in Christ?



University of
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LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

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Introduction

In many respects, it is uncontroversial to claim that the Holy Spirit indwells believers upon their conversion to Christianity through faith in Jesus Christ. As H. Wheeler Robinson states:

[D]ependence on the Holy Spirit is an essential mark of any experience that deserves to be called Christian. The Christian experience would not be what it is, in any of its characteristic features, if the Christian did not believe that a divine and 'supernatural' factor was working in and through him.¹

This claim, that the life of the Christian is set apart because of her relation to the indwelling Holy Spirit, is uncontroversial for two main reasons: (1) the biblical text is clear that the Holy Spirit comes to, and is present in, the church and its members in a new way after Christ ascends, and (2) because the Holy Spirit is present in the church and its members in this way, both experience and evidence transformation of some sort.² Further, there is majority agreement that the indwelling relation of the Holy Spirit is a form of *union* between the divine and human persons that is *unique*, somehow *internal* to the human person, and *transformative* for the human person.³ The conundrum is that even though the biblical text makes clear that 'being indwelt by the Holy Spirit' is a reality for the Christian and explains ways one might experience or witness to this new relation to God, the biblical text is not clear as to (1) how to understand what spirit is,⁴ (2) how to understand what the *indwelling* relation is, and (3) how the human person is transformed or to what degree the human person is transformed by being put in union with God in this indwelling way.

¹ H. W. Wheeler, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (London: William Brenden & Son, Ltd., 1928) 41.

² The concept of being deified or transformed into the image of Christ was so deeply ingrained within the minds of the Church Fathers that it was utilized to argue for the divinity of Christ and, subsequently, the divinity of the Spirit. That is, it was so obvious when the church began to form that people were being transformed into 'new creatures' that it was used to argue that the Son must be divine, and the Spirit must be divine. For a discussion of this point see Norman Russell *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (eds) in Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Scholars will include additional caveats regarding the relation; those listed here are mostly agreed upon, though the terms might be understood in different ways.

⁴ The concept of spirit or pneuma is obscure in the biblical text as well as the wider body of historic literature. Pneuma can refer to a variety of different kinds of realities (some material and some immaterial): an attitude, intention, disposition, desire, energy, power, the will, a whole person etc. In the biblical narrative, רוּחַ and/or πνεῦμα can also refer to a being, i.e., a subject who can be attributed with the above noted features of personality. The pneuma as divine, though attested to in Scripture and agreed upon in the tradition, remains muddled due to the hiddenness of his relations to the others in the Godhead, humanity, and the cosmos. In the New Testament text, the Holy Spirit is shown to be not the Father nor the Son; the Spirit is not given a relation to or form of the other members of the Godhead which humans can easily relate to; instead He is רוּחַ—breath or wind—which blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but do not where it comes from or where it goes (John 4:8).

In the first section, I will situate the concept of indwelling within the biblical narrative to provide grounds for the doctrine. This section will highlight the proliferation of the concept of indwelling in the New Testament. It will show that understanding the life of the Christian as the ‘indwelt life’ is crucial to understanding the Christian’s relation to God,

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to the church, and to the cosmos at large. In the second section, I will identify three philosophical puzzles related to indwelling. I will discuss two of the most common ways in which indwelling is understood and how these options for understanding indwelling either address or avoid the philosophical puzzles. In the concluding section, I will highlight a way for scholarship

to move forward, gesturing towards a new approach for constructing a model or models of the indwelling relation with the hope that the church might increase in understanding this marvel—Holy Spirit in us.

A biblical understanding of indwelling: the story and its importance

In the gospel of John, Jesus, prior to his crucifixion, explains to his disciples, ‘I will ask the Father, and he will *give you another* helper, that he may be with you forever; the spirit of truth...you know him because *he abides with you and will be in you*’ for ‘I tell you the truth: *it is to your advantage that I go away*,⁵ for if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you. But, if I go, I will send him to you.’⁶ In the gospel of Luke, Jesus, following his resurrection, says to his disciples, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending *the promise of my Father upon you*. But stay in the city until you are *clothed with power on high*.⁷ And then in the Book of Acts, Luke describes this power: ‘When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came

⁵ The gospel writer has already prepared his reader for this sort of statement. He writes, “Jesus stood and cried out, ‘Whoever believes in me as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ [And John explains to the reader] Now this [Jesus] said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39).

⁶ John 14:16-17; 16:7

⁷ Luke 24:46-49

from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And dividing tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them. *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*⁸ The church was born.

During the formation of the church, the writers of the New Testament continue to expound on the importance of the Holy Spirit's relation of indwelling the believers in Christ. The church is described as a single body. Paul explains 'for even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members, though they are many, are *one body, so also is Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body.*'⁹ The church is a single unified entity while also containing a diverse set of individual members. As the individual is both made one or in union with the Spirit, so the church is full of multiple members who are one or in union with one another because of each being indwelt by the Spirit.

Paul refers to this relationship to instruct, rebuke and encourage the saints. He asks, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that *God's Spirit dwells in you?*'¹⁰ and 'do you not know that *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?*'¹¹ He explains, 'You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, in fact

the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through *his Spirit who dwells in you.*'¹² He offers hope that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through *the Holy Spirit who has been given to us,*'¹³ and 'because you are sons, *God has sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*'¹⁴ As Christians, you have been '*sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance* until we require possession of it, to the praise of his glory.'¹⁵ This is '...the riches of the glory of this mystery to the Gentiles, *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*'¹⁶ Therefore, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation...* The

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⁸ Acts 2:1-4

⁹ Acts 2:1-4

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:16

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

¹² Romans 8:9-11

¹³ Romans 5:4b

¹⁴ Galatians 4:6

¹⁵ Ephesians 1:13-14

¹⁶ Colossians 1:27

old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God...¹⁷ For '[we] have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer [us] who live, but *Christ who lives in [us]*.'¹⁸ There is an intimate, internalized union that comes into being when the Spirit of God appropriates

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the work of Christ to the life of the Christian—the Christian is in the process of being conformed to the image of the Son, being transformed by the Spirit who indwells, even though she is already somehow made complete and hidden in him in the heavenlies.¹⁹

For Christians, the new norm, i.e., the new life in Christ, is the Spirit-indwelt life. The indwelling relationship is a new permanent state of being which is rooted

in and sustained by the Holy Spirit; this indwelling relation establishes and gestures forward to the final consummation of union between human persons and the Godhead. This relationship exhibits in the believer in an internal and direct sort of way producing external effects witnessed in the human person’s change of character and actions which in turn confirm the human person’s special relation to God. Being in indwelt relation with the Holy Spirit is the overarching context for all that occurs in the life of the Christian until (at least) resurrection. Hermann Gunkel, in his important work, *The Influence of the Spirit*, describes Paul’s understanding of every Christian’s life. He writes:

The entire life of the Christian is the activity of the πνεῦμα [spirit]. This means that the entire life of the Christian reveals a powerful, transcendent, divine power... Every activity of the Spirit is a miracle... The same judgement that the popular view gives to a few definitely extraordinary appearances, Paul gives of the entire Christian life... the community thus regards as pneumatic what is extraordinary in Christian existence, but Paul what is usual; the community what is individual and unique, but Paul what is common to all; the community what abruptly appears, but Paul what is constant; the community what is isolated in Christian experience, but Paul the Christian life as such.²⁰

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17-18a. It is important to note that 'partaking of the divine nature' mentioned in 2 Peter 1:4 has been elevated to a place of importance in the academic understanding of the indwelling Spirit.

¹⁸ Galatians 2:20

¹⁹ Romans 8: 29-20; Colossians 1:1-4

²⁰ Hermann Gunkel, *Influence of the Spirit: the popular view of the Apostolic Age and the teaching of the Apostle Paul*. Trans. R.A. Harrisville & P.A. Quanbeck II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1979) 96.

What is meant here is that because of the internal nature of the indwelling, there is nothing that happens in the life of the Christian which occurs outside of the Holy Spirit's indwelling relation to the Christian. It is not that what is commonly understood as miraculous is not a divine work of the Spirit, but that every moment of the Christian life is, in some sense, a working of the Spirit and therefore should be understood as having divine purpose. Thus, the indwelling Spirit is common to all Christians and is exhibited in (even and possibly primarily) the drudgery of everyday life. The life of the Christian is a life indwelt by the Spirit of God.

If this is the case, it seems pertinent for the church to have a better grasp on what it means that the Spirit of God dwells in Christians. Because of this indwelling relation, not only is the Christian somehow unified to God and transformed, but he also becomes a living witness of God who lives in him.²¹

Three puzzles and two approaches

Three of the main philosophical concerns regarding the indwelling relation of the Spirit and the human person are internality, division of labour, and transformation.²² The first pertains to how the divine person of the Spirit can be somehow *inside* of a human person; the second pertains to who does what, i.e., what are the actions of the divine person and what are the responsibility of the human person, or in what ways do the divine and human persons cooperate in action; and the third pertains to how and in what way the human person is transformed. In recent literature, models of indwelling seek to address either the transformative or interpersonal nature of the relation. Most scholars want their models to incorporate a bit of both.

Theologians who construct interpersonal models begin with the premise that relations between human persons are an analogue for relations between divine and human persons. We know that relationships between human persons can be understood as unifying (e.g., marriage) and these more unifying relationships between persons can also be understood as transformative (e.g., a particular mentor can shape one's thoughts or one's loves in ways that completely shift one's worldview). The thought here is that as two persons are alert to, engaged with, and responding to one another, both persons involved grow in some form of unity and become certain types of people due to the relation each has with the other. Interpersonal accounts of indwelling can explain how it is that labour is distributed among persons in relation and how some level of transformation takes place. In indwelling relation, just like in human interpersonal relations, the human person is responsible to be alert to, engage with, and properly respond to the person with whom he is in relation, in this case the Holy Spirit. As the human person engages the Holy Spirit, the person comes to better know the Holy Spirit on an intimate level. And as the human person comes to better know

²¹ John 15:26-27; Acts 1:8; Ephesian 3:4-11.

²² McCord Adams, Marilyn. "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit; Some Alternative Models" in *The Philosophy of Human Nature in Christian Perspective*. Edited by Peter Weigel and Joseph Prud'homme (Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2016) 83, 84.

the Holy Spirit (i.e., God) the human person (rightly responding) is sanctified, becoming more and more conformed to the image of Jesus.

There are three important questions that the interpersonal model struggles to address. The first is whether this explanation can address the internality puzzle. The second, related to the first, is how this relationship of indwelling is any different from God's omnipresent relation in all of creation, i.e., why is this a unique relation? The final concern is whether an interpersonal model can get at the sort of drastic transformation the biblical account witnesses to.

Theologians who construct transformative models begin with the premise that the indwelling relation between the divine person and the human person is unique not only in degree but in kind, i.e., because one of the persons involved in the relation is divine, the relation and its effects have no true analogue in relations which hold between nondivine persons. The thought here is that there is some sort of merging or interpenetration that takes place when the Holy Spirit is said to indwell the human person. The human person, in salvation, is given the gift of the Spirit, and that gift enters the 'stuff' or 'spirit' of the human person who becomes a 'new creation'—literally; the person metamorphoses. Transformative models want to say that the human person relates to the Holy Spirit not in an interpersonal way like she might with other human persons, but that the human person somehow relates to the Holy Spirit in an intra-personal way. Transformative models of indwelling can explain how it is that the Spirit is internal to the human person as well as provide an answer for how the human person is transformed.

Transformation accounts fall short in that they often seem to disregard human responsibility regarding how transformation takes place and continues. Further, transformation accounts have some strange philosophical and theological consequences some might not want to accept. I will mention two; both are rooted in the traditional theological understanding that God and humans are of completely different sorts (i.e., we do not think of God as just a perfect human person). Because of this theological premise, when a human person and the Holy Spirit merge in some way, one might think that a new sort of superhuman person emerges. If this is the case, there are different types of human persons walking around—some that are merely human, i.e., human stuff, and some that are superhuman, i.e., human stuff with a bit of divine stuff mixed in (being of a qualitatively better sort). I think most Christians would not want to think of there being human persons with differing qualities, so this is a problem that would need to be worked out if one desires to hold to a transformation model.

How to move forward and why have concern for what it means to be indwelt by the Spirit

Because the move to understand indwelling is just now receiving focused attention from scholars, one might think that the best place to start working out what this relation is in the metaphors used in the biblical text which highlight how it is that God relates to human persons of faith after the ascension of Christ. Further, due to the many metaphors used in the biblical text and the complexity of the indwelling relation, one might also think that there are either varying ways to understand the indwelling relation or that a conglomerate of frameworks is needed to

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address all facets involved. For example, what if the agriculture metaphors and specifically the metaphor of the vine as employed in the Farewell Discourse of the fourth gospel can provide insight as to how Christians are metaphysically related to Christ, the Spirit, and one another? What if thinking deeply about the metaphor of a grafted vine can help us to understand how the Christian bears spiritual fruit which is of a divine sort? Or, maybe one might wonder how Christ being our high priest in the heavenly temple relates to the permanence of the Spirit in the lives of Christians even when they are engaging in sin? How might the high priesthood help us to understand Christ acting as mediator of our humanity before God and the Spirit acting as mediator for the divine life of Christ in us? It seems that both metaphors might be able to provide context and even frameworks for understanding how the Spirit is in us, how the Spirit mediates the life of God, and how we might respond to God and God facilitate his life in us.

Thinking through how the Spirit relates to the Christian is important for the life of the church because we are all, individually and cooperate, carriers of the divine presence. This is a great privilege and responsibility. Some of the most fundamental questions of daily life are intricately connected to understanding what it means to live a life that is dead to sin and alive to Christ. Understanding how we relate to and communicate with God (and He with us) as we sojourn to his presence through resurrection are dependant on how we understand God currently being in us in the Third Person of the Trinity.

Further Reading

1. Alston, William P. 1989. "The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit." In *Divine Nature and Human Language Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Cornell University Press.²³
2. Blackwell, Ben C. 2016. *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.²⁴
3. Gunkel Hermann. 1979. *Influence of the Spirit: the popular view of the Apostolic Age and the teaching of the Apostle Paul*. Trans. R.A. Harrisville & P.A. Quanbeck II. Fortress Press.²⁵
4. Levison, Jack R. 2009. *Filled with the Spirit*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.²⁶
5. Rabens, Volker. 2014. *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*. Fortress Press.²⁷
6. Stump, Eleonore. 2018. *Atonement*. Oxford University Press.²⁸

Author Information

Kimberley Kroll is a PhD student in the Logos Institute at the University of St. Andrews. Her interests are pneumatology, theological anthropology, and metaphysics. Her PhD thesis focuses on the doctrine of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit utilizing the works of both biblical scholars and philosophers.

²³ Presents the major puzzles of the indwelling relation and three possible models.

²⁴ Discusses deification (becoming like Christ). It focuses on Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 5, and two early Church Fathers.

²⁵ Describes and develops the work of the Holy Spirit as a concrete or real experience in the life of a believer. Considered groundbreaking when first released.

²⁶ Self-understood as an extension of Gunkel's work, Levison's book provides an overview of the historical context and concept of pneuma or spirit in the Hebrew bible and ancient world.

²⁷ Provides a detailed overview of biblical scholarship in relation to Pauline ethics. Though the book does not refer to 'indwelling', it is an attempt to explain what Paul is talking about when he discusses transformation of human persons who are 'in Christ'.

²⁸ Intends to explain the atonement in light of what is understood as its end, i.e., union between God and human persons. Part II of this book, and particularly chapters four and seven, provide a detailed model of the indwelling.



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