

Nazarene Global Theology Conference—Session 1: “In the Power of the Spirit – Holy Spirit”

THE HOLY SPIRIT: A RESPONSE TO SVETLANA KHOBNYA AND L. FILIPE NUNES BORDUAM

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During the West’s Enlightenment era, the call among many social elite was to “Be reasonable!” They assumed that every human mind possessed the same mechanism for logic: a universal human reason. They believed if society would rid itself of ignorance, superstitions, and religious beliefs, we could resolve every problem humanity faces according to that single perspective of *universal* human rationality—which, notably, aligned with white Western ways of seeing the world. Even while the call to “Be reasonable!” was challenged in the West with calls to treat *being reasonable* as being *realistic*, and being prepared for disappointment,¹ Western powers continued to assert that their perspective was the only true perspective because it alone was based *objectively* on facts. Their perspective was absolute and could rightfully measure all people-groups and impose itself on them. Western powers worked to subject all bodies, cultures, and lands to what they assumed was the *absolute truth* of its *universally rational* ways.² While it may be tempting to see those impulses only within the political, economic, and scholarly realms, the Western church was not immune to ethnocentrism as it did its work of theology and missions.

Svetlana Khobnya and L. Felipe Nunes Borduam have offered timely papers on the Holy Spirit. The Babel-like project of the West, while refusing to collapse, has crumbling foundations. Few people have an interest in bowing to the empire of universal human reason—especially people who have suffered colonialism and discrimination. As Nunes Borduam notes in his context, people no longer value “rationalistic answers.”³ Instead, they are looking for experience. Rather than emphasizing the divine Word—characteristic of Reformation theology and vulnerable to the abuse of totalizing claims—people are embracing a Christianity focused on the Holy Spirit, who “is the point that makes God personal to the Christian by actively acting in the lives of believers and by indwelling them.”⁴ Unfortunately, through the centuries, reflection on the Spirit has not always been connected to God’s work in Christ. Pneumatology has had a deficiency of being focused on “community and forgiveness and resurrection life” more than the Son’s incarnation, mission, passion, and his “humiliation and shame.”⁵ In short, the Spirit applies what the Father and Son previously accomplished. Consequently, in Nunes Borduam’s context, a turn to the Holy Spirit has not brought Christlikeness, but rather an emphasis on spiritual victory and the prosperity gospel—the Spirit becoming “just a means to satisfy one’s own desires and achieve personal goals.”⁶ People remain splintered in self-serving individualism. He rightly

¹ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 168.

² See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2011); and James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Baker Academic, 2006).

³ Nunes Borduam, “In the Power of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit,” *Didache* 22, no 1 (2023): 2.

⁴ Nunes Borduam, 2.

⁵ D. Lyle Dabney, “*Pneumatologia Crucis*: Reclaiming *Theologia Crucis* for a Theology of the Spirit Today,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 4 (2000): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600057008>.

⁶ Nunes Borduam, 5.

criticizes this as “an inversion of the Holy Spirit’s work,”⁷ since there is no emphasis on “sanctification or service to community”⁸ or any activity of the Spirit that would “enable believers to align themselves with and submit to God’s will and criteria.”⁹

In this post-Babel time, Khobnya also notes our “human alienation”—in other words, our lack of “togetherness.”¹⁰ COVID has negatively affected practices of healthy socialization. We also have divided ourselves into groups of like-minded people that act with hostility toward “others.”¹¹ We are fractured in many ways and in need of “the reconciling gift of the Holy Spirit” to bring us together.¹²

Khobnya is not alone among scholars advocating in our fractured context that we attend to the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit; for example, D. Lyle Dabney also notes, “relationship to God through Jesus Christ starts with the Spirit.”¹³ Attention to the Spirit’s activity in the Bible illuminates God’s intention for creaturely flourishing in God’s self-giving fellowship. God’s relation to all creation—to everything that is not God—begins with the Spirit of God (Genesis 1:2). Dabney builds on this, explaining that the Holy Spirit is “the possibility of God even in the midst of every impossibility that God could be present and active, the divine possibility that the living God might be found even in the midst of chaos and death, indeed, precisely in the midst of chaos and death.”¹⁴ We see the Spirit as God’s active presence before creation (as the possibility for creation) and the Spirit was actively present in the impossibility of Christ’s death and resurrection. The Spirit is “the possibility that God might yet be for us and we might yet be for God, and thus the possibility that even those who suffer that deadly estrangement might beyond death be raised to new life, transformed life, a life in which the crushed and broken and incoherent bits and pieces of a life are taken up anew and made whole.”¹⁵

That new life in the Holy Spirit is the way our present salvation is described in the New Testament.¹⁶ We are embraced into divine fellowship and the fullness of creaturely life by the Holy Spirit and “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4,

⁷ Nunes Borduam, 5.

⁸ Nunes Borduam, 4.

⁹ Nunes Borduam, 5.

¹⁰ Khobnya, “In the Power of the Spirit: Holy Spirit,” *Didache* 22, no 1 (2023): 2.

¹¹ Khobnya, 3. Online platforms have not helped this trend.

¹² Khobnya, 3.

¹³ D. Lyle Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit: Why the Last Should Now be First,” in *Starting with the Spirit*, edited by Gordon Preece and Stephen Pickard (Hindmarsh, SA, Australia: Australian Theological Forum Inc., 2001), 27. Nunes Borduam quotes Wiley saying something similar: “The Holy Spirit as the performing agent of the Godhead is the specific Person of the Trinity through whom God acts in us” (1). Khobnya herself points out that theologians have been highlighting the Spirit’s role in Christ, salvation, and creation (1).

¹⁴ D. Lyle Dabney, “Naming the Spirit: Towards a Pneumatology of the Cross,” in *Starting with the Spirit*, edited by Gordon Preece and Stephen Pickard (Hindmarsh, SA, Australia: Australian Theological Forum Inc., 2001), 58; italics removed.

¹⁵ Dabney, “Naming the Spirit,” 58; italics removed. See Dabney, “*Pneumatologia Crucis*,” 524.

¹⁶ For example, “To be saved is, among other things, to ‘receive the Spirit’ (John 7:39, 20:22; Acts 2:38, 8:15, 8:17, 8:19, 10:47; Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 3:2, 14), to be ‘born again of water and Spirit’ (John 3:5), to become a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19), to be adopted as God’s children through the sending of ‘the Spirit of his Son into our hearts’ (Gal. 4:4–7; Rom. 8:15–16); to follow the ‘law of the Spirit of life’ rather than the ‘law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2); and to be brought to ‘life’ by the Spirit following the ‘death’ of the ‘old self’ (Rom. 6:3–6, 8:10–11)” (Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* [Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2020], 82). See Frank Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publish Co., 2010).

NRSVUE). The church's life and ministry (Luke 9:2; 10:8-9; 11:13) takes place in the same Spirit that led Christ (Luke 4:1, 14) and by which he performed the signs of God's kingdom: of justice, healing, exorcism, and resurrection (Luke 4:18-19; 7:22; 9:11; 11:20).¹⁷ As a redeemed people, we are defined as "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) in this life (1 Cor. 2:13-15) and "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) when we are resurrected from the dead (1 Cor. 15:44, 46).¹⁸

Both Khobnya and Borduan suggest we have lost something—trust in rationality and social connection. They both note turns to the Holy Spirit, whether as a popular Christian phenomenon or as a theological pathway forward.¹⁹ Nevertheless, they have discerned that neither a self-serving power nor a generic togetherness represent the fruits of a sufficiently Christian pneumatology. To be the Spirit of Christ, we must be speaking of the Spirit that is gathering all people into the "common narrative" of what God is working through Christ,²⁰ which sanctifies us all into loving service toward others.²¹

God's Spirit reflects God. We confess that God eternally begets the Son, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father as well.²² God's very existence is to give the fullness of self to the Son and Spirit, not keeping back anything of divinity, including all authority, glory, honor, and power (Matthew 28:18; Revelation 4:11; 5:12).²³ The Son and Spirit themselves do not hold tightly to the status of divinity, but rather empty of themselves into creation for the sake of shared governance according to the pattern of self-giving service (Philippians 2:5-11; Genesis 1:26-28; Luke 9:1; 10:19).²⁴ The Son and Spirit work so that everything will conduct itself in the glory of the ever self-giving Father—reflecting the character of divine rule (1 Corinthians 15:24; Revelation 21:23). In other words, the "reign of God is governance for the sake of communion."²⁵ The Son, by the Spirit, does just as the Father does (John 5:19) and we are seeing the Father when we see him (14:9). The Spirit, who hovers over empty wilderness at creation (Genesis 1:2), casts the incarnate-Son into the wilderness (Mark 1:12), anoints him for ministry to the lowly (Luke 4:18-19), and is perfectly willing in Gethsemane to enter death itself for the sake of gathering all things into divine life (Mark 14:32-38; Hebrews 9:14).²⁶ All "togetherness" and life-giving "power" of the Holy Spirit directs us toward self-giving, other-nurturing love as revealed in the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Whenever we imagine divine power and rule as hierarchical power that stands over others, we feel justified in emulating hierarchical power in the world. Power in that image is

¹⁷ See Vail, "Saving Humankind," in *Atonement and Salvation: The Extravagance of God's Love* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill of Kansas City, 2016), 51-62.

¹⁸ See Vail, "The Resurrection of the Dead," in *Eschatology* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Press, 2020), 79-100.

¹⁹ Fragmentation and discontinuity are part of our time that challenges all totalizing frameworks (metanarratives) and unity of experience. See Dabney, "Starting with the Spirit," 10; and James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

²⁰ Khobnya, 8-9.

²¹ Nunes Borduan, 4.

²² The Latin tradition adds that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son together.

²³ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 377-411.

²⁴ See Vail, *Creation* (Kansas City, MO: The Foundry Press, 2022), especially chapters 3 and 4. See also D. Lyle Dabney, "The Peculiar Business of an Apostle: The 'Great Commission' and the Tendency of Wesley's Speech about God the Father" (Oxford: Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2007), 49, 52, 58-59, <http://oimts.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/2007-4-dabney.pdf>.

²⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 384.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 63-65; see Dabney, "Pneumatologia Crucis," 511-524.

grasped and exercised over others—by one gender, race, classification, culture, nationality, or viewpoint—usually to the advantage of the powerful.²⁷ It is a self-serving arrangement and not self-giving for the flourishing of others. It misses the personal, relational, and shared power of our Triune God. Similarly, whenever we imagine divine power consolidated into a singular point, rather than being selflessly shared, we feel justified in erasing diversity in favor of turning communion (or togetherness) into conformity to a singular, totalizing principle.²⁸ In that theology, only one voice can be valid; diversity is made fundamentally illegitimate. We miss the great vision of all people, tribes, and tongues having a place around God’s throne.²⁹ Wesleyans, of all people, should recoil from theologies that place us under a determining sovereignty and leave no room for creaturely expression. As the Spirit is poured out, God can sanctify us as unique persons in our diverse contexts. We can be restored to God and one another in the dignity of mutual love.³⁰ Nevertheless, this fellowship is a chorus of diverse voices operating, each with divinely gifted authority, in self-giving care for others. We may not be doing or saying the exact same thing as others in the community, but that is precisely the beauty of God’s one Spirit equipping us all differently in love, for the common good.

²⁷ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 388-400, esp. 393.

²⁸ LaCugna, *God for Us*, 394-396.

²⁹ Khobnya celebrates this vision (see “In the Power of the Spirit,” 5, 8).

³⁰ See Diane Leclerc, *Christian Holiness: The Heart of Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010), 164-166.