

DEEP END - HIGHLIGHTS (text not audio)

John 16:13 – Our relationship with the Holy Spirit – functional or personal?

The Eastern Orthodox Church, in agreement with the church in the West, teaches that we see the face of the Father in the Son. There is nothing unfamiliar to us here as it is plain in scripture that we see “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). They then go on to say, again in agreement with the church in the West, that we see the face of the Son in (or by) the Holy Spirit. Again, this is familiar ground for us. All that we know about Jesus has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself said “the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” (John 16:15) ...One of the primary tasks of the Holy Spirit is to reveal to us the person and work of Christ.

So if the face of the Father is seen in and by the Son and the face of the Son in and by the Spirit, where do we look to see the “face” of the Spirit? Some would answer that we do not see his face and neither should we try to, as the Holy Spirit only wants to reveal to us the face of Christ. But this is not strictly true. What Jesus said is that “he [the Spirit] will not speak of himself” (John 16:13). In other words, His words are about the Son of God, not words about himself. One of his roles in our midst is as the revealer—of both who Jesus truly is and what he has accomplished in his redemptive ministry. (Not that we limit the role of the Holy Spirit to this alone: he is also the one who empowers the church and is the active presence of the triune God both in the world and in the church.)

But simply because he is so active in the community of believers in so many ways, and is the one who not only speaks and reveals Christ but also the one who equips us for service and manifests the presence of Jesus in our midst, it would seem logical that we can (and should) come to know him as a person. It is for this reason the Eastern Church has always affirmed that the face of the Father is seen in the Son, the face of the Son is seen in (or by) the Spirit, and that the face of the Holy Spirit is seen in the church.

However, what is important to note is that they do not say that you see the face of the Spirit in the individual believer (although is true to an extent), but that the face of the Holy Spirit is seen most clearly in the church as a body. So while in the individual believer we see the Spirit in action as he empowers them and transforms them, we see the face of the Holy Spirit most clearly in the actions and lifestyle of the corporate church.

All this leads me to a verse that, until recently, has always been a personal stumbling block. It is in Galatians 6:10 and reads “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” The reason why I had a problem with what Paul says here is that he seems to give preferential treatment to believers as the recipients of those to whom we are to “do good” and this seems to be in conflict with the first and great commandment that we love God with our whole hearts and our neighbor [not just our fellow believer] as ourselves.

So if we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (and who among us can claim to fully do so?) then how can we then justify Paul’s words that we should do good to all people “especially to those of the household of faith”. How can we show preferential treatment in doing good to believers when Jesus said that our neighbor is also the one that we should love as ourselves?

Recently the tension was resolved for me when I realized that Paul’s motive is not simply pastoral but also evangelistic. He realizes that the church is the incarnation of the gospel (what Barth called the “earthly historical continuation of the incarnation”) and that unless “outsiders” can see the kingdom in our midst, the message we proclaim becomes ineffective and a gap opens up between belief and behavior that cripples our witness.

Therefore Paul is not advocating preferential treatment for believers as an elite group: as a group who merit special treatment in contrast to unbelievers. He is simply helping us to grasp the fact that our message will not be “heard” unless unbelievers can see in our midst the reality of the message we proclaim.

When the Holy Spirit fell at Pentecost, his face was so clearly seen in the church by the way believers radically lived out together their commitment to Christ. As we know, they had all things in common, there was no needy one in their midst, they sold what they did not need and cared for the orphan and the widow. It was not long before this radical care for the poor overflowed the boundaries of the church and according to church historians, along with signs and wonders, became the most powerful agent in authenticating the gospel message in the ancient world.

So if we see the face of the Father in the Son, the face of the Son in (or by) the Holy Spirit, and the face of the Holy Spirit in the Church, then it would seem that the quality of our life together is crucial evangelistic. If we reflect only a caricature of the person of the Holy Spirit, then we will disfigure the beauty of the whole Godhead.

Clark Pinnock in his book *The Flame of Love* observes that “hindrances to faith in God seldom have to do with a lack of proofs. Hindrances to faith have more to do with the quality of our theism. Theology does not have to do with whether God is but with who God is. Theology gains credibility when we have a doctrine of God that one can fall in love with.”

Theology is not simply cerebral, it is supremely incarnational. This means that the church is not simply a collective of spiritual individuals but a community that has abandoned the radical autonomy plaguing western society and now demonstrates in its common life the nature of the God that we proclaim.

A final note is needed if we are to be faithful to the Trinitarian theology that we hold. As the persons of the Trinity cannot be divided... it is important to note that the process I have describes also works in reverse. When the Spirit is seen in our midst, the Son is also revealed. The two are so closely identified that Paul goes as far as to say that “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:17). In other words, to see the Holy Spirit is also to have revelation of the one who “is radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). Then to close the hermeneutical circle, it goes without saying that to see Jesus is also to see the Father.

However, as this is so well known (that the Spirit reveals to us the Son and that the Son reveals to us the Father), the perspective of the Eastern Orthodoxy that we see the face of the Spirit in the church remains very helpful as it can deepen our relationship with the person of the Spirit.

Most books on the Holy Spirit focus on what he does for us: he convicts us, regenerates us, fills us, empowers, guides us, give us spiritual gifts and so on. However, such books rarely attempt to deepen our relationship and revelation of who the Spirit is as a person (as opposed to what he does as a person) and this is a tragedy.

It is almost as if the Holy Spirit becomes the faceless friend -the one who does all kinds of things for us every day but the one who we fail to develop a relationship with in the way we develop a relationship with the Father and with the Son—for fear that we will fall foul of the words of Jesus that the Spirit “will not speak of himself”.

In fact, for most of us, our relationship with the Holy Spirit is more functional than relational. It is a utilitarian relationship. We are simply the recipients of all that he does in regenerating us, filling us, gifting us, and leading us etc. Sadly, without intending to, we dishonor the person of the Spirit and impoverish both our own lives and the life of the church.

There are many ways to correct this and there are many biographical examples in church history of individuals who have had a very rich personal relationship with the Holy Spirit (Again, I emphasize, a personal not a utilitarian relationship).

How to move forward in such relationship is something I intend to take up in another article. But one way to begin is to embrace the Orthodox perspective that we see the face of the Spirit in the church. (The church fathers also said that the Holy Spirit was “the kiss of God”, and “the Spirit of surprise”, beautiful insights, but I don’t have time to take them up here.).

But meanwhile, look for his “face” in the community of the church: in a child, in a teenager, in a disabled person, in the elderly, and in marginal, those who are “invisible” as even in church we tend to gravitate towards our friends and family. We are all only earthen vessels, but if we adopt this perspective, we will soon discover that the most commonplace earthen vessel can contain surprising treasure!

Just a note to end with: as I have already said, developing a relationship with the Spirit is something I want personally want to develop further, as most books that I read on the Spirit emphasize the utilitarian relationship (what he does for us) rather than the personal relationship (who he is and what he is like as a person).

Many books on the Fatherhood of God discuss all that he has done and continues to do for us, and then many of them follow on and speak of developing a relationship with the “Father Heart of God”. The same is done in many books on the person and work of Jesus and we have all benefited greatly from them. However, to my knowledge, this second dimension of an intimate person to person relationship, where we really get to know the person of the Spirit (as we are encouraged to develop a person to person relationship with the Father and the Son) is absent from most books I read on Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is a weakness of the charismatic movement? (Even the word “charismatic” speaks of the gifts that the Spirit gives us—again focusing on something that he does for us, something utilitarian.)

So I am on a quest, on a journey, that for me is new ground. However, I am confident that the Spirit himself will be with me (as I remember, the word used for the Spirit in John is “paracletus”—“one who is alongside”). Jesus also described the Spirit as living water, water that I for one am thirsty to drink!