

Editorial: The Glorious Work of God the Holy Spirit

Stephen J. Wellum

Over the last year, *SBJT* has been devoted to thinking through and wrestling with various significant aspects of theology proper, i.e., the doctrine of God. We have done so by reflecting respectively on the work of God the Father, God the Son, and now, in this issue, we turn our attention to diverse and crucial aspects of the person and work of God the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the subject of the third person of the Godhead, we must, sadly, admit that even

today he is still the neglected person in Trinitarian discussion. Even though great strides have taken place in recent years to think through Scriptural teaching and to theologize about the Spirit's person and work, for many in the evangelical church a robust understanding and living out of the Spirit's work in our lives is still lacking. For the most part, Christians are more familiar with the work

of God the Father and Son than God the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that we are giving special attention to the Spirit's work and it is our prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will help in some small measure.

In order to set the stage for the following articles and Forum section, I want to begin our discussion on the glorious work of the Spirit by thinking briefly about three important points of the Spirit's work which Pentecost highlights and underscores. Why Pentecost? For the simple reason that Pentecost is uniquely the redemptive-historical event where we see most clearly the Spirit's work with respect to God's plan of salvation centered in our Lord Jesus Christ. What, then, does Pentecost teach us regarding the glorious work of God the Holy Spirit?

First and at the most basic level, Pentecost reminds us that the Spirit's work in redemption is a Triune work. A crucial truth of Trinitarian theology is that in all of God's actions whether in creation, providence, or redemption, all three persons are inseparably at work yet in their own

STEPHEN J. WELLUM is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In addition to his role on the faculty, Dr. Wellum serves as editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received the Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles, as well as the co-author of *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Crossway, 2012).

distinctive ways. Thus, for example, in creation the one God creates but he does so as the Triune God—the Father through the Son and by the Spirit (Gen 1:1-2; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:1-3). The same is true of redemption. In redemption, the one God acts to save but all three persons inseparably act—the Father elects us and sends the Son; the Son obeys and becomes incarnate in order to act on our behalf as our covenant head; and the Spirit applies the work of the Son to us (see Eph 1:3-14). Pentecost, as a unique and unrepeatable event in redemptive-history is a beautiful illustration of this point. The entire event is placed within God's eternal redemptive plan, initiated by the Father, secured by the Son, and applied to us by the Spirit. In every way, the Spirit's work at Pentecost is a Triune work.

Second, Pentecost also reminds us of the unique new covenant work of the Spirit. This is *not* to say that the Holy Spirit was not operative in a variety of ways in the OT era, including the work of regeneration. Yet, it is to say that we cannot do justice to the reality of history in God's unfolding plan of redemption unless we affirm that it is not until Christ's cross work is accomplished that the Spirit of God is poured out in a *greater* way upon the people of God than before (see John 7:37-39). Generally speaking, under the old covenant, God dealt with his people in a representative fashion. Various leaders—prophets, priests, and kings—represented the people and on them the Spirit was poured out in a special, empowering sense, which could come and go (see e.g., Num 11:24-30). We do not read about the Spirit's work in this empowering way for *each* individual believer in Israel, as he was operative in the various representative figures. Yet, as the OT prophets anticipate, there is coming a day when all of this will change. In such places as Jeremiah 31:29-24 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, there is the anticipation of the coming of the Messiah and the dawning of the new covenant age. When this occurs, we are told that *all* of God's people will be empowered by the

Spirit, not just the representative leaders (Joel 2:28-32). In addition, the *entire* community will also be transformed by the Spirit that *all* will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. In truth, the pouring out of the Spirit in this *greater* way is one of the crucial evidences that the new covenant era has indeed dawned.

As we move to the New Testament, what the prophets anticipated, the New Testament announces is inaugurated in the coming of our Lord and his triumphant cross work for us. Rather than serving as an isolated event, Pentecost is central to our Lord's victorious work which uniquely signals the dawning of the new covenant era. In this crucial way, Pentecost demonstrates both that Jesus is Lord and Messiah *and* that the new covenant age has finally dawned (Acts 2:36). This is why the Spirit is described in relation to Christ's work as the seal of God's ownership upon us in Christ, as well as the firstfruits and deposit of our full inheritance yet to come (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14). Pentecost rightly viewed is more about the finished work of Christ and the dawning of the era of fulfillment than any mere debate over charismatic gifts.

Third, Pentecost also reminds us that in light of Christ's work, that which *characterizes* this entire new covenant era is the Spirit's work in transforming grace and power. That is why the New Testament constantly exhorts us to walk and pray in the Spirit, to be filled by the Spirit, and to not grieve the precious Spirit of God (Gal 5:22-25; Eph 4:30; 5:18) since it is the Spirit who makes us alive, brings us to Christ, and transforms us.

If all of this is true (which it is) then Pentecost reminds us that it is our joy, delight, and duty to think carefully about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. To get him wrong not only gets our Triune God wrong (which is awful enough), it also leads to our spiritual impoverishment. With this in mind, let us spend some time reflecting upon the glorious work of God the Holy Spirit.