

# The theological centre of Pauline theology as it relates to the Holy Spirit

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## Abstract

*The issue as to what constitutes the “heart of Pauline theology” is a contentious one in academic debates. The traditional view is the one fostered by the Reformers and perpetuated by generations of Protestants namely that “justification by faith” is the key to Paul’s theology. Unfortunately, upon careful reading of Paul’s letters, the inadequacy of such a view becomes apparent as such a focus would fail to cast the net broadly enough to capture all of Paul’s theological concerns. In saying this and without denying the presence of other determining factors, especially Christology and eschatology, shape the framework of Paul’s pneumatology. There is no doubt that in their eschatological significance, the death and resurrection of Christ control Paul’s teaching on the work of the Spirit within the lives of believers. It could then be argued that as part of the fundamental core of Paul’s understanding of the Gospel, the Spirit is rather close to the centre of things.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Does Paul have a theology? Paul, as Albert Schweitzer (1931:377) has put it, is “The patron-saint of thought in Christianity.” One need not agree with Schweitzer’s particular analysis of Paul’s thoughts, yet theology is what Paul is doing all the time (Fee 1994:2). Is this to suggest then, that Paul is a (systematic) theologian (Gaffin 1998:573)? Yes and no, depending on how one defines theology. Obviously Paul does not write systematic theology, at least not as one usually conceives of it. Gaffin (1998:573) contends that his writings are “occasional” – that is, genuine letters, pastoral pieces addressing specific problems and circumstances, in particular church situations. The question then is, does Paul’s theology have a “centre”? By that metaphor I mean principally to affirm that there is in his letters an identifiable hierarchy of

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interests. Some concerns of Paul as Gaffin (1998:574) puts it, are more important to him than others. It seems then that present in the overall coherence of his teachings is a pattern, in which each part is more or less dominant in relation to the rest.

Dunn (1998:21-22) writes that older alternatives to Paul's theology are still posed and defended, particularly in German scholarship. He cites Bultmann and Ernest Käsemann, in particular, who insist with tremendous conviction, that the centre of Paul's theology is "justification by faith" (see Bultmann 1960:70; Käsemann 1970:405). This, however, is emphatically rejected by Neill and Wright, who contend that "Paul's doctrine of the Spirit is far more central and characteristic than his doctrine of justification by faith" (1988:203). Further to this argument is Ulrich Wilkens' belief that the theology of the cross stands firmly at the centre of Paul's theology and Albert Schweitzer's suggestion that the central feature is to be found in "participation in Christ".

Dunn (1998:20) suggests that the problem with the imagery of centre or core or principle, however one might put it, is that it is too fixed and inflexible. It encourages the impression from the start that Paul's theology was static and unchanging. He quotes Achtemeier who prefers to speak of a "generative centre," which he finds in Paul's "conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead" (Achtemeier:138-40).

This alternative model as given by Achtemeier, is in my view the closest that one may hope to get to Paul's "centre" within his theology. This model – if one could call it that – is further expanded on by Beker (1988:364-377). For him, "the coherence of the gospel is constituted by the apocalyptic interpretation of the death and resurrection of Christ". Dunn (1998:23) concurs with Beker, by stating that the strength of this model is precisely that the coherence does not reduce it to some static formulation, or unalterable structure of thought, and so cannot be easily broken by the shifting currents of contingency. Rather, the coherence is that stable, constant element which expresses what Beker calls "the convictional basis of Paul's proclamation", or what Paul himself refers to as "the truth of the gospel" (Gl 2:5:14) (Beker 1988:368).

In the light of the preceding discussion, the death and resurrection of Christ have specifically shaded my own attempt to write a brief theology of Paul as it relates to the Spirit. My preferred model is, therefore, one that is centred on the Christological and eschatological significance that shades Paul's pneumatology. Like Dunn (1998:24), I make no apology for pursuing my task along these lines. In particular, I am not concerned to reconstruct the theology of Paul as a historical artefact of primary antiquarian or curiosity

value. Rather, I aim to wrestle with the supreme question of reality and human existence as it relates to the believer, the indwelling Spirit and the believer's relationship with God.

## **2. TOWARDS A PAULINE THEOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT**

The "centre" of Paul's teaching, as it finds expressions in his writings, is his Christology and eschatology. With that said, however, it must also be noted that this centre is not the person of Christ in the abstract, but His person and work focused in His death and resurrection. The reason for this thought is perhaps clearest in 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; in context: Christ's death and resurrection is the "first fruits". In His resurrection, the resurrection harvest that belongs to the end of history is already visible. In other words, this eschatology can be defined in terms of His first as well as His second coming. His resurrection is, therefore, not an isolated event in the past, but in having occurred in the past, it belongs to the future consummation and from that future has entered history.

It could be anticipated then, given the overall coherence of his teaching that Paul's understanding of the Spirit would prove to be "eschatological in nature and Christocentric in quality" as proposed by Turner (1975:56). Without denying the presence of other determining factors, Christology and eschatology especially shape the matrix of Paul's pneumatology. Gaffin (1998:575) states that the death and resurrection of Christ in their eschatological significance, control Paul's teaching on the work of the Spirit.

In response to this, others have sought this theological centre in Paul's "mystical experience of being in Christ." This view shifts according to Fee (1994:12), the focus from Christ's historical work and its appropriation by the believer, to the believer's (especially Paul's) ongoing experience of Christ. While in some ways this serves as a corrective to the traditional view, most contemporary Pauline scholars, have recognised the inadequacy of these limiting approaches.

## **3. PAUL'S "ELUSIVE" CENTRE**

Fee (1994:12) points out that the reason why the Pauline centre is so "elusive" is that Paul's theology covers too much ground for one to simplify it into a single phrase. His view is rather in line with Gaffin (1998:574) and Turner (1975:56), who contend that it is far better to isolate the essential elements that lie at the very heart of matters for Paul, and around which all other concerns cluster. In such a view, Fee (1994:12) believes that the following four items should be included:

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- The *church* as an eschatological community, which comprises the new covenant people of God;
- The *eschatological framework* of God's people's existence and thinking;
- Their being constituted by God's eschatological *salvation* effected through the *death and resurrection of Christ*; and
- Their focus on *Jesus* as Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

It does not take much reflection to recognise that apart from the actual focus on Jesus Christ as Messiah, Lord, and Saviour, that the Spirit is a crucial ingredient of each of these aspects of the Pauline centre. It could be said that the Spirit stands near the centre of things for Paul, as part of the fundamental core of his understanding of the gospel. The experience of the Spirit is the key to his already/not yet eschatological framework. Adding to this, the Spirit is the essential player in the believer's experiencing and living out the salvation that God has brought about in Christ. Furthermore, the Spirit both forms the Church into God's (eschatological) people, and conforms them into the image of Christ. Fee (1996:7) rightly argues that Paul's entire theology, without the supporting pinion of the Spirit, would crumble into ruins. This argument is echoed by both Pinnock (1963:2) and Neill and Wright (1988:203).

#### **4. PAUL'S PNEUMATOLOGY**

Within this theological framework of the Spirit, Paul also expresses his key ideas concerning *the new covenant* and *sonship*. Based on this, the author will attempt, within this section of this paper, to analyse and synthesise what Paul says about the Spirit, specifically in the context of the eschatological aspect of the Spirit's work in believers. Fee (1994:6-7) states that the church and individual believers are the new locus of God's own presence with His people; and the Spirit is the way God is now present. Dunn (1998:429) takes it one step further, he rightly says that membership in God's family (*sonship*) is defined in terms of the Spirit.

In the author's view, Paul's theology on this is simple; because believers have received the Spirit, they are now sons of God (Rm 8:15). That the Spirit is thus to be seen as the defining mark of the Christian according to Paul, is put in blunt terms, says Dunn (1998:423), in Romans 8:9, "*you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, assuming that the Spirit of God does indeed dwell in you, if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Him*". In this verse, Paul provides the nearest thing to a definition of a Christian (someone who is "of Christ"). The Spirit, according to Paul, is the life of the Christian, that is, the life of God in the Christian.

Where Paul the Pharisee might have identified the Proselyte as one who had received the law and lived in accordance with it, Paul the Apostle identifies the Christian as one who has received the Spirit and lives in accordance with it. Membership in God's family is no longer defined as being a Barmitzwah (son of the Commandment), but as one who has been adopted by God and shares the Spirit of God's Son. The adoption is given its existential reality by the presence and witness of the Spirit (Rm 8:16).

(Dunn 1998:424)

To say that the Spirit is pivotal to one's understanding of *sonship* is by no means an overstatement; it is the underlying principle of Pauline theology. The first problem, though that one is confronted with in deciphering a theology of the Spirit in Pauline writings, is the lack of concrete imagery concerning the Holy Spirit. Fee (1994:2) rightly states that for some a book (*or thesis*) on the Spirit as "theology" is the kiss of death. The reason for this is that ordinary theology has to do with reflective understanding of things divine, whereas Paul's understanding of the Spirit is ultimately a matter of what Jeremias, in another context called, *gelebte Glaube*, "lived out faith". Thus in Pauline theology one finds moments of theological reflection, but mostly one finds occasional words, that give all kinds of insight into his understanding of the role/experience of the Spirit in the new age, that has *come present* with Christ and the Spirit (Fee 1994:3).

## 5. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SPIRIT

Why use the phrase "the eschatological significance of the Spirit?"

For Paul, as previously mentioned, the Spirit is the key to everything, for him, the Spirit is an eschatological reality marking the turning of the ages. By this is meant that believers, those who are indwelt by the Spirit, are part of the coming age that God is now ushering in.

In Paul's case it was not just a conversion that he experienced on the road to Damascus (Ac 9:1-19), but rather as Dunn puts it, "it was much more a transition to a different plane. It was a breakthrough from one age to another; in some sense a 'rescue from the present evil age' (Gl 1:4). In Dunn's view, it was the beginning of the 'new creation'" (1998:179-180).

### 5.1 From flesh to spirit

Moo (1996:50) is more direct when he states that the contrast of "flesh" and "Spirit" (in this case Holy Spirit), is part of Paul's larger salvation-historical framework, in which two "aeons" or eras are set over against one another: the

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old era dominated by sin, death and the flesh, and the new era characterised by righteousness, life, and the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Christ the “new era” of redemptive history has begun. The life giving Spirit of Christ is now powerfully active to bring about this change in all who would believe.

It is through the outpouring of the Spirit at the end of the age of Torah (law), that the Christians understood the prophecy of Joel 2:28-30 to have been fulfilled: Now all possessed the Spirit. Fee further expands on this; he says that the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the eschatological Spirit marked the end of the old order (Torah 1994:284).

To further understand the eschatological significance of the work of the Spirit in a believer’s life, one needs to realise that it is embedded in the doctrine of Christ. Hamilton states it this way: “the common opinion is correct which sees the key to the doctrine of the Spirit in the doctrine of Christ” (1957:3).

The Spirit is, therefore, the channel of the life that is stored in Christ. Christ is the source; the Spirit is the agent of distribution. Hamilton expresses it as follows: “that which the Spirit communicates remains a property of Christ. Thus through redemptive action the Spirit and the Lord are identified” (1957:7).

## **5.2 Christ is the Spirit**

The work of the Spirit is to transform believers into the divine likeness (2 Cor 3:18), which is Christ (4:4). Hence, the Spirit is also known as “*the Spirit of Christ*” (Rm 8:9) “*the Spirit of (God’s) Son*” (Gl 4:6), “*the Spirit of Jesus Christ*” (Phlp 1:19). What is implied, presumably, is that the Spirit of God, hitherto a somewhat nebulous concept, was now being understood as related to Christ (Dunn 1998:263).

According to Paul, so completely does the Spirit convey to believers the life and power of the risen Christ, that in practice the two seem frequently identified (although in principle they are distinguished). An example, is the expression in Romans 8:9-10, where Spirit is spoken of as dwelling οἰκεῖ (vv 9, 11) and ἐνοικοῦντος (v 11) – in the believer and the believer has ἔχει the Spirit (v 9). Then with no warning the very same phenomenon is described as Christ being in the believer Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν (v 10). While it is fair to say that the coming of Christ forever marked Paul’s understanding of the Spirit, Fee (1994:834-835) argues that in Pauline theology one does not have to think of the Spirit in *strictly* Christocentric terms. His reason for saying this is that, not only does Paul speak more often of the “Spirit of God” than of the “Spirit of Christ” but God is also invariably the subject of the verb when Paul speaks of

human reception of the Spirit. Although one does not have to fully agree with Fee, it is fair to say that Paul's doctrine of the Spirit is Christocentric, but only in the sense that Christ and His work give definition to the Spirit and His work in the Christian life. This reveals that in Paul's mind they mean the same thing. The resulting identification of the Spirit and Christ is parallel to 2 Cor 3:17 "the Lord is the Spirit" ὁ δὲ κύριος τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστίν. The terms "Christ" and "the Spirit of Christ" are used interchangeably, but, once again, it is not necessarily an ontological identification of being; here, too, it is in fact a dynamic identification. Hamilton (1957:10) states it this way, "the Spirit gives His gift of life to what is mortal on the basis of Christ's righteousness and after the pattern of Christ's resurrection. The Spirit applies the benefits of Christ, but since those benefits are inseparable from the living Lord, the Lord Himself is present".

According to Meyer (2001:8), the most remarkable feature of these verses is the apparently promiscuous interchanging of "God's Spirit", "Christ's Spirit", "the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead", and "Christ in you". He states that the possible confusion of these verses can be cleared up by using Romans 8:11, citing the Spirit as a *third power*, the life-giving power of God by which He raised Jesus from the dead. He further states that this same power is operating already in the Christian moving him towards the future defeat of immorality in such a way, as to liberate the Christian life now from its past pattern of obligation to the flesh (v 12).

## **6. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL ASPECT OF THE SPIRIT IN THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE**

Christologically, the function of the Spirit is to reveal Christ to man, bind the believer to Christ, and to impart to the believer the risen Christ's life of resurrection and exaltation. This ties the work of the Spirit to the redemptive acts of God in Christ in the past. However, the Spirit belongs primarily to the future, in the sense that what one witnesses of the post-resurrection action of the Spirit, can be understood only when viewed as a breaking-in of the future into the present. In other words, Hamilton (1957:26) contends, on the basis of the work of Christ, the power of the redeemed future has been released to act in the present in the person of the Holy Spirit.

## **7. THE SPIRIT IN THE PRESENT: (THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TENSION)**

Fundamental to Paul's Gospel is the claim that the gift of the Spirit is the beginning of the process of salvation (Dunn 1998:468). Indeed, one could say

that for Paul, the gift of the Spirit is the key to the eschatological tension (Turner 1975 127-30) for by His coming the Spirit sets up that tension. The Spirit is, as it were, the bridge between the present and the future, or between the already and the not yet. The gift of the Spirit, as Dunn (1998:469) puts it, is the first phase of the harvest mentioned in Romans 8:23, which consists in the resurrection of the body. Paul, no doubt in this context, had in mind a body unified and determined wholly by the Spirit, and no longer by the soul, and even less by the flesh. The gift of the Spirit is the beginning of that process according to Hamilton (1957:26-40). The eschatological tension is set up precisely because the Spirit is the power of God's final purpose, which is already beginning to reclaim the whole person for God.

Hamilton (1957:26) further contends that Ephesians 1:13 also presents the relation of the Spirit to the believer in such a way that one sees the Spirit as present to the believer, not only now while he believes in Christ, but also after the time when the believer takes possession of his inheritance in the future age. Here one has a function of the Spirit in the believer's present that is only meaningful in relation to the future.

## **8. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PROCESS OF SALVATION**

According to Dunn (1998:465), Paul's conception of the process of salvation is his conviction that the believer has not yet arrived, is not perfect, and is always *in via*, in transit. It is this which determines the experience of "being saved" as a process of "eschatological tension" – the tension between a work "begun" but not "complete", between fulfilment and consummation, between a decisive "already" and a still to be worked out "not yet".

The eschatological tension implicit in Paul's schema of salvation runs through all his soteriology, and although its presence is regularly acknowledged, its extent is rarely documented.

This eschatological tension is no less evident in the case of the gift of the Spirit. Gunkel (1899:75) elaborates that Paul saw the whole life of the Christian as an effect of the πνευμα (Spirit).

In Romans 8:9, he describes the life of the believer as being "in the Spirit" ἐν πνεύματι. In Romans 7:6, he uses a similar expression "in the new life of the Spirit" ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος and in 1 Corinthians 12:3, he uses ἐν πνεύματι twice. According to Bauer (1952:470), this phrase means being the subject of a special action of the Spirit. He who is ἐν πνεύματι (in the Spirit) becomes the organ through which the Spirit expresses himself. One discovers then that the eschatological tension within the Christian life as a whole, flows from the working of the Spirit, for it is by His coming that the Spirit sets up that tension according to Dunn (1998:469).



## 9. THE SPIRIT AS THE EVIDENCE AND GUARANTEE OF THE FUTURE

For Paul, the gift of the outpoured Spirit meant that the Messianic age had already arrived. The Spirit is the crowning evidence that God's end-time promises are being fulfilled. Fee (1996:53) rightly states that, for Paul, neither his own experience of the Spirit nor his perception of that experience, makes sense, apart from the perspective of the fulfilled promise and salvation as already, but not yet. Believers, therefore, live between the times with regard to two resurrections. They have *already* been "raised with Christ," which then guarantees their *future* bodily resurrection (Rm 6:4-5; 8:10-11).

The most prominent feature of what is "not yet" in Pauline eschatology is the bodily resurrection of believers. Here again is a place in Paul's understanding, where the Spirit plays a decisive role, but that role is not as is sometimes asserted, that of agency. Rather, the indwelling Spirit serves as the divine pledge of a future bodily resurrection, but *guarantees* it.

It is fair to conclude that the Spirit is the key to the future orientation of Paul and the early church. By the Spirit's presence, believers have tasted of the life to come, and are now orientated towards its consummation, "*we are saved in hope*", Paul tells the Romans (8:24); by the power of the Spirit believers "*abound in hope*" (Rm 15:13).

Despite what is often implied, Fee (1996:59-61) observes that Paul's primary emphasis is not on this certain and eagerly awaited future that the Spirit guarantees, but rather on the Spirit as the demonstration that the future has already been set in motion.

This is especially true at the very heart of matters for him, that through Christ and the Spirit, God is already calling out a people for His name, who will live the life of the future in their present existence together, as they await the consummation. Fee (1996:66) sums it up thus, "God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, He is creating *a people* among whom He can live and who in their life together will reproduce God's life and character".

This view of salvation is consistent throughout Paul's letters. It is demonstrated most clearly in his references to the Spirit, who plays the key role, not only in forming the people of God, but also in their life together and in worship.

## 10. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

For Paul, his theology, without denying the presence of other determining factors, is Christocentric in quality, and eschatological in nature. Related to this is the eschatological significance of the Spirit within his theology. The

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Christocentric flow of Paul's theology and how he relates it to eschatology is, without doubt, the matrix that shaped his pneumatology. For him, the Spirit is the evidence and guarantee of the future for all who would believe. This life-giving Spirit of Christ is now powerfully active in bringing about whatever change is necessary within the lives of those who would believe. For Paul, the eschatological significance of the work of the Spirit in a believer's life is embedded within the doctrine of Christ. It therefore seems certain that there can be no theology of the Spirit, if it is not Christocentric in its flow and outlook.

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