

BLASPHEMING THE HOLY SPIRIT: PNEUMATOLOGICAL BOUNDARY-MAKING AND BOUNDARY-BREAKING

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We who have experienced God's sanctifying work can testify to the Holy Spirit's presence in forming Christlike disciples, empowering for ministry, and unifying across differences of culture, language, and experience. The subject to which my response turns, focusing on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, might conjure up an entirely different set of notions: judgment, unforgiveness, and exclusion. Yet both angles into a discussion of the Holy Spirit have biblical warrant. The finality of an "unforgivable sin" tends to scare believers into avoiding the Gospel passages that mention this blasphemy. It is little wonder that we prefer to discuss empowering manifestations of the Spirit as on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42), the bestowing of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1-12), and the fruit produced by the Spirit (Gal 5:22-26), rather than the guilt of an unforgivable sin that is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30; par. Matt 12:31-32; Luke 12:8-12). Yet Jesus himself upholds the Spirit's authority while simultaneously cautioning believers against misusing or denying God's Spirit. It is in this tension—the Holy Spirit's defiance of our expectations and the needful recognition of the Spirit's agency—that our two papers on the Holy Spirit might be more fully appreciated and their implications examined with care.

By way of a brief summary, Rev. Borduam discusses the particular circumstances of South American expressions of Christianity and various groups' emphases on the role of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to self-interested or imbalanced approaches to the things of the Spirit, Borduam offers evidence widespread across the biblical witness for the Spirit's transformative power. The Holy Spirit makes us holy because a holy God is at work in and through us, making us more like Christ in holy love. In her paper, Dr. Khobnya searches through a variety of NT texts, first, to show the unifying, corporate work of the Holy Spirit. She examines language of revelation and fulfillment in light of the Spirit-enabled "experience of togetherness." In contrast to human alienation, Khobnya demonstrates that it is the Spirit's reconciliation that grounds humans' ability to assemble as the whole people of God. As Acts attests, the gathered people experience Spirit-enabled communication (anti-Babel; p. 8), embracing "outsiders," and persistence in holy living amidst suffering (citing 1 Pet 1:2-16). The whole community expresses and benefits from the Spirit's distribution of gifts, which points to God's purposes for all creation.

As both Khobnya's and Borduam's learned and pastorally-attuned papers evidence, it is difficult (if not impossible) to discuss the Holy Spirit without reference to the Spirit's manifestation in the lives of people. The character and work of the Holy Spirit is embodied in ecclesiological expressions. And, thus, the Gospel texts that attest to the Spirit's work also wrangle with uncomfortable language of collective boundaries: Who is with us? Who is against? How does one know what is the work of the Spirit, versus what represents a selfish endeavor of the people, rather than the Spirit whom they claim?

There is a palpable tension between, on the one hand, the need to remain open to the evidence that the Spirit's movements may break the mold of what we expect or have deemed acceptable (e.g., the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 or the inclusion of uncircumcised gentiles in Acts 15:6-11) and, on the other hand, the idea that the Holy Spirit represents a force that shapes humans in ways consistent with Jesus (and, thus, ways that are predictable; e.g., John

14:25-26). In the Synoptic Gospel passages that warn about speaking falsely against the Holy Spirit, there is a mix of generous grace (promising forgiveness of sins and even blasphemies; Mark 3:28; Matt 12:31a, 32a; Luke 12:10a) and excluding blasphemy directed toward the Holy Spirit from forgiveness perpetually (Mark 3:29; Matt 12:31b, 33b; Luke 12:10).

Moreover, each of the Synoptic Gospels retains Jesus's statement about blaspheming the Holy Spirit in a context that nuances it somewhat different ways. Although Matthew seems more willing to exclude those not aligned with Jesus—"The one who is not with me is against me, and the one who does not gather with me scatters" (12:30)—he also sets on a different scale words that malign Jesus himself ("the Son of Man") and words spoken against the Holy Spirit (v. 32). If one chooses sides against Jesus, how can one help but rejecting the Spirit's agency bringing the Kingdom of God near (v. 28), precluding the possibility of the divine intervention that saves. In many ways, Luke aligns with Matthew, but takes the implications further. That is, Luke connects the allegiance or lack thereof to the Holy Spirit with the believers' forecast persecution (and the Spirit's aid in defense). The context of a legal trial, in which believers might have the opportunity to either acknowledge or reject Christ, is one in which purported followers might pit themselves against the Spirit (Luke 12:10) or, conversely, on in which the Holy Spirit as teacher guides the faithful into the proper way to speak in their very hour of need (12:11-12).

Mark's Gospel, likely the earliest of our canonical Gospels, might further help to provoke us into the necessary tension between inclusion and exclusion that the Spirit's work governs, leaving us with ample questions for future discussion. The preceding pericope tells us that in close sequence Jesus's family (lit. "those from him"; *hoi par' autou*) try to stop his ministry, thinking he is not in his right mind (*exestē*; Mark 3:21). Immediately afterward, Jesus faces the pushback from scribes who come from Jerusalem in order to ascertain the source of Jesus's exorcistic power, which they attribute to Jesus's own possession by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demonic realm (3:22). Jesus retorts with his famous rejection of their logic: that is, given the resulting expulsion of Satan, how can he be working within Satan's sphere of power? Jesus concludes with "truly [*amēn*], I say to you [pl.]," a statement that comes to indicate a moment of teaching that relates to but has relevance beyond that current situation (e.g., 3:28; 8:12; 9:1, 41; 10:15, 29; 11:23; 12:43; 13:30; 14:9, 18, 25, 30).¹ Jesus says:

*"Truly I say to you [pl.] that all things will be forgiven to the sons of humans, the sins and blasphemies, as many as they might blaspheme; but anyone who blasphemes into [against] the Holy Spirit does not have forgiveness eternally, but is liable for an eternal sin."*²

Mark explains in the concluding verse that Jesus says this "because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit'" (3:30). Something in Jesus's person, actions, followers, or teaching prompted nay-sayers to conclude that he could not be in step with God's ways.

Onlookers observed the powerful exorcistic work of Jesus, which Mark reports frequently across the Gospel (1:23-27, 32-34, 39; [3:15; 6:13], 7:24-30; 9:17-29; [16:9]), and attributed it to an unclean spirit. Beyond merely rejecting the logic of such an accusation (3:23-27), Jesus

¹ This style characterizes Jesus's teaching across the Gospels, cf. e.g., Matt 5:18; 18:18; Luke 4:24; 23:43; Cf. also the doubled *amēn amēn* of John (e.g., 1:51; 3:3; 5:24-25; 6:53).

² Mark 3:28-28, author's translation.

responds by declaring a twofold reality: (1) Forgiveness and release from guilt is broadly and extravagantly available; and (2) Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the exception. Rather than an arbitrary distinction between sins, however, Mark provides an explanation where the other two Evangelists do not: Jesus said these things *because* his opponents had claimed he was possessed by an unclean spirit (3:30). This guilt of an “eternal sin” is not mere punishment: by misattributing the source of Jesus’s power and authority, the onlookers had shut down the revelatory avenue by which they might have accessed divine forgiveness. That is, looking directly at the power of God at work in Christ and *calling it* unclean—out of bounds, wrongly-sourced, absent of God’s holiness—they cut themselves off from the very power they rationalized away.

Where have we seen the Holy Spirit at work in powerful ways and experienced the deadening pain of its rejection by those who would benefit most? To gesture toward an example or two: Think, perhaps, of believers who reject the very possibility that God’s Spirit calls and empowers female ministers. Recall a time when a conviction about “the way we have always done things” has led a community to silence prophetic and spiritually-sensitive calls to repentance. As Mark tells his story, Jesus is not afraid to carve out a strong boundary demarcating those who are responsive to the Holy Spirit’s work and those who have insisted on resisting that very Spirit. This distinction requires discernment. Are God’s boundaries our own? May we follow the Spirit into all truth.