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A Response to Diane Leclerc's

“Holy Spirit: The Essential Characteristics and Parameters of a Nazarene Pneumatology”

by

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Given the immediately discernible, and laudable, emphasis upon the doctrine of the Triune God in many of this conference's papers, I intend to follow suit in this response to my friend and colleague Diane Leclerc's musings on pneumatology. I will try to keep most of my remarks near to Trinitarian hues. Indeed, Leclerc invites such reflection, asking us to consider what might happen to our doctrine of the Holy Spirit were we to root it in a more consciously and conscientiously chosen “doctrine of God, Trinitarian in nature . . . rather than the soterio-centric theology we now embrace” (2-3).

Again, recognizing the Trinitarian accents in these proceedings, we must at least comment on this bifurcation between the doctrines of salvation and of the Trinity that Leclerc assumes. Perhaps in an ideal world (or church), we would feel no need to draw this line too boldly. Instead, perhaps we would understand and proclaim salvation as a matter of our ecclesial participation in the very life and love of the Triune God through Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Lord and Brother. Certainly the essays especially of Tom Noble and Steve McCormick encourage us to move in that direction. But we are not there yet, not as a church. Hence, Diane's yearning for a more richly Trinitarian reading of pneumatology is not misplaced. Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, our Manual's Articles of Faith do in fact begin with our affirmation of the Triune God.

The implication is that we give pride of place to the Christian conviction regarding God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which immediately implies (or at least ought to imply) the creative and re-creative labors of God the Father, through the agency of God the Son, in the active power and presence of God the Holy Spirit, toward creation. It would seem that, indeed, the “ecumenical” (Triune confession) and the “evangelical” (*a la Wesley*) voices should in fact be singing a harmonious duet – in the Spirit through the Son to the Father. Since our Articles of Faith do indeed begin with the very tenet that Leclerc longingly suggests should serve as the “primary doctrine out of which all others flow” – the doctrine of the Triune God – perhaps what we need to do as Nazarene preachers and teachers is to preach and teach as though this doctrine’s place of primacy in the Articles actually does imply its role of primacy in our reflection and proclamation.

I confess, though, that I find myself at least mildly confused by Leclerc’s concerns regarding “depersonalizing the Spirit.” Allow me to explain. She writes that “the Church of the Nazarene emphasizes the full personality of the Holy Spirit,” drawing in this instance not from the Articles of Faith but from the Nazarene Manual’s ritual for the reception of new members. That in itself is no problem, but she cites language that, for my part, is problematic. What do we mean by “full personality” in this instance? The term “personality” implies far more than what the Latin term *persona* meant to early Christian theologians of the West, and in fact seems to me to reduce, rather than to enhance, the Spirit’s identity by rendering the Spirit as comparable to the human psyche or personality. Meanwhile, our denominational emblem includes two biblical symbols of the Holy Spirit that in fact are not suggestive of “full personality,” the dove and the flame. Further, Jesus understandably employs a biblical metaphor when he compares the Spirit with the wind – hardly a personalistic metaphor. If God “breathes” the Spirit, or “pours out” the Spirit “upon all flesh,” or if “the Spirit of God” is a phrase interchangeable with “the finger of God” as H.O. Wiley suggested, then to insist upon “the full personality of the Holy Spirit” may in fact be to restrict the Spirit to the human, the “all-too-human” (Nietzsche).

Similarly, I hesitate to validate Leclerc's resistance to "language such as 'the Spirit of Christ,'" language she identifies as "depersonalizing." Indeed, I would argue just the inverse: it is precisely the gospel identity of Jesus that fulfills and fills in the Spirit's "identity" for Christian believers. Since Paul is content to describe the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9), or the Spirit of God's Son (Gal 4:6), or even the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:19), are we not on solid grounds in so doing? I would argue, then, that it is the person of Jesus Christ, in the entirety of his ministry, in all his go/spelled words and works, who contributes "identity," or even "personality" – if one insists on the term – to the Spirit. We know it is idiomatic of John's gospel that the Spirit does not testify regarding the Spirit, but regarding Jesus and his words. On the other hand, in the synoptic gospels, especially but not exclusively in Luke, Jesus accomplishes his mighty works by the very power of the Spirit. A symbiotic relationship is developing! On the other "other hand," though, Jesus never addresses or "prays to" the Spirit, so far as we know, nor are we ever instructed to do so. Perhaps we discover a regulatory pattern for our pneumatological reflections when we read in Luke that "Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .'" (10:21). Jesus prayed to the One he called "Father" in the presence and empowering joy of the Holy Spirit.

There is good reason, then, I am arguing, for hesitation regarding language of "full personality" of the Spirit if this implies independent identity or anthropomorphic psyche. In the New Testament the Spirit is identified, variously, as the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God's Son, the Spirit of life, the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead – and even, in words attributed to Jesus as he addresses his disciples, the Spirit of your Father! The Spirit is, metaphorically speaking, Breath – the Breath of God, blowing through Jesus, and through Jesus to (and hopefully also through) his disciples (Jn 20:22) to the world that God loves. It is difficult to see what is gained by insisting on "full personality" of the Spirit, if this means the Spirit is regarded any less to be the Spirit of Christ, i.e., the very presence of the resurrected Christ in the church and in the world.

Leclerc is apparently concerned that the Spirit be “unsubordinated,” meaning, presumably, not subordinate to either the Son or the Father. But I wonder if concerns over subordination are misplaced when we are attempting to think about God as Triune. If the doctrine of the Trinity involves our (admittedly) stumbling, stuttering attempt to bespeak deeply divine mutuality – that is, self-giving and other-receiving love, within God’s own being – does it make any sense to think in terms of hierarchy and thereby worry ourselves over subordination? The traditional worries over the subordination of the Son, or of the Spirit, can only be meaningful where hierarchical thinking is the rule. Is it not likely that one implication of a healthy doctrine of “the Three-One God” (Wesley) is a profound undoing of that very thinking? For example, the Spirit can be properly identified both as the Spirit of Christ (and thus as “subordinate” to the Son), and as the empowering Presence by whom Jesus performed his mighty deeds (and thus as “superordinate” to the Son); it is as true to say that the Spirit engenders the Christ as it is to say that the Christ breathes the Spirit. The Spirit can be called the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of “your Father” – these are clearly relationally-contoured titles, but not at all necessarily titles of subordination.

A similar point, of course, can be made regarding the language of “baptism of [or “with”] the Holy Spirit.” First, we may repeat: it is difficult to avoid the sense of *non*-“personality” associated with this usage. Here the Spirit is most easily compared with, even associated with, water. But on to Leclerc’s point on this topic: she raises questions regarding whether “the language of Spirit baptism” is “still relevant,” “still communicative.” One of the important lessons of Mark Quanstrom’s book is the reminder that the insistence in the holiness movement on associating the work of entire sanctification with Spirit baptism is that baptismal language appears strongly to connote a “crisis” experience rather than a gradual process. I believe he is correct to see this as the “cash value” of the language of Spirit-baptism. We all know that Spirit-baptism language was not Wesley’s native tongue; it may be worthwhile, nonetheless, to point out that in his sermon “Of the Church” he did indeed identify the “baptism of the Holy Ghost”

with that “which the Apostles received at the day of Pentecost” – “and which,” he added, “in a lower degree, is given to all believers.” I believe it is safe to say that most New Testament scholars, both within and without the Church of the Nazarene, would nowadays tend to favor Wesley’s understanding of the phrase over the usage typical in 19th- and most 20th-century holiness theology. In any case, Leclerc’s suggestion that “perhaps meaning might be restored if the denomination restored its sacramental emphasis” (p. 10, f.n. 8) is virtually a stroke of genius.

But more can be said on the matter of Pentecost. If Wesley and later holiness interpreters were correct to identify the baptism of the Spirit with the phenomena of Pentecost – even as they in fact understood that baptism differently from one another, Wesley associating it with all believers and the holiness preachers associating it with entirely sanctified believers – they all tended to miss the primary significance of Peter’s proclamation in Acts 2. Recall that Peter assures his hearers, first of all, that the extraordinary manifestations of Pentecost provided a fulfillment of “what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh’” (Acts 2:16-17). Taking Joel’s stirring prophecy as his text, Peter proceeds to preach to his fellow Jews regarding “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you” (2:22). Peter proclaims Jesus’ ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, and then offers his hearers (including us all) a profound Christological and pneumatological truth: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and *having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he* [i.e., Jesus] *has poured out* this that you both see and hear” (2:33). If Pentecost is indeed “the baptism of the Spirit,” then it is equally true that it is first and foremost a baptism that Jesus himself receives from the Father. God the Father promised to outpour the Spirit *upon all flesh* – and that promise, like all of God’s promises, is fulfilled first and foremost in Jesus the Christ (2 Cor 1:20), the Anointed of the Spirit. So even here (especially here?) at Pentecost we encounter the Trinitarian logic of divine activity toward creation: Jesus receives the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, and then in turn outpours this Spirit upon the fledgling church. The

church receives the Spirit from the Father through the Son. Further, it is because the Spirit proceeds from the Father that the Spirit can be called the Spirit of the Father; it is because the Spirit proceeds through the Son that the Spirit can be called the Spirit of the Son – or, to put it all together, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son of the Father.

Since our pneumatological musings have not surprisingly led us to ecclesiology, allow me to comment very briefly on three other issues Leclerc raises, all of which are related to the church:

1) An ethos of embodied empowerment, or the Church's social ethic. I applaud Leclerc's call to us Nazarenes to be "God's agents of compassion, mercy, and justice in the world" (15-16), and second her wish that every Nazarene might be required to read Donald Dayton's *Discovering our Evangelical Heritage*. However, I am troubled by her leaving us but two options: either to transform culture, or to isolate ourselves from culture. "But the question remains," she writes, "do we believe that as we depend on the Spirit for gracious empowerment there is hope for real societal change? Or do we simply await our escape from a hopeless 'God-forsaken' world?" (16) Is there, however, something like a third option represented by the likes of Stanley Hauerwas and his company? Rather than assuming that it is the Christian role either to escape or to transform "society" or "culture," could we begin seriously thinking of ourselves as a new society, a new social reality called "the body of Christ"? A distinct culture called (to be) "the people of God," gathered from among all the nations? Might we Nazarenes truly understand ourselves to be "called unto holiness," part of God's *ekklesia* or community of the age to come – and live accordingly? This would not entail an abandonment of "society," but the embodying of a distinct and alternative "society" – much like "a city set on a hill" – that bears witness to the Lordship of Christ and the Commonwealth of God already in this world.

2) Forgive us our trespasses, or the Church's repentance. Leclerc asks if there a place for "corporate repentance, aided by the Spirit"(6). In the pertinent footnote, she presses the issue: "Dare we ask ourselves what the Church of the Nazarene needs to take responsibility for?" One

suggestion among possibly many – and one especially pertinent to the doctrine of the Spirit – might involve the Church of the Nazarene’s more or less official statement regarding Christian believers who ostensibly have received, and do practice, the gift of glossolalia. We are on shaky exegetical ground, at best, on this issue.

Given, too, the fact that on the one hand the Church of the Nazarene affirms the outpouring of God’s Spirit upon “all flesh,” females as well as males, to prophesy or speak forth the gospel – and on the other hand that the denomination endured several decades where virtually all access to pulpits was denied to women – certainly here is another strong candidate for corporate repentance.

3) *All things necessary to our salvation, or the Church’s affirmation regarding Scripture.*

I only want quickly to correct Leclerc’s misinterpretation of the phrase “plenary inspiration,” which she claims “entails a rejection of a mechanical or verbal doctrine and absolute inerrancy” (12). “Plenary inspiration,” however, in itself entails no such thing; indeed, left to itself it probably veers closer to these rejected notions than any others. “Plenary” implies “full” or “complete,” and in doctrine regarding biblical inspiration has always been used to claim that all of the Bible, and its every part and passage (and even word), is equally inspired. The portion of the Church of the Nazarene’s Manual Article on the Holy Scriptures that makes Leclerc’s point is not to be found in “plenary inspiration,” but in “inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things pertaining to our salvation.” (Shameless plug: see my recently published Point Loma Press monograph on this topic.)