The concept of Pneuma in the Theology of Paul

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1. INTRODUCTION

This introductory paper is intended to scan the horizon of Paul's idea of the Holy Spirit in order to initiate discussion of a difficult subject. As one reviews the material at one's disposal and current theological literature one is astounded at the scantiness of thought on the theme. One comes inevitably to the realisation that Pneuma is the stepchild of N.T. Theology. Abounding in meditation on Christology, the field yields a poor crop as far as Pneuma is concerned.¹ It is also open to question whether one could conceive of an autonomous pneumatological scheme without doing injustice to the unity of N.T. teaching. By this I mean the justifiability of speaking of a Pauline "doctrine of the Holy Spirit".

Before considering the vital elements of our theme it is therefore necessary to survey the whole field with a view to pinpointing the main problems concerned. In the second instance it is essential to localize Paul's views within the greater framework of his teaching.

2. HISTORY OF THE MAIN LINE OF THOUGHT AND LITERATURE

It is well-known that Brunner called the Holy Spirit "the stepchild of the theologian",² because of the fact that systematic theology busied itself with the central themes of the Gospel, like the Kingdom of God, the Christ of Paul, etc. The Pneuma concept was apparently not considered a central theme. Conceding this to be a neglected province of systematic theology it is nevertheless a most important one. Neill might well be correct in holding that no one has yet developed a theology of the Spirit which does justice to the important role of the Spirit in the history of Revelation.³

In the classical Creeds we find a mere sprinkling of references to the Spirit in contrast to the extensive treatment of the Person and Work of Christ. Perhaps this is to be explained by the fact
that confessional thought on the Spirit came up for discussion fairly late in history, in any case later than on Christology. It is only by the 6th century A.D. that the Filioque attained confessional status, viz. that in the Holy Trinity the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Eastern Orthodoxy could never come to terms with this view, with detrimental consequences, as one might expect, since the ways of the Eastern and Western Churches parted as a consequence of this issue as well. In Eastern theology the subjective application of the redemptive Work of Christ in the believer by the Holy Spirit has therefore never developed to the point of an accepted confession, as is the case in the Western Church, as embodied in the Canons of Dordt, Chapters III and IV. Berkhof makes a profound remark on this which needs to be pondered: the imminent confrontation with the Eastern Orthodox Church, which still rejects the Filioque, compels us towards a reconsideration of the classical trinitarian view, particularly as far as the concept of Pneuma is concerned. It led Berkhof to alarming pronouncements, despite his excellent discussion of the subject.

From these sketchy remarks it is clear that perhaps on no other issue of theology as on this one are the N.T. and systematic theologian rubbing shoulders. One is reminded of two great figures like Barth and Bultmann. Although both ventured into the field of pneumatology neither came forward with a clear view of the Spirit. Neil finds only “polite references” to the Holy Spirit by Bultmann, and even though Barth devotes 55 pages to the subject in one of his works, he nevertheless does not arrive at a decisive doctrine. What is clear is that Barth is also compelled to reconsider the work of the Pneuma, particularly as far as His subjective work is concerned (cf. K.D. IV 2 par. 64, 4, p. 360). He is obviously placed before a dilemma. On the one hand he views the work of the Spirit as subordinate to Christ due to his “Christomonism”; which means that to him the Spirit is a “power of Christ” and “nothing else than the presence of Christ” etc. On the other hand he is obliged to acknowledge that much more is to be said on the subject, but leaves it at that, as does Bultmann.

In Anglo-American theology we are in a better position. We have numerous works at our disposal, although so many of them are moralistic, popular and devotional rather than a systematic treatment of the subject. In German and Dutch theology a few works of greater importance have been published since the turn of the century. As far as the latter is concerned the work of
A. Kuyper is still of capital importance. Between Kuyper and Barth there are two outstanding figures, van Ruler and Noordmans. Of these two it is especially van Ruler who has an acute realization of the importance of the work of the Spirit. The influence of Kuyper can be clearly traced in his works. Noordmans on the other hand is more reserved on many points.

It is Berkhof, however, who makes a major contribution with his already mentioned work on the Holy Spirit. It is also through his publication that the works of Ingo Hermann and Kurt Stalder and some others are given proper treatment. Of lesser academic importance should be mentioned the work of Janzen. In conclusion mention should be made of the collection of essays, edited by J. H. Bavinck, and the work of Ridderbos on the theology of Paul. This list is by no means complete but does indicate the scantiness of publications in relation to the other main aspects of N.T. theology.

3. PNEUMA IN THE MIND OF PAUL

To treat the various issues which are to be raised involves taking some preliminary stand in regard to Paul's teaching. We may otherwise be led astray by the extensive textual material at our disposal. This in turn means finding the predominant element in his thinking — the main entrance, so to speak, to the full design of his thought.

We realize from the outset that we have no so-called locus classicus for his pneumatology. What we do have is a rich variety of sayings, expressions and statements. In the older N.T. theologies the work of the Spirit is usually localized with the ethical imperatives. There is, however, a more current consensus of opinion that Paul's views on the Spirit should be regarded as the fundamental substance of his theology, to such an extent that the reformed principle of "justification by faith alone" is not the predominant element in Pauline thought. One could, it is held, with equal right call him the "apostle of the Holy Spirit", but this point of view has by no means received sufficient recognition or deliberation.

It is noteworthy that in various, now famous schools of thought, the quest for a doctrine of the Spirit is pursued in rather off-hand fashion. This calls for a brief review for the purpose of formulating our own point of view.

A primary landmark is to be found in the Tübingen School, a
type of interpretation initiated by F. C. Bauer (1860). This brilliant scholar sought the essence of Paul's theology not in the latter's views on Christ, but on the Spirit, and particularly in the correlative motif of the antithesis Spirit: Flesh.19 "Spirit" is interpreted by him in Hegelian sense as the Transcendent, Infinite, as opposed to the bounded "Flesh". By the "Spirit" one participates of the Infinite. His interpretation might be called: idealistic mysticism.

Quite the contrary is attempted by the Liberal School (Holsten, Lüdemann, Pfleiderer, Holtzmann and others). The representatives of this school take their starting-point in Greek anthropology. The result is a mystic-ethical Pneuma concept. Spirit is no longer regarded as the transcendent antithetic principle but is part of an immanent dualism: spirit as opposed to flesh within man. "Spirit" is therefore the rational, motivating and elevating element in man, whereas "flesh" is his lower and sensual constitution. Ridderbos calls this way of thinking "ethic-rational religiosity".20 One can hardly consider this a pneumatology; it is rather more a spiritualizing of Paul's Christology.

The beginning of the present century saw a turn of the tide. Scholars began taking an intensive interest in the religious phenomena of the Hellenistic era. Profound study brought about the formation of the so-called Religionsgeschichte, a word difficult to translate but sometimes referred to as "religio-historical theology" or worse "history of religion". Scholars like Cumont, Rohde, Dietrich, Reitzenstein and others were convinced that the "mystery" of Christian sacraments could be cleared up by interpreting them in terms of the Hellenistic mystery religions. This view has far-reaching consequences: the eschatological Christ is given a mystical interpretation. One man stands above all others in this school of thought, Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920). His Kyrios Christos (1913) is still a corner-stone of the school. It is mainly concerned with the Kyrios of the Hellenistic Churches, and Pneuma is found only in the development of a pneumatic Kyrios, presumed to have been in Paul's mind on analogy of the "Hellenistic Communities". From this Christology a pneumatic principle emanates: life governed by the Spirit. The structure of this line of thought is such that the pneuma concept is absorbed in a Christian mysticism.

Reitzenstein places the accent slightly differently by comparing Paul with the gnosticism gleaned from Hermetic writings. We are told that 1 Cor. 2 supplies the key to his interpretation: Paul's appeal to the effect that the Spirit searches everything,
even the hidden depths of God’s purposes (1 Cor. 2:10). Accordingly
the apostle is not thinking of the historical Jesus at all, but is
involved in “gnosis”, whereby he experiences all manner of spiritual
phenomena. This subjective experience is then reconstructed into
a Christology.

At this stage of our discussion a gradual development from an
objective pneuma concept (Bauer and the Tübingen school) to a
subjective one with a mediating connotation (the religio-historical
school) is clear. From this stage onwards it is not difficult to
follow the straight line to Bultmann and his whole idea of
demythologizing.

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At the beginning of the century these liberal and religio-
historical views were dealt a heavy blow by a major shift in out-
look, brought about by Albert Schweitzer with his concept of
Eschatology, which he clothed in a term difficult to translate but
which is rendered “thoroughgoing eschatology” (Neill’s translation).
The term is unwieldy but does say more or less what Schweitzer
had in mind: the eschaton as a present reality. He turned to Jewish
Apocalypse and not to Hellenistic sources to find the key to
Paul’s thinking.21 In this way it was possible for him to develop an ob-
jective “Christ-mysticism”, his use of the term mysticism however
often being misunderstood. The accent is on Christ. Through Him
the elect participate in a very real and objective way in the
Messianic Kingdom which became a reality with the coming of
Christ. Pneuma now plays the role of spiritual vitality, energy,
power. “In Christ” would mean something like a pneumatic
corporality. We note the subordinate and impersonal character
ascribed to the Spirit, and that is about as much as we can say
of the Spirit as seen through the eyes of Schweitzer.

This brief survey may be concluded by a short reference to
Bultmann. As we have already stated, Bultmann is the one who
introduced Hegelian existentialism into N.T. theology, meaning
in this context the continuous Entscheidung between “flesh and
spirit”. We note furthermore his accent on Christ and Kerygma,
leaving a very small margin for an adequate conception of the
Spirit. To quote Neill: “The whole work of Bultmann can be
summed up as a gallant attempt to solve the problem, to make
the challenge existential — without belief in the resurrection of

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Jesus Christ as something that actually happened, and without a doctrine of the Holy Spirit”;22 and again: “There is the same exaggeration of the significance of preaching, which is characteristic of continental Protestantism; and there is the same lack of a theology of the Holy Spirit”.23 Risking the danger of too naively coining a word, the development as described and which ended in Bultmann may be understood as a process of de-pneumatologizing.

To a greater or lesser degree Bultmann found protagonists in Haenchen, Käsemann, Schmithals, Fuchs, Bornkamm, Vielhauer, Brandenburger and others.

This survey would not be complete without some reference to the work of C. H. Dodd, now famous for his realized eschatology. According to Dodd the church lives in an eschatological miracle, i.e. the day of salvation, the Kingdom of God, in that which — by whatever term we wish to call the “last word of God to men” (Neill) — is a present reality, not a coming hope. (Cf. The Parables of the Kingdom 1935 and The Meaning of Paul for today, amongst others.) Because the Kingdom of God is actually present in Christ, the Spirit and Christ come as near to being identified as makes no difference.

4. CONCLUSION

We have traced some of the highlights of N.T. research in respect of the Holy Spirit. The fruits are not prolific. So much remains to be done and said. We have noted a gradual shifting of accent from an objective pneuma concept to a subjective one, in which the Spirit is relegated to a position as mediating Power. This cannot be our final word. There is a more positive note to be sounded. With the work of J. Dupont (Gnosis, 1949) a new dimension was opened to us. By laying stress on the Jewish character of Paul’s teaching the Pneuma concept receives greater recognition. The eventual realization of the importance of the Qumran and Nag-Hammadi literature did much to focus attention on the Spirit. Foerster’s article on the subject clearly indicates this new realization.24 The important aspect is that the character of Paul’s teaching is now understood as “heilsgeschichtlich”-eschatological (the former is also untranslatable; “history of salvation” is a poor substitute). This is also true of his statements on the Holy Spirit.

If a full account of the Spirit is to be given this character of
the apostle's teaching should be taken into account. Amidst so much confusion I believe that Ridderbos has stated the fundamental fact clearly in his article "De Kerk en de Heilige Geest": We cannot understand Paul's conception of the Holy Spirit otherwise than in relation to the history of salvation. When speaking of the Spirit he thinks in eschatological dimensions. He is not deliberating in abstract theological or trinitarian terms, but taking his stand in the concrete dimensions of the history of salvation. Christ is the Messiah of the fullness of time, anointed with the Spirit. He is the Bearer and Distributor of the Spirit to his people. It is, therefore, possible that he could write: the Lord is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17), which means that where the Lord is, the Spirit is also. The Spirit is the Bridge between Ascension and Parousia. In the time between the Ekklesia is living under the power and government of the Spirit.

5. PNEUMA IN THE LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In illustration of the principal viewpoint under discussion one aspect is selected for further exposition. If the unity of Pauline teaching is not preserved the result of such a discussion could easily become an arbitrary arrangement of statements by the apostle. Compare for instance Delling's summary resulting from his view of the Pneuma (in following Bultmann) as "Schöpferkraft", with that of Janzen and G. B. Stevens.

In preserving the unity of Paul's teaching we are committed to answering the question as to the source of his Pneuma conception. Foerster is right in seeking it in the sphere of late Jewish eschatological concepts. Comparing the evidence with the Qumran documents he asserts that for Paul the Pneuma is an eschatological event. He is certainly nearer the mark than Eduard Schweizer with his view that Paul's idea is a conflation of an Old Testament and a Hellenistic line of thought. In this way he centralizes the Spirit in a sort of dualism of Hellenistic-Jewish "neue Existenz schlecht-hin". His examination of texts like 1 Cor. 2:6; 2 Cor. 4:3; 5:5, 7; Gal. 3:2, 5; 6:8; Rom. 8:5, 26 etc. is governed by this viewpoint.

Concluding this brief outline of prominent points of view, attention should be drawn to the works of H. Ridderbos and H. Berkhof. Both these scholars seek the origin of Paul's concept in Jewish thought, as is done by Foerster. They are prepared, however, to go a step further and qualify the typical Pauline character
of this thought as "heilsgeschichtlich". Who the Person and what the work of the Spirit are can only be described in terms of History of Revelation and Eschatology; therefore, Spirit is not merely the power of New Life in the moral sense of the word, but renewal of the entire existence of man, in all his functions and possibilities of his existence. It also means renewal of the universe and Christ governing the universe and history.31

Berkhof is prepared to go even a step further and perhaps one step too far. The difference of opinion lies in this fact that Berkhof approaches Christology in the light of pneumatology. This leads him to identify Christ and the Spirit. Thus ev πνευμάτι is synonomous with ev χριστῷ.32 (Cf. 2 Cor. 3: 17.) By doing so he is forced to abandon the established Reformed Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and substitute in its stead a trinitarian concept of modi subsistentiae or modi entis.

These far-reaching statements have not been tried and tested extensively, as Berkhof readily agrees, and certainly not so far as N.T. theology is concerned. This aspect of the Pneuma concept still requires much deliberation and study.

For another contribution, however, we are indebted to Berkhof, namely the importance of maintaining the unity of the ordo salutis. The question of priority is still a stumbling block: Conversion or Regeneration (Re-birth)? By merely glancing at a passage like Eph. 2:1-10 it is clear that these various moments — in their diversity — are nevertheless a unity. It would be possible to describe them from the point of view of the Re-birth, as Berkhof does.

What does all this mean in respect of the Work of the Spirit? It means that the new way of life by the Spirit in Christ is the fundamental thought, cf. Rom. 8 and Gal. 5. But this unity should not be accentuated at the expense of the diversity. This diversity can be seen in that the Spirit is the Person under Whose government the individual believer is led to and in a new life, a life of new proportions and dimensions. As Spirit of the living God (2 Cor. 3:3), He grants new life (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:6; Rom. 8:11; Gal. 6:6). The Holy Spirit is the "renewing power", Tit. 3:15; Rom. 7:6. The love of God which has been proved in the death of Christ, is flooding "our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit", Rom. 5:5, 8:38; cf. Eph. 3:16. The dimensions of the new life of those who belong to Christ may be ascribed to the workings of the Spirit. Those who live by the Spirit have a "spiritual outlook"
Rom. 8:6. The Spirit inspires love, Rom. 15:30, fights against the desires of "the lower nature", Gal. 5:17. There is joy in the Spirit, 1 Thess. 1:6. The Spirit we have received is not a Spirit of slavery, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry 'Abba! Father!' Rom. 8:16. The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control, Gal. 5:22. This new life is also described in moral tones: the Spirit that "consecrates" us, 2 Thess. 2:13. The commandment of the law can only be fulfilled in those whose conduct is no longer under control of the flesh, but is directed by the Spirit, Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 25. The Spirit is also the principle of wisdom and vision, Eph. 1:17. He is the author of extraordinary powers and gifts and equipment for His duty, Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, 14 (Ridderbos, p. 244).

And so we could go on multiplying examples of the richness of the diversity within the unity, which is to be found in the fundamental character of Paul's teaching on the History of Salvation. Yet so many questions have not been answered by saying this. Neither has the full picture been painted of the Spirit in the individual believer. Only the outlines have been drawn. But by bearing this in mind a detailed examination of all the apostle's statements in exegetical context would yield a picture full and rich in its variety yet not differing in essence from the outlines as gleaned from a principle examination of the theme.

Let us, in conclusion, look at one of these aspects in greater exegetical detail. Having indicated the purpose of the Spirit as "New Life" we are faced with the question as to the nature of this new life. Is it described by Paul in juridical categories, by virtue of his concept of faith alone? Or is it a process of growth, a sanctifying process? Reformed theology has sometimes been reserved in this respect. Yet the apostle speaks clearly of both aspects. As we read chapters 7 and 8 of Romans we become aware of the depth of movement in the believer towards a more spirit-controlled life. Elsewhere he encourages the faithful to be innocent of evil as babes, but grown-up in thinking, 1 Cor. 14:20, or to aspire to "mature manhood", Eph. 4:13, and again in Eph. 4:16 "to grow up in Christ".

Now if we reconsider the exegesis of Rom. 7 there is a very strong case to be made out in favour of understanding the chapter as a unity and considering it a description of man outside of the salvation in Christ. The history of the exegesis of Rom. 7 is a
long one, but this view is an old one which is receiving more support in current interpretation (cf. Herman Ridderbos in his Commentary on Romans). By accepting this viewpoint Rom. 7:24 is the culmination of the description: “miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death?” (NEB). Verse 25 opens the way to understanding chapter 8 in antithesis to chapter 7 as life in Christ through the indwelling of the Spirit. The antithetic parallelism is remarkable, and leaves us with a unique picture of the work of the Spirit in man who is saved “through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25). The following diagram may be constructed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Verses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I: Condemned</td>
<td>7:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Purchased slave of sin</td>
<td>7:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unspiritual, of the flesh</td>
<td>7:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do... what I detest</td>
<td>7:15-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nothing good in me</td>
<td>7:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nothing good</td>
<td>7:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leads to death</td>
<td>7:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Law entices to death</td>
<td>7:9,13</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Miserable creature</td>
<td>7:24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Despair</td>
<td>7:24</td>
</tr>
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- **Now**: No condemnation - 8:1.
- Liberated, set free - 8:2.
- Spiritual 8:2, 9.
- Directed by Spirit: Power! - 8:3-4.
- Spirit dwells in me - 8:9.
- Christ in us - 8:10.
- Spirit gives new life - 8:11.
- Life-giving law of Spirit - 8:2, 10.
- Gods children - 8:14-17.

To sum up, Paul tells us what life was without Christ and the Spirit, and what life becomes in Christ through the Spirit — a new man! who is —

(a) Acquitted 8:1
(b) Liberated 8:2
(c) In Spirit 8:9
(d) In Christ 8:10
(e) Benefits: Resurrection 8:11; Children of God; triumph over fear 8:15; Confidence 8:15.
(f) Call to new life 8:12.
(g) Life in the Spirit: chapter 8!

This is no super-human being, but a new being! What more fitting praise to the Spirit could there be than the ability to shout: “And yea! in spite of all, overwhelming victory is ours through Him who loved us” (8:37).
1 Cf. G. Delling, Zum neueren Paulusverständnis, Novum Testament vol. IV, Dec. 1960, pp. 95 ff. The author treats Paul's theology in current thought fairly extensively but limits his review on Pneuma to a single page or so, and then only in relation to Bultmann's thought on the subject.
4 M. H. Bolkestein, De Prediking op het Pinksterfeest, Handboek voor de Prediking II, Amsterdam 1948, ad loc.
6 H. Berkhof, De Leer van De Heilige Geest, Callenbach 1965, p. 12, and in particular chapter VI.
7 Neill, op. cit., p. 233 et alia.
9 A. Kuyper, Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest, 1888.
10 Cf. W. H. Velema, Confrontatie met van Ruler, Kok, Kampen 1962, p. 6 et alia.
12 Kurt Stalder, Das Werk des Geistes in der Heiligung bei Paulus, Zürich 1962.
15 De Heilige Geest, Kok, Kampen 1949.
16 H. N. Ridderbos, Paulus, Ontwerp van Zijn Theologie, Kampen 1966; and Het Woord, Het Rijk en onze Verlegenheid, Kampen 1968.
19 Cf. Ridderbos, Paulus, Chapter I.
23 Do., p. 235.
26 G. Delling, Zum neueren Paulusverständnis.
27 H. H. Janzen, op. cit.
29 W. Foerster, op. cit., p. 117 ff.
30 Cf. Schweitzer, TWB VI, p. 413.
32 H. Berkhoft, De Leer van de Heilige Geest; cf. also Käsemann, A. M. Hunter and others.