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# Who is the Holy Spirit?

BY BARBARA MUTCH

**With careful consideration given to Scripture, primary sources, historical interpretation, and personal experience, the four books reviewed here address the often polarizing doctrine of pneumatology and its meaning for life and faith.**

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**H**ow do we understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit? What meaning does this understanding have for the lives of believers personally and corporately? And where do we turn in order to acquire such an understanding? The four books reviewed here address the often polarizing doctrine of pneumatology and its meaning for life and faith.

Craig S. Keener, in his volume *Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001, 224 pp., \$24.00), turns to Scripture, primarily the New Testament, in search of the answers to these questions. Writing to what he refers to as the “larger body of Christ,” Keener sets a very practical agenda. He wants to help readers “better understand how the Spirit empowers Christians to live” (p. 11). His methodology undertakes a biblical examination of the Spirit’s role in Christian living, and then illustrates the argument with personal experience.

Keener organizes his work around the foundational question of how the Spirit can be recognized. He argues that learning to recognize God’s voice is necessary in order for believers to obey God and reflect God’s character; and “knowing God’s character in Scripture is the most important way to begin recognizing God’s voice” (p. 19). It is this growing ability for persons to reflect God’s character that Keener sees as the greatest work of the Holy Spirit. In response, he focuses the heart of his book on the work of the Spirit

in effecting moral transformation, examining what the New Testament teaches about the role of the fruit of the Spirit in the transformation process, and also the ways in which the Holy Spirit empowers believers for evangelism and ethical living. “The bottom line of the Spirit’s work in our lives is not power to perform miracles but a transformed heart that learns how to love” (p. 136), states Keener. Congruent with his emphasis on human transformation, Keener makes an interesting suggestion – that “baptism in the Spirit,” rather than referring only to what happens at the occasion of conversion, may more accurately refer to the entirety of the Spirit’s work in the lives of believers, including God’s empowerment for mission.

*Gift and Giver* presents the Holy Spirit as the One who empowers believers to live and defines believers as those who are charged with learning to recognize God’s voice and to depend on the Spirit who has been given. Through methodical study of the New Testament and personal illustrations, Keener crafts an accessible, practical book on the gift of the Holy Spirit who was given for the transformation of Christians.



Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s anthology, *Holy Spirit and Salvation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010, 496 pp., \$45.00), is part of *The Sources of Christian Theology* series, whose aim is to provide resources for the study of major Christian doctrines. Each book in this series, which currently comprises four volumes, is edited by a scholar who selects extensive source materials that convey essential elements of theological formulation about each doctrine. The editor provides context and background to each of the selections, and includes a bibliography for further study. This volume turns to the “best Christian theological thinking” from the early church period to the present in order to understand the meaning of the Holy Spirit. Kärkkäinen presents an impressive collection of primary sources on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, briefly situating each within its historical time period and particular context, and then mostly lets them speak for themselves.

The book is organized into two parts. Part I, which surveys the history of the pneumatological traditions, presents a rich proliferation of views and experiences, images and metaphors of the Spirit from various sources. This section begins with the earliest efforts of the Apostolic Fathers to faithfully transmit the traditions of the Holy Spirit, and then traces understandings that developed through the wrestling of historic councils, the writings of Latin and Eastern Church Fathers, and the reflections of medievalists, mystics, and Scholastics. Next are selections from mainstream Reformers, highlighting the important role of pneumatology in their theological vision, and from the Post-Reformation renewal movements that were hallmarked by a deep interest in the spiritual life. Various nineteenth-century pneumatologies, expressed in the thinking of persons such as F. D. E. Schleiermacher and Abraham Kuyper, bring the first part to a close.

Part II, “Contemporary Theologies of the Spirit and Salvation,” is organized in two sections. The first represents key doctrinal beliefs about the Holy Spirit held by various traditions in the twentieth century, including the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist perspectives, and the Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic traditions. This section also includes sources that are “contextually oriented,” meaning those expressed by feminist theologians, persons writing with particular concern for the environment, and out of the socio-political arena. The second half of Part II focuses on a wide variety of sources from the Global South, including writings introducing African Spirit Christology, Korean Minjung theology, and the Latin American Feast of the Espíritu Santo.

Rather than providing a single answer to the question of the identity and work of the Holy Spirit, Kärkkäinen offers a richly textured, kaleidoscope of images, symbols, metaphors, and stories of a member of the Godhead who can be encountered and understood through texts as diverse as Catherine of Siena’s *Table Waiter*, Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Kiss of God*, John of the Cross’s *South Wind that Wakens Love*, Thomas Goodwin’s *Builder of the Church*, and Karl Barth’s *Awakening Power*. The reader is richer for it.



*The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy is Shaping the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014, 192 pp., \$19.99) is written by Phyllis Tickle with Jon M.

Sweeney. It is the third book of Tickle’s trilogy on Emergence Christianity, and the reader truly does feel as though they are stepping into a conversation already begun. The question of intended audience may have been addressed in a preceding volume, most likely those interested in the nature of the emergent / emerging church, but Tickle and Sweeney’s purpose in this slim volume is less clearly

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stated than that of the three other books reviewed here. It appears they want to engage the question of the meaning of the Holy Spirit for the Church at this time. The methodology takes the form of an interpretive historical survey. The last two thousand years is organized into half-millennium increments, based on the theory that every five hundred years the Latinized world goes through a period of enormous upheaval. The Great Transformation

moved Rome from a kingdom to an empire; the Great Decline and Fall ushered in the Dark Ages; the Great Schism severed the Orthodox Christianity from the Western church; and the Great Reformation propelled, among other things, humanism, capitalism, and Protestant Christianity. Each of these periods of time, according to Tickle and Sweeney, have been marked by an overarching question of the locus of authority or, specifically, the issue of how believers should live.

By turning to history and a particular interpretation of it (in contrast to presenting primary sources as Kärkkäinen does in the previous volume reviewed), Tickle and Sweeney develop the argument that the Holy Spirit is central to the question of authority and ethics for the Church in this time. The thinking of Augustine and Basil on the nature of the Trinity, the expression of various councils and creeds, the nature of the relationships within the Trinity (specifically whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, or from the Father alone), and the conception of twelfth-century Joachim of Fiore that all of human history is divided into three epochs each corresponding to a member of the Trinity, are among the resources from which the authors make their case. They conclude that the work of the Spirit is about movement and transformation, “and the most profound change theologically and conceptually in Christianity in our era has been the shift toward emphasis on God, the Holy Spirit” (p. 147). In place of past statements about the identity or work of the Holy Spirit and the implications for believers, Tickle and Sweeney create a sense of anticipation of what lies ahead in this Age of the Spirit. The book concludes with four helpful appendices describing major historical heresies, seven ecumenical councils, differences between Western and Eastern Christian practice, and a glossary of theological words that bear on the conversation presented.



Jack Levinson’s *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013, 246 pp., \$24.00) is clearly addressed to “students, theologians, scholars, and intellectually engaged pastors” (p. 9). It is intended as “a straightforward message for the church” (p. xii), particularly for “readers keen to develop and sustain vibrant contemporary spiritualities” (p. 2). Levinson seeks to draft an agenda for the future of pneumatology based on the premise that the Holy Spirit is most fully understood and experienced in the synergy of inspiration, virtue, and learning. In developing this agenda, Levinson builds around a central core of exegetical biblical study, to which he adds personal stories and significant practical application.

Levinson organizes *Inspired* into three lengthy chapters: “The Spirit and the Cultivation of Virtue,” “Putting Ecstasy in its Place,” and “The Spirit and the Interpretation of Scripture.” In the first chapter, Levinson

draws substantially on the teaching in the Jewish Bible or Old Testament that God gives the spirit-breath to all human beings at birth, and that it is this spirit given at birth that becomes the locus of virtue and learning for believers, who are continually being given the Spirit. In the second chapter, Levinson makes a biblical case for a strong connection between ecstasy and comprehension. Citing the Apostle Peter's pondering of his rooftop vision, the visions of Paul and Ananias, and the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council, Levinson claims that the relationship between study and the Spirit is the ultimate expression of inspiration throughout the book of Acts. In the third movement, he hones this argument more finely, claiming that the quintessential expression of the Holy Spirit in Israelite, Jewish, and Christian literature is the inspired interpretation of Scripture. Each of these substantial chapters concludes with specific, practical implications for Christian belief and practice, including how Christians acknowledge the Holy Spirit in those who are not Christians, how Christians pray, how churches can practice group discernment, and how Christians value the Old Testament. Levinson concludes his substantial work with an agenda for the Church, in which he states that "the principal task of the Holy Spirit for Christians is to illuminate the person of Jesus by setting his words and actions in the context of Israel's poetry, stories and prophecies" (p. 227).



Through a careful consideration of Scripture, primary sources, historical interpretation, and personal experience, the four books reviewed here present a dynamic picture of the Holy Spirit as the One who empowers believers to live, is described in diverse images, serves as the locus of authority for this age, and is experienced at the intersection of inspiration, virtue, and learning. Readers will be enriched intellectually and encouraged spiritually by time spent in their good company.



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