

The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Sanctification of the Man Jesus*

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The Nature of the Paper

Donald Guthrie writing in his book, *New Testament Theology*, correctly points out a major concern in a vital aspect of theology that relates to the nature of this paper. He says, “One aspect of New Testament Christology to which insufficient attention is generally given is the relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit.”¹

This I believe is a major area of concern for both the theological disciplines of Christology and Pneumatology. A properly defined Christology will at the same time be Pneumatological and a properly defined Pneumatology will be at the same time Christological. Therefore, inspired by a reading of the early Eastern Fathers, who progressively developed the close and vital relationship between Christology and Pneumatology, I offer this paper to relate these two disciplines to the particular theological area of sanctification. The heart and foundation of holy living is dependent neither solely on a proper understanding of Jesus, nor solely on a proper understanding of the Spirit, but upon a proper understanding of the *Person and Work of Jesus* and the *Holy Spirit*.

Therefore this paper attempts to be Christological *and* Pneumatological. If it is not, then we lose the essential heart of a properly defined theology in general, but in particular we lose the essential nature of sanctification in the life of Jesus as laid down for us in the Biblical revelation. As I approach the subject, ‘The role of the Holy Spirit (the pneumatological) in the sanctification’ (the particular theological subject matter) of the man Jesus (the Christological)², I hope that some of the concerns expressed by Guthrie and indeed many others, may be addressed, albeit inadequately, to our mutual benefit today.

* Adapted from MA thesis, 1993

¹ D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 405.

Theological Terms of Reference in the Paper

I want briefly to define the parameters of my topic and define the terms of reference therein. I want to assume some rather large theological premises that I trust are legitimate, for these form the basis for my dealing with the present subject matter.

The Subject Matter and Term “the man Jesus”.

In this paper I am not seeking to argue and defend the Nicene Christological settlement and its subsequent definition of the Divine and Human Christ. Rather I am particularly interested in emphasising the role of the human Jesus, or to put it in Christological terms, I am deliberately approaching ‘Christology from below’. Often the real problems with the approach to understanding Christology are methodological problems. Therefore I am presupposing the Deity of Christ, His sinlessness, and all the other implications that relate to such a Logos Christology, i.e. a Christology ‘from above’.

The Subject Matter and Term “sanctification of”.

This paper presupposes two vital theological considerations that directly relate to an understanding of sanctification. Firstly, I am defining “sanctification” in more general terms as two things. One, based on the Hebrew word and OT concept of *שָׂדֶה* (*qadesh*), I am defining sanctification to mean that which is made clean and pure. And, two, based on the Greek word and NT concept of *ἁγιασμοῦ* (*hagiasmos*), I am also defining ‘sanctification’ primarily to mean ‘consecration and separation unto God’. Therefore my definition of sanctification in the life of Jesus the man relates to how the humanity of Jesus is cleansed and consecrated. This may resolve some of our difficulties as we approach this complex issue, for Nazarenes have a tendency to be too specific, and too narrow in their understanding and definition of sanctification. This is one of the fundamental problems with a Nazarene understanding of sanctification, and consequentially it could be a major problem when we come to look at the issue of sanctification in the life of Jesus the man.

The second, and perhaps the most controversial, theological assumption I make in this paper – and essentially so – is to reject substantial elements of the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin. This is a crucial issue. Indeed some may already be questioning the very premise of my paper – “the *sanctification* of the man Jesus”. No doubt there are difficult

questions to be answered here, particularly the relationship between that of the sinfulness of humanity and the sinlessness of Christ, and I hope to deal with them in this paper, but many of our difficulties are rooted in our ingrained Augustinian understanding of original sin and fallen humanity. One of the real problems I believe facing a European understanding of holiness is the widespread embracing and entire acceptance of Augustinian original sin. In fact I agree totally with the Barthian criticism that Western theology in general, and Augustinianism in particular, has a preoccupation with Anthropology rather than with Christology. Augustine, in responding to the dangers of Pelagianism, went too far in his doctrine of original sin. In my paper I hope to throw light on this difficult concept as I approach my topic from a primarily non-Western and non-European understanding of sin. Therefore in my paper I am working with a doctrine of sin that at times is profoundly different from that found in Augustine and indeed different from that found in many of the Western theologians and Reformers.

The Subject Matter and Term “the role of the Holy Spirit”

In this paper I am primarily concerned to show the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the man Jesus that brings about his sanctification. I am not looking at every role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of Jesus and I am not looking at every dimension of how Jesus is sanctified. Rather I intend to focus my attention upon the specific role the Holy Spirit exercises in the life of the Incarnate Word. Furthermore, I am not denying the ‘active’ role and participation of Christ in his sanctification, but neither am I suggesting that Christ does not in some way demonstrate a ‘passive’ role that, in the plan of God, enabled his sanctification by the same means as ours, i.e., through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now we may proceed under two main headings dealing specifically with the role of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of the man Jesus. From this point on I will use the heading ‘Incarnational’ to relate to the *man* Jesus. This is an appropriate word for ‘Incarnation’ *per se* relates to the ‘enfleshment’ of the Word, i.e., the term qualifies that we are approaching Christology from below. There are two main dimensions to consider that relate to the sanctification of the man Jesus through the Holy Spirit: the Incarnational Birth, and the Incarnational Life.

**The Incarnational Birth and the Sanctification
by the Holy Spirit**

For the Greek Fathers the most critical aspect of salvation-history is undoubtedly the Incarnation. That is not to say however that they did not see the critical importance of the cross for salvation. Indeed they did, but the Incarnation, the coming to birth of the Word in flesh, marks for them the crucial high-point of salvation.

The reason that the Incarnation is so important is due to their understanding of the purpose of the Incarnation for the God-man himself and therefore the subsequent consequences for mankind that are wrought by the Incarnate act. Athanasius in his work *Tomus Ad Antiochenos* summarises the essential purpose of the Incarnation,

...[T]he Word himself was made flesh, and being in the Form of God, took the form of a servant, and from Mary after the flesh became man for us, and that thus in him, the human race is perfectly and wholly delivered from sin...²

The Incarnation makes it possible for our human corruptible flesh to be sanctified because the Word himself essentially assumed the same human flesh, and human corruptibility, but sanctified it in himself through the Holy Spirit. This is the heart of the Father's understanding of the Incarnation and it is our task to examine in greater detail the role of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of this human flesh.

There is no denying that Jesus was a real human being in every way. For the Greek Fathers the Word became a man, a real historical person. The Word became flesh, not just a physical entity, but man in his wholeness and essence. The Word took human flesh and took it directly from the virgin named Mary who was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit, and not through the agency of a human father. Augustine saw the absence of a human father as the key to how Jesus remained sinless since original sin was passed on from generation to generation as a hereditary condition through concupiscence. However the Eastern Fathers see rather that it was the positive act of the Spirit that enabled the humanity of Christ to be sanctified rather than the negative act of a human Father being absent in the birth of the God-man. Guthrie, who shares this theological perspective, sums it up, "It is not so much birth by a virgin

² Athanasius, *Tomus Ad Antiochenos*, 7.

which guarantees sinlessness, as the direct action of the Holy Spirit in that birth.”³

This is a critical point not only for Christology and Pneumatology but also for a proper understanding of Hamartiology.

The role of the Spirit in the birth of the man Jesus is evident from the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke. For them the eschatological Spirit ushers in the new age of salvation. This is evident from the significant role of the Holy Spirit in the birth narratives. Matthew records as fact how the birth of Jesus Christ came about, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child *through the Holy Spirit*” (Mt 1:18).

To cement the truth of this miraculous conception the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph to confirm the Incarnate birth by the Spirit, “...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is *from the Holy Spirit*’” (Mt 1:21).

Luke’s account seems less embarrassed about the birth of Christ than Matthew’s, for whereas Matthew tries when possible not to speak of Joseph as Jesus’ father, Luke sees no harm in giving the same essential points without any qualification. For Luke, the role of the Spirit in the birth of the God-man is witnessed to even before the Incarnation itself. The eschatological Spirit is evidenced in the angel’s message to Elizabeth about her pregnancy, as well as in the message to Mary about her pregnancy, and when Elizabeth and Mary meet the Spirit fills both the women. Even sceptical Zechariah finally bursts into song as the Spirit comes upon him breaking his months of dumbness. For Luke the Incarnate birth is clearly linked to the role of Holy Spirit. He records the words of the angel to Mary, “*The Holy Spirit* will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

For Matthew and Luke, the Incarnate act, the coming to birth of God in our world, or in John’s more profound words, “and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14), is clearly the work of the Holy Spirit.

³ D. Guthrie, *ibid*, p 374.

This leads us to some essential theological considerations that the Eastern Fathers were not hesitant to express concerning the Incarnation. Jesus is born as total man – real man, historical man – but his humanity incorporated the working of the Holy Spirit from its conception. For the Fathers the Word assumes all our humanity, all its existence, for unless he does then he is not fully man and is therefore unable to save and cleanse all the condition of man.

From Mary Christ takes our human condition and because it is essentially that condition that needs to be sanctified and redeemed, it was essential that in the assumption of our flesh Christ must also have taken the corruptible, mortal and fallen humanity which he received from Mary. For the Greek Fathers it was a proper understanding of ‘fallenness’ that was the key to understanding the humanity Christ assumed in the Incarnation. Christ shares our fallenness. In other words, he shares our death, and the corruption of mind, body, soul and spirit. Total corruption is the consequence of the Fall, not an inbred hereditary disease, and this total corruption Christ shares with us. As Athanasius says,

He submitted to our corruption. And thus taking a body like ours, since all were liable to the corruption of death, and surrendering it to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father....in order that, as all die in him, the law concerning corruption in men might be abolished.⁴

In other words, Jesus took corruptible humanity in all its aspects and in himself, by the Holy Spirit, makes the corruptible, incorruptible. This inevitably leads us to ask the question of how to reconcile this understanding of humanity with the equally important qualification that Jesus was sinless. The question is simple. Did Jesus therefore take sinful humanity in the Incarnation? Well, according to the Fathers he did indeed! Here is the crux of the argument. Fallen humanity, corruptible humanity, is fallen in every aspect. Fallen humanity was in death – physically, mentally, and spiritually. It was, to simplify the concept, sinful humanity that Christ assumed from his mother Mary. However it was precisely in the assumption of sinful flesh, in the very moment of the Incarnational act, at the very moment of conception that this corruptible, fallen and sinful humanity was made clean, was sanctified by the act of the Holy Spirit which is documented in the Gospels. In other words

⁴ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 7.

Christ, in taking to himself the very essence of our humanity, sanctified that very humanity by his Holy Spirit, so that in his own body, in his own human mind and soul as the Man Jesus, he transforms the corruptible essence of humanity itself.

The sanctification of the humanity of Christ took place at the moment of conception by the working and power of the Holy Spirit. Christ can sanctify our humanity by his Spirit because his own humanity was sanctified by the same Holy Spirit at the moment of conception. The Spirit guarantees the sinlessness of the Christ, for his humanity is cleansed by the Spirit at the point of the Incarnation. Gregory of Nyssa says it like this,

For though he took our filth upon Himself, yet he is not defiled by the pollution, but in his own self He purifies the filth.⁵

J. H. Strawley in summing up Gregory of Nyssa's concept here says,

Christ assumed our sinful human nature, but from the very moment of its assumption the union of the divine nature with it cleansed it from its sinful propensities.⁶

And, one further useful quote to help explain this theological concept, this time from Dr. T.A. Noble,

The Son of God literally takes our sinful humanity and sanctifies it, so that in him it has a sinless perfection.⁷

The man Jesus is therefore sanctified in his Incarnate birth by the Holy Spirit. This is a profound mystery and words do an injustice to the miracle of the Incarnation. But we must, I believe, assert that the humanity of Jesus is sanctified by the Spirit of Holiness in the Incarnate act, so that our humanity too, in all its dimensions, is cleansed and healed by the same sanctifying Spirit.

The Incarnational Life and the Sanctification by the Holy Spirit

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Antirrhetic adv. Apollinaris*, c. 26

⁶ J. H. Strawley, "St. Gregory of Nyssa on the Sinlessness of Christ," *JTS*, 7, p 438.

⁷ T. A. Noble, *The Foundation Of Christian Holiness*, The Collins Holiness Lectures, 1988 (unpublished manuscript), p 37.

Jesus, then, assumes our humanity at his Incarnation and sanctifies that humanity through the Holy Spirit. However, this is not the end of the story, for it was essential that Jesus maintained this sanctified humanity throughout all of his life and ministry in order that every aspect of human living is re-ordered by Jesus, the sanctified man. In other words, the common humanity which Jesus assumed is also the humanity that needed to be lived out, so that at every stage it may be sanctified and healed. Jesus the man had to face the same pressures and temptations, the same physiological drives, as every other man if he was to truly be a real man. Jesus had to live a particular human existence as man and had to experience all the dimensions of human existence but He faced and overcame all that pertained to man because of the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in his life. Jesus the man does not retain sinlessness because of his deity, rather his sinlessness is secured by the work of the Holy Spirit in his life at every point, at every stage, at every choice, consecrating him continually to the will of his Father, as Jesus commits himself as man through faith, will and obedience.

Jesus the man secures his sinlessness because he remains obedient to the Father's will and makes the right choices that please God throughout His life. He is enabled to make these choices because his life was saturated by the work of the constant presence of the sanctifying Spirit, making and keeping his heart pure in a love relationship with God the Father. Where Adam had failed Jesus has succeeded because he remained obedient to the Father in his consecration and commitment through the working of the Holy Spirit in His life. And perhaps even more startling is the progressive nature of this consecration, as Jesus the man learns and develops as a human person in regard to his Father's will and the humanity he finds himself living in.

This is demonstrated in a number of ways in the life of the man Jesus. It is no coincidence that Luke brings together the boy Jesus and the man Jesus with the beautiful verse in Luke 2:52, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

Jesus matured as a boy in every aspect as other Jewish boys did. He grew physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. His life progressively developed in understanding the nature of the Father's will, but even as a boy we can see in a remarkable way, that he is found being about "His Father's business". This development in Jesus' human spirituality assumes the continual and daily revelation by the Spirit of God that

enabled him to be consecrated, sanctified, set apart, for the Father's purpose at every stage of human development.

Another example of the role of the Spirit in the setting apart of the man Jesus is seen in the baptismal accounts in the Gospels. In Luke the activity of the Spirit in the whole episode is crucial. Jesus, who is announced by the Baptist as the One who would give the eschatological Spirit, is himself waiting for a fresh endowment of that eschatological Spirit. And as Jesus the man queues uncomfortably in the line of sinners for repentance, identifying His humanity with common humanity, assuming our corporate corruption before God, he comes to be baptised by John. According to Luke it was as Jesus was praying that the Holy Spirit descended upon him and he is announced as the Son of God. However, the Spirit did not come upon him to confirm his deity, rather the Spirit came upon him to empower him to live the holy life that God wanted him to live. This is clear in the Gospel accounts. Mark says that immediately after the baptism this same Spirit "threw him out" into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. Luke, a little less forceful, tells the same story except that he concludes the temptation story by declaring that Jesus returned from the wilderness "in the power of the Spirit"(Lk 4:14). Only Luke brackets the temptation incident with the role of the Spirit in the life of the man Jesus. Thus we can reasonably conclude that (along with the significant role the Word of God plays) the victory that Jesus secured in the wilderness temptations was primarily a result of the power of the Spirit to enable the man Jesus to say 'No' to temptation and to remain pure and sinless. It was the role of the Spirit that enabled the man Jesus to be set apart, to be sanctified for the ministry that lay ahead of him. Indeed Luke further makes this clear by the incident in Nazareth where Jesus gives his Jubilee Manifesto beginning with the words of Isaiah, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me..."(Lk 4:18). In other words, the whole of the ministry ahead of Jesus, the call to be consecrated to the will of the Father in bringing about the good news for all, is clearly and inextricably linked to the empowering of the Spirit upon the man Jesus.

One further note is important to make here. It is clear that the works that Jesus performed were also in the power of the Spirit. In His conflict with the demonic it was the power of the Spirit which enabled the man Jesus to overcome. In the miracles of healing, in the discerning of human spirits, in the signs and wonders of the Jubilee message, it is the power of

the sanctifying Spirit that enables the man Jesus to do the works of God. Here is an important theological consideration for our denomination. The sanctifying Spirit that keeps Jesus in fellowship with the Holy Father is the same Spirit that enables Jesus to demonstrate the effects of that relationship with God. In other words, there is a definite link between the Holy Spirit that keeps Jesus pure, and the same Holy Spirit that enables Jesus to do the works of God. There is no conflict in the man Jesus. He is consecrated by the Spirit to live for the Father in purity of heart, and he is empowered by the Spirit to bring the whole of the Gospel to the whole of the world. The division between an emphasis on the power of the Spirit in some circles and the purity of the Spirit in other circles is a dichotomy not found in the man Jesus, for the sanctifying Spirit is at the same time the empowering Spirit.

Let us turn finally to the book of Hebrews to further examine the role of the Spirit in the sanctification of the man Jesus. In Hebrews the existence of the human Jesus, learning and growing, developing and consecrating, is one of the key themes of the whole book. Jesus is truly made like his brothers and becomes holy and perfect, not because of the nature of his divinity, but remarkably because of His surrender through obedience to the will of God and through what God does in the man Jesus. And the purpose, according to the writer of Hebrews, of this progressive obedience and perfection was that, “he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people”(Heb 2:17).

Jesus the man was made perfect, he was made holy, he was made complete, in his consecration by the act of God through the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not succumb to sin because he obeyed the Father, and he did this through the Holy Spirit. Although the book of Hebrews has little to say about the Holy Spirit there is a critical reference in 9:14 that makes this whole argument legitimate. Undoubtedly the climactic moment of Jesus’ obedience and consecration came as he obeyed the Father’s will in going to the cross. The critical words of consecration and obedience, “not my will but yours be done” in one moment epitomises the life of the man Jesus. Yet in Hebrews we are told that this final act of obedience, the most critical act of surrender and consecration was only made possible because of the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling him to make that sanctified decision. The author, commenting on this great moment of consecration, says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who

through the eternal Spirit offered himself to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God” (Heb 9:14).

Here is the critical truth for us – the ultimate act of obedience, the ultimate act of consecration, the ultimate act of being set apart to do the Father’s will could only be wrought through the Spirit of Holiness working in the life of the man Jesus. The dynamic power of the Spirit working in the man Jesus from birth to death enabled Jesus the man to live the sanctified life completely at every stage. As T. A. Noble says,

The whole movement from conception and birth, through his life of selfless service to his sacrifice on the cross is a sanctifying of human flesh and human life.⁸

The work of the Spirit in sanctifying the man Christ was the reason Jesus was made perfect and followed the Father’s will. Kierkegaard defined purity of heart as willing one thing. Jesus the man was always devoted only to the will of the Father, and that ensured that there were no divided loyalties in his life. He single-mindedly followed the Father’s will, and that in turn resulted in purity of heart.

Indeed this leads us to search the very nature of the relationship within the Trinity since the motivation and obedience of the man Jesus to the Father was enabled by the Holy Spirit of God. The whole of Jesus’ ministry is lived out with a single-minded love for the Father. Perfect love is the only way to describe the nature of the relationship in the Godhead, and that applies to the man Jesus and the Heavenly Father. The reason Jesus lived for his Father was not out of fear nor out of duty, but out of love. This love stems from the presence of God in the man Jesus because of the working of the Holy Spirit. The inner secret of his life is found in his relationship with the Father. Herein lies the profound Augustinian thought that the Holy Spirit is in fact the *vinculum caritatis*, the bond of love, in the Holy Trinity between Father and Son. The Spirit is the love bond, he is the means of relationship between Father and Son and his presence in the man Jesus ensures the love relationship is pure,

⁸ T. A. Noble, *ibid*, 48.

and entire in devotion. If this is not entire sanctification through the Holy Spirit nothing is.

From what we have seen from Jesus' conception, through his life in the Spirit, through his obedience and loyalty to the Father's will, through his continual consecrated devotion, it is the role and working of the Spirit that enables the sanctifying of the man Jesus. As T. A. Noble says,

The Holy Spirit...who is the bond of love in eternity between the Father and the Son, now continues to fill the Son even as Incarnate, so that in Jesus, *Man* loves the Father with all his heart, soul, mind and strength.⁹

Conclusion

The role of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of the man Jesus is an important theological consideration for us all. For if Jesus is a paradigm for us to emulate, if the ultimate goal of holiness is Christ-likeness, then we ought to examine the life of Christ and find in it the keys for our own pilgrimage of faith. Jesus was indeed a real man, a man like us in all respects, who shares our very corruptible condition, so that he may make it incorruptible. Jesus was indeed a man who faced the challenges to follow God in a real world, with real temptations and real choices to make in relation to God and the world. Jesus was indeed a man who progressively followed the will of God as it was revealed to him through faith, obedience and consecration. Jesus was indeed man who loved God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus was indeed man who made the right choices at each stage of his own personal pilgrimage of faith. Jesus was indeed a real man who chose not to sin but chose to sanctify himself as a person of integrity and blamelessness. Yet all of this would have been impossible if it were not for the working and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the man Jesus. Jesus was truly sanctified throughout his life, at his birth, at his baptism, in his ministry, in his death, in His relationship with His Father. But this sanctification was achieved and maintained through the working of the Spirit of Holiness in his very humanity. And this is the hope for us, that because this man has loved God and remained pure by the Spirit of God, we too in him may

⁹ Ibid, 49.

become pure as we receive the same Spirit of Holiness in our hearts,
creating in us the desire to live in obedience to the Father's will.