

The Son and the Spirit: The Promise and Peril of Spirit Christology

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing number of Christian theologians have devoted considerable attention to the person and work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the person and work of the Son. That is, various forms of Spirit Christology have become commonplace on the landscape of contemporary theology. The term Spirit Christology is used broadly to refer to any proposal in which the person and work of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) figures prominently and indispensably in one's articulation of the person and work of Jesus Christ (Christology).

Some contemporary proposals of Spirit Christology are explicitly non-Trinitarian, articulating a unitarian/modalistic paradigm for understanding the mission and message of Jesus in light of his experience of the Spirit of God. That is, for some, Spirit Christology is an alternative to the Logos Christology of the ecumenical creeds.¹ It will be seen that such non-Trinitarian proposals are little more than contemporary iterations of an ancient Christological heresy—adoptionism.

Many contemporary proponents of Spirit Christology, however, attempt to develop their models within the general boundaries of Trinitarian orthodoxy, as established by the ecumenical creeds, even if they critique the traditional formulae at key points.² For heuristic purposes, two methodological approaches to this Trinitarian variety of Spirit Christology can be identified.³ The first may be called the “biblical-exegetical approach” because proponents devote their presentation almost exclusively to the exegesis of key biblical texts. Such proposals tend to focus on the role of the Holy Spirit upon or through Christ according to his human nature during his earthly life and ministry. The other methodology may be called the “historical-systematic approach” because proponents develop their proposals primarily in dialogue with the ideas of their theological/philosophical predecessors and contemporaries. These proposals tend to place much greater emphasis on questions of immanent Trinitarian relations.

While some may laud the influx of Spirit-Christology proposals as a much needed pneumatological enrichment of traditional Christological formulae, others are undoubtedly troubled that the contemporary emphasis on the Holy Spirit entails dangerous theological problems. It is the purpose of this article to show that contemporary models of Spirit Christology present a number of distinct theological advantages that hold out the promise of a valuable pneumatological enrichment of evangelical Christology within the framework of traditional Trinitarian theology. These advantages, however, are attended by a number of theological dangers that potentially jeopardize some of the most cherished theological commitments of the Christian faith. If a constructive proposal of Spirit Christology can be articulated that preserves all of the potential theological advantages identified in this article while carefully and clearly avoiding the theological dangers, then the hope of the pneumatological enrichment of evangelical Christology can be achieved.

METHOD

The article will proceed in three sections. First, non-Trinitarian proposals of Spirit Christology will be surveyed. In this section, a brief examination of the ancient Christological heresy of adoptionism will be followed by a survey of a representative contemporary proposal of non-Trinitarian Spirit Christology. This will demonstrate that the contemporary non-Trinitarian

proposals are just new iterations of the old heresy. The second section will survey several important contemporary proposals of Trinitarian Spirit Christology. Examples of both the biblical-exegetical and the systematic-historical methodological approaches identified above will be considered. The third section will be an exercise in theological assessment in which I will identify and discuss the theological advantages of Trinitarian Spirit Christology, i.e., those distinctives that hold out the most promise for the pneumatological enrichment of evangelical Christology. In this section, I will also identify the attendant theological dangers of Spirit Christology. It will be seen that the advantages are only genuine enrichments insofar as they can be articulated without succumbing to the dangers that attend many models of Spirit Christology.

NON-TRINITARIAN SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

Gary Badcock observes that “some of the earliest christologies of the church ... were broadly pneumatic in character.”⁴ Of these early (pre-Nicene) Christological models, the most famous is that of adoptionism, an ancient heresy that has been revived in recent years.

Ancient Adoptionism

The term adoptionism, also commonly referred to as dynamic Monarchianism, is typically reserved for the second and third-century movements that took shape under the leadership of Theodotus the Cobbler and Paul of Samosata.⁵ Theodotus was a learned man of Byzantium who was summoned to Rome about AD 190 to present and defend his views concerning Christ to Victor, then Bishop of Rome. J. N. D. Kelly summarizes his Christological position:

Theodotus held that until his baptism Jesus lived the life of an ordinary man, with the difference that He was supremely virtuous. The Spirit, or Christ, then descended upon Him, and from that moment He worked miracles, without, however, becoming divine—others of the same school admitted his deification after his resurrection.⁶

For Theodotus, Jesus was a mere man. His sonship to God was to be understood only in terms of the descent of the Spirit/Christ upon him. Furthermore, the Spirit was understood to refer to the manifestation of divine power, not to a distinct divine person. Theodotus was eventually excommunicated by Victor for his denial of the true ontological deity of Jesus Christ.

Paul of Samosata is probably the most famous of the early adoptionists, but his teachings are difficult to reconstruct with any precision. It is primarily through the words of later critics (e.g., Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*). If these critiques are accurate, Paul of Samosata taught the same kind of adoptionism for which Theodotus was excommunicated. The church clearly and strongly rejected this early attempt at explaining the supernatural dimensions of the life of Jesus Christ.

Theological Themes of Adoptionism

A few important theological themes of these early adoptionist Christologies should be made explicit. It will then be seen that these same themes characterize some contemporary proposals of Spirit Christology. First, the adoptionists held in common a unitarian view of God. When the adoptionists speak about the Spirit/Logos descending upon Jesus at his baptism, they do not mean a distinct, personal hypostasis. Rather, God is monopersonal, and the Spirit/Logos is merely the active manifestation of divine power or divine inspiration.⁷ The second theme is specifically Christological and follows quite naturally from the first. All of the early adoptionists rejected the personal pre-existence of Jesus Christ. The personal existence of Jesus began in the womb of Mary, not before. Third, while the adoptionists could speak of divine power at work in, upon, or through Jesus, they could not speak of Jesus as a divine person. He was a *merely human person* in/upon/through whom the divine power of the Spirit was at work.

Theologian Gary Badcock regrets the church's thorough rejection of the adoptionist paradigm because it stymied pneumatological developments in Christology: "The loss of Spirit as a Christological category in the early tradition meant that this Christological perspective went undeveloped, resulting in negative implications that are still with us."⁸ The result is that "we lack a developed conceptuality"⁹ for articulating a robust and coherent Spirit Christology. While it may be true that strong pneumatological emphases in

Christological thought went undeveloped for a long time, it is difficult to lament the firm and thorough rejection of the heresy of adoptionism. The trajectory of adoptionism was not in the direction of an eventual affirmation of the ontological deity of Jesus Christ and a mature Trinitarian theology. It is only along the path paved by the Logos Christology of the ecumenical creeds that a responsible Spirit Christology can be developed, one that is faithful to the biblical testimony concerning the prominence of the role of the Spirit in the person and work of the ontologically divine Son. In fact, the church's utter rejection of the heretical Spirit Christology of adoptionism is one of the key factors that has opened the door for the fruitful development of an altogether *different kind* of Spirit Christology in the contemporary context.

Contemporary Adoptionism

In spite of the church's rejection of adoptionism as heretical and antithetical to the biblical presentation of Jesus Christ as true God and true man, some modern scholars have revived the ancient heresy. In this section, I will dialogue primarily with Geoffrey Lampe's work, *God as Spirit*, but James D. G. Dunn and Roger Haight have also made adoptionistic proposals.¹⁰ I will demonstrate that the same theological themes that characterize ancient adoptionism—(1) a unitarian view of God; (2) a denial of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, and; (3) a denial of the ontological deity of Jesus Christ—also characterizes the proposal offered by Lampe.

The Anglican theologian Geoffrey Lampe believes that the concept of God as Spirit is the key to answering a puzzling question of Christology: "What is the relation of Jesus to God?"¹¹ For Lampe, the answer to the question is "best approached by way of the concept of the Spirit of God."¹² In this statement, one can see that Lampe is developing a *kind* of Spirit Christology. However, by the term "Spirit of God," Lampe does not mean the third person of the Trinity. Rather, he insists that "the Spirit of God is to be understood, not as referring to a divine hypostasis distinct from God the Father and God the Son/Word, but as indicating God himself as active towards and in his human creation."¹³ For Lampe, the concepts of "Word," "Wisdom," and "Spirit" are interchangeable metaphors. He explains: "Any one of these terms could be used to speak of the outreach of God himself as revealed and experienced."¹⁴ Thus, a denial of the hypostatic identity of

Spirit is identical to a denial of the hypostatic identity of the Son/Logos as well.¹⁵ Given his rejection of the hypostatic distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit, it is not surprising that Lampe refers favorably to the modalism of Praxeas: “This was a view which should not have been so lightly rejected in the interests of the theology of the pre-existent Logos-Son-Christ.”¹⁶ Put succinctly, Lampe is fundamentally unitarian in his theology.¹⁷

Given Lampe’s unitarian understanding of the Godhead, it is not surprising to learn that he rejects the traditional understanding of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, thus expressing the second major theological theme of the ancient adoptionists. “In a sense,” Lampe says, “all creation is pre-existent, in that it subsists from eternity as an idea in the mind of the Creator.”¹⁸ However, to identify the pre-existent God with Jesus of Nazareth is seen as highly problematic. For Lampe, the very idea belongs more to the realm of science fiction literature, in which “superman from a distant planet ... visited the earth in flying saucers or some other kind of space-ships.”¹⁹ In Lampe’s view, the development of this idea into the creedal confessions of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon proved disastrous. The resulting theology is hopelessly incoherent, causing “inconsistency and confusion.”²⁰ Thus, like the ancient adoptionists, Lampe rejects the personal pre-existence of the person of Christ.

Though unitarian in his theology and rejecting the pre-existence of Jesus, Lampe expresses a desire to preserve belief in the “true incarnation of God in Jesus.”²¹ But what does he mean by “true incarnation”? For Lampe, the incarnation in Jesus is just one instance of incarnation among many, albeit the supreme instance:

God has always been incarnate in his human creatures, forming their spirits from within and revealing himself in and through them; for although revelation comes from beyond the narrow confines of the human spirit and is not originated by man himself, there is not, and never has been, any revelation of God that has not been incarnated in, and mediated through, the thoughts and emotions of men and women.²²

Here the concepts of incarnation and revelation are conflated. Traditional Logos Christology has always affirmed that the incarnation is the supreme instance of revelation (cf. Heb 1:1-2). The eternal Son’s assumption of a

human nature by which he dwelt among us is a revelatory event (John 1:14) so that Jesus can say to Philip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). For Lampe, however, the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is simply the divine revelation given to the man Jesus as the archetypal model for all other instances of incarnation/revelation. Thus, the incarnation does not establish the utter ontological uniqueness of Jesus. Rather, Jesus’ uniqueness is conceived only in terms of the degree to which he experienced revelation. Like the liberal tradition sired by Schleiermacher, Lampe can affirm the presence of divinity in Christ but not the predication of divinity to Christ.²³

When viewed against the backdrop of the early adoptionist Christologies, Lampe’s Spirit Christology is seen to embrace all the distinctive theological themes that resulted in the church’s rejection of adoptionism: a unitarian theology, a denial of the personal pre-existence of Jesus Christ, and a denial of the ontological deity of Jesus Christ. Thus, when weighed in the balance, the Spirit Christology of Lampe is little more than a new articulation of an old heresy—adoptionism.

TRINITARIAN SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

Not all models of Spirit Christology are adoptionistic. Many Spirit-Christology proposals are made within the confessional boundaries of traditional Trinitarian theology and Christology. Specific attention will be given only to a few of the more significant proposals here. As already noted, a distinction will be maintained between two methodological approaches to Trinitarian Spirit Christology: the biblical-exegetical approach and the historical-systematic approach.²⁴

The Biblical-Exegetical Approach

For some proponents of Trinitarian Spirit Christology, the pneumatic dimension of Christology is presented via an almost exclusively exegetical approach.²⁵ Space considerations limit this discussion to the most significant contributor: Gerald Hawthorne. Other thinkers who have contributed to the discussion of Spirit Christology from a biblical-exegetical approach include Bruce A. Ware,²⁶ Klaus Issler,²⁷ Sinclair Ferguson,²⁸ and Thomas Oden.²⁹

In 1991, Gerald Hawthorne, the late New Testament scholar at Wheaton, published what remains to this day the only book-length treatise devoted exclusively to the role of the Holy Spirit in the earthly life of Christ—*The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus*.³⁰ In this seminal book, Hawthorne intends to answer the question, “To what extent was this extraordinary life [of Christ] the direct result of the Spirit’s activity upon it?”³¹ For Hawthorne, “[T]he Holy Spirit was the divine power by which Jesus overcame his human limitations, rose above his human weakness, and won out over his human mortality. It will be the purpose of the major part of this volume to show how this is so.”³² For “the major part of this volume,” Hawthorne conducts an exegetical examination of the work of the Spirit in every phase of the life of Christ,³³ seeking to demonstrate that “the Holy Spirit was indeed operative in every experience of Jesus so that the great moments of his life were indeed the result of the Spirit’s powerful presence within or upon him.”³⁴

According to Hawthorne, the New Testament emphasis on the presence and power of the Spirit in the life of Christ stands in marked contrast to the tendency of post-biblical authors, who appeal to the deity of Jesus as the explanation for the extraordinary features of his life and ministry. One of the great problems Hawthorne sees with the traditional emphasis on Christ’s deity is a kind of implicit, if unintentional, Docetism in which the full humanity of Christ is masked in favor of a sort of super-human existence for Jesus on earth, charged by his full possession of the divine nature. He contends, “In their zeal to affirm the deity of Jesus, these writers and others like them effectually eliminate the realness of his humanity. But this the New Testament writers do not do. They stand unalterably opposed to such Docetism.”³⁵

This concern to preserve a robust portrait of the full humanity of Jesus Christ (and thus his solidarity with those he came to save) is common in Trinitarian Spirit-Christology proposals, especially those of the biblical-exegetical type.³⁶ In fact, many have emphasized the role of the Spirit in the earthly life of Christ for the sake of enriching the concept of the *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ).³⁷ If Jesus’ authority over demonic forces, his resolve to obey his Father’s will, and his strength to resist temptation are all attributed to his possession of the divine nature, how can he be imitated by those who do not possess the divine nature? However, if Jesus worked all these things by the power of the Spirit, then his followers truly can imitate

him because they are endowed with the same Spirit.

Proponents of the biblical-exegetical type of Spirit Christology do not typically explore the implications of their proposals for issues of immanent Trinitarian relations (e.g., How does this proposal impact one's understanding of the Trinitarian order of subsistence *ad intra*? Does this model have any bearing on the ongoing debate over the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed?). They also do not give any treatment to questions of the traditional understanding of Trinitarian action in the world (e.g., Is this understanding of the role of the Spirit in the life of Christ consistent with the traditional doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra*, i.e., that all of the external works of the Trinity are undivided?). It will be seen, on the other hand, that these issues loom large in the works of those who approach the issue of Spirit Christology with a more historical-systematic methodology.

The Historical-Systematic Approach

This approach describes those who develop Spirit Christology primarily through dialogue with the ideas of their predecessors and contemporaries. While the proposals included in this type are numerous and cover a wide variety of traditions, only the contributions of Ralph Del Colle and Clark Pinnock will be considered here. The basic contours of each proposal will be briefly considered with the purpose of ascertaining the distinctive contributions made by each. Other theologians who have developed models of Trinitarian Spirit Christology with a historical-systematic approach include Philip Rosato,³⁸ David Coffey,³⁹ Yves Congar,⁴⁰ Myk Habets,⁴¹ John Zizioulas,⁴² Gary Badcock,⁴³ and Amos Yong.⁴⁴

Ralph Del Colle

The late Ralph Del Colle was a Roman Catholic charismatic theologian. In his greatest work, *Christ and the Spirit: Spirit Christology in Trinitarian Perspective*, he attempts to articulate a model of Spirit Christology that is consistent with the broader contours of Roman Catholic Trinitarian theology and Christology. He succeeds at synthesizing the work of his Roman Catholic predecessors (e.g., Rosato and Congar), drawing especially on the work of David Coffey. From the beginning, Del Colle recognizes that Spirit

Christology is particularly difficult for theologians in the Western tradition because of the West's affirmation of the *filioque* clause,⁴⁵ which was inserted into the Nicene Creed at Toledo in AD 589 and led to the official division of the church in AD 1054. Del Colle believes that the *filioque* clause has resulted in an "excessive Christocentrism" in the West.⁴⁶ Del Colle is intent on keeping his proposal within the parameters of official Roman Catholic dogma, which includes the *filioque*, but he is aware of the problems this presents for a robust Spirit Christology: "How can the Holy Spirit be fully recognized in the economy of God if within the trinity its relationship of origination from the Father is also made dependent on the Son?"⁴⁷ In order to get through this impasse, he engages in extensive dialogue with the neo-scholastic tradition, spending considerable time explicating the Thomistic account of the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity *ad extra* and the concurrent appropriation of divine works to one particular person of the Godhead.⁴⁸ For the neo-scholastics, the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Godhead *ad extra* entails that one cannot ground the distinction between the persons of the Godhead in the economic Trinity because the economic works are indivisible. Therefore, in keeping with this tradition, Spirit Christology can only be developed speculatively from the standpoint of the immanent Trinitarian relations.

Del Colle proposes that the traditional Latin account of immanent Trinitarian relations based on the model of generation and procession,⁴⁹ including the disputed *filioque*, is correct as far as it goes. However, the account does not go far enough. While the procession-generation model can account for the revelatory *descent* of God to man, the model cannot account for the soteriological *ascent* of man to God. This is so because the traditional model does not allow for any kind of reciprocity. Generation and procession are unidirectional concepts always moving from the Father but never back to him. Thus, Del Colle proposes a bestowal model for understanding the hypostatic individuality of the Spirit, which he insists is complementary to the traditional model of procession/generation. In the bestowal model, the Father bestows the Spirit on the Son and the Son reciprocates by bestowing the Spirit on the Father. Put in the language of procession, this model suggests that, within the eternal being of God, the Spirit proceeds from the Father *to the Son* and from the Son *to the Father*. Thus, there is procession from the Father *and the Son*, but it is a reciprocal procession.⁵⁰

Del Colle's proposal is a Trinitarian Spirit Christology at the highest conceptual level. The very eternal hypostatic identity of God the Son in the immanent Trinity can only be properly conceived in terms of the Holy Spirit. For Del Colle, the careful articulation of Spirit Christology is a means to ensure that the person of the Holy Spirit is given due consideration as a fully divine person whose eternal place in the Godhead and whose mission and role in the world are understood as equal to that of the Son. He believes he has proposed "a model of Spirit Christology that stresses the pneumatological dimension of the divine economy that underscores filioquist sensibilities without compromising the monarchy of the Father or implicating a subordination of the Third Person."⁵¹ As such, Del Colle hopes his Spirit Christology may be a step toward bridging the gap between Eastern and Western traditions, a gap that has revolved around the *filioque* clause. That is, Del Colle's Spirit Christology is proposed as a tool for furthering ecumenical dialogue.⁵²

Clark Pinnock

In his work on the Holy Spirit, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Clark Pinnock attempts to approach all of the traditional loci of systematic theology from the perspective of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Pinnock's Christology is *Spirit Christology*. Integral to understanding correctly Pinnock's Spirit Christology is his view of the Spirit in creation. Pinnock emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in creation as the one brooding over the primordial earth, bringing to fruition the creative purposes of God the Father. He fears that the Spirit's role in creation has been neglected in much theology with devastating effects. Because the Creator Spirit has been ignored, the church has been able to confine the concepts of soteriology and communion with God to the realm of the church. If, however, the Spirit is the author of the creation of the whole world, then it is wrongheaded to limit his presence and activities to the sphere of the church. According to Pinnock, a recovery of the vision of Creator Spirit will help Christians realize, with humility, that "The Spirit is present in all human experience and beyond it. There is no special sacred realm, no sacred-secular split."⁵³ By acknowledging the role of the Spirit as Creator, one is able "to believe and hope that no one is beyond the reach of grace."⁵⁴ Only through Pinnock's presentation of Spirit as Creator can one

fully understand Pinnock's Spirit Christology.

Pinnock believes that, "Just as there has been a neglect of the Spirit as Creator, there has been a neglect concerning the work of the Spirit in relation to Christ."⁵⁵ As a result, the Spirit has been subordinated to the Son such that the mission of the Spirit in the world has been conceived as an aspect of the mission of the Son. However, by a recovery of Spirit as Creator in conjunction with a model of Spirit Christology, Pinnock is able to argue that the mission of Christ is "an aspect of the Spirit's mission," rather than the other way around.⁵⁶ By framing his Spirit Christology in terms of the Spirit's mission of creating man in the image of God and by suggesting that the mission of the Son is an aspect of that mission, Pinnock is able to present the incarnation of the Son of God as the supreme exemplary event, marking the crowning achievement of the Spirit's work: "We begin by placing Christology in the context of the Spirit's global operations, of which incarnation is the culmination."⁵⁷

This approach to Spirit Christology gives Pinnock the tools to articulate an inclusivist soteriology. While the incarnational mission of Christ on earth is the culmination of the Spirit's mission, it is not the *only* aspect of the Spirit's mission. For Pinnock, what the Spirit achieved supremely in the incarnation of Christ, he is achieving in a lesser way throughout all the world. In his chapter on "The Spirit and Universality," Pinnock argues that the Spirit is at work in all creation, including among the non-Christian religions, bringing about salvific communion with God, which is patterned after the ultimate communion between God and man that occurred in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ Thus, Pinnock does believe that apart from the incarnation, there could be no salvation. However, explicit faith in Christ, while advantageous for those who have it, is by no means necessary for salvation in the economy of the Spirit. Thus, Pinnock's Spirit Christology is integral in the development of his inclusivist soteriology.⁵⁹

ADVANTAGES AND DANGERS OF SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

In this section, the potential advantages of Trinitarian Spirit Christology will be made explicit and briefly discussed. Also, the attendant dangers, which some proposals have failed to avoid, will be considered. Any proposal of Spirit Christology that offers genuine pneumatological enrichment to

evangelical Christology must achieve these advantages while clearly and coherently avoiding these dangers.

Theological Advantages of Spirit Christology

The first potential advantage of Trinitarian Spirit Christology is that it corrects a perceived neglect of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in theology, especially in Western traditions. Jürgen Moltmann has observed that, for a long time, the Holy Spirit was the “Cinderella of Western theology.”⁶⁰ The general consensus is that the neglect of the Holy Spirit in western theology has resulted from a Trinitarian theology and Christology in which the person and role of the Holy Spirit are tangential to the person and role of the Son. While many have gone too far in their attempts to ascribe a prominent place to the Holy Spirit in Christology (see dangers below), there is certainly room for development of the pneumatological dimensions of Christology in evangelical traditions. Christians should not regret the church’s early and utter rejection of the heresy of adoptionism, but they should be willing to acknowledge that the right and necessary focus on the centrality of the person and work of Christ in the ecumenical creeds has resulted in a considerably less developed theological emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit that is still evident, even if being remedied, today. As a theological proposal that highlights the prominence of the person and role of the Spirit in the very life and mission of the Son, indeed in the very hypostatic identity of the Son in the immanent Godhead, Spirit Christology strikes at the very foundation of perceived Western pneumatological neglect. In this way, Spirit Christology has opened the door for explorations of other loci of systematic theology from a pneumatological perspective.

A second important theological advantage of Trinitarian Spirit Christology is that this approach highlights the genuineness of Christ’s humanity against an implicit Docetism⁶¹ that can potentially endanger traditional Christological models that do not adopt some form of Spirit Christology as a tool for understanding the human experience of Jesus. If all the extraordinary features of the earthly life of Jesus are ascribed to Jesus’ personal exercise of the power of the divine nature, it is quite difficult to conceive of his experience as being genuinely human. However, a carefully constructed Trinitarian Spirit Christology is able to preserve the genuine humanity of

Jesus' experience by appealing to the Holy Spirit as the terminating subject of the divine power by which Jesus performed supernatural feats. The Holy Spirit is given by Christ to his followers, and his followers are imbued with the Holy Spirit for the completion of their mission in service to Christ, just as Jesus Christ, according to his human nature, was imbued with the Holy Spirit for the completion of his mission in service to the Father. Therefore, the danger of conceiving of Jesus' human existence as some kind of a divine-human admixture is avoided, and Jesus' solidarity with the rest of humanity is preserved.

A third theological advantage of Spirit Christology follows naturally from the second. Spirit Christology can serve to enhance Christian discipleship by making sense of the *imitatio Christi*. The New Testament is replete with the injunction to follow the example set by Christ (John 13:15, Phil 2:5, 1 Peter 2:21). Of course, many have appealed to this motif as the *sumum bonum* of the incarnation and atonement, neglecting the far more prominent biblical theme of atonement by penal substitution. Nevertheless, danger looms on the other side of this fence. If Jesus is God the Son incarnate, how can Christians follow his example at all? Once again, Spirit Christology as a complement to Logos Christology is helpful here. If Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit to live his human life, then believers can follow in his example insofar as they also have the Spirit.

A fourth theological advantage of Spirit Christology is exegetical. There are a number of important gospel passages, which, if understood in terms of Trinitarian Spirit Christology, are far more meaningful and shed tremendous light on the identity and mission of God the Son. If those same passages are read without the motif of Spirit Christology, the tendency can be to overlook the pneumatological emphasis as an anomaly. For example, in Luke's gospel, the string of pneumatologically rich passages, which dominate the text from 3:16 through 4:2, is integral to Luke's overall presentation of Jesus as the Spirit-anointed Messiah who is baptized with the Spirit and then baptizes with the Spirit, who bears the Spirit and then bestows the Spirit. Once a kind of Trinitarian Spirit Christology is embraced as faithful to the biblical witness, such passages take on new life.

Virtually every model of Trinitarian Spirit Christology appeals to these theological advantages, and it is through these concepts that Spirit Christology holds out the promise of pneumatological enrichment to evangelical

theology in general. While the above advantages can be construed in a way that jeopardizes the cherished beliefs and traditions of evangelical theology, there is no reason that they must. In fact, I am convinced that all of the advantages of a robust Spirit Christology can be achieved by the utilization of the tools of classical Christian Trinitarian theology and Christology. If the dangers discussed below can be avoided, Trinitarian Spirit Christology enables a deeper and more robust affirmation of these things than Christology conceived without this pneumatological orientation.

Theological Dangers of Spirit Christology

While Trinitarian Spirit Christology offers considerable theological advantages, there are several attendant theological dangers lurking here as well. This may explain the hesitancy of some to embrace the model. First, the danger of adoptionism looms large in models of Spirit Christology. While all of the proponents of Spirit Christology discussed here would be quick to reject the adoptionist models of Geoffrey Lampe, James Dunn, and Roger Haight as unacceptable, there may be a more subtle danger, one to which even the Trinitarian models can succumb. To illustrate, consider the following. It is popular in Spirit Christology proposals to read of the implicit Docetism of classical Logos Christology. Of course, no proponent of classical Logos Christology formally embraces Docetism. Rather, all classical Christian theologians embrace the affirmation of Chalcedon that Jesus is *homoousios* with us according to his humanity. This is precisely why the Docetism is said to be implicit, rather than explicit. Might it be the case that, in a similar fashion, an implicit adoptionism at times characterizes some models of Trinitarian Spirit Christology? In Trinitarian Spirit-Christology proposals, adoptionism is rejected and the Logos model affirmed confessionally in an attempt to avoid heresy. However, seldom does one read a sustained treatment of the inimitable uniqueness of Christ owing to his divine nature in the literature of Spirit Christology. Instead, sometimes it seems as though the majority of the ink is spilled in the interests of showing that the full deity of Christ is not nearly so obviously displayed as many suppose. However, the full ontological deity of Jesus Christ is a prominent feature of the New Testament witness, and no apologies should be made for emphasizing it. In their zeal to avoid an implicit Docetism, Spirit-Christology proponents

must be wary of an implicit adoptionism.

A second danger attending proposals of Spirit Christology is the potential rejection of the conceptual framework that has enabled Christians to affirm the unity of the Godhead. I am referring here to the conviction that the three persons of the Godhead share in identically the same nature/essence (*homoousios*). Therefore, any work of God outside of himself (*ad extra*), because it flows from the one divine nature as its principle, is a work of the entire Godhead. This is the historic doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity. The danger here is that all of this talk of whether it is the Spirit or the Son who is the divine subject of the supernatural power on display in and through the life of Christ might obscure the fact that the three persons share in the same divine nature, so that the power on display is always the power of all three divine persons. A holistic model of Trinitarian Spirit Christology must be consistent with the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity, carefully ascribing works to one divine person or another in a way that is consistent with this basic affirmation of the unity of the Godhead. Apart from this traditional affirmation of divine unity and inseparable operations, it is difficult to avoid an implicit tri-theism.

A third danger of espousing a model of Spirit Christology is the possibility of overcorrecting the perceived neglect of pneumatology to the neglect of a healthy and robust emphasis on the person of Christ. Trinitarian Spirit Christology, on many occasions, has been too willing to forfeit the church's correct Christocentric soteriological impulse in an attempt to invite the Cinderella Spirit to the theological ball. For example, the traditional generation/procession model of immanent Trinitarian relations, including the *filioque* clause, does not represent a desire to consign the Spirit to a lesser role in the Trinity. Nor is it simply vain speculation occurring in a vacuum. Rather, the traditionally conceived *taxis* of Trinitarian relations is the result of careful reflection on the economy of salvation. The basic hermeneutical conviction that God *is* as God *does* results in a traditional model of Trinitarian relations, a model of eternal generation of the Son from the Father alone and the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. This is so for a number of reasons. First, both the Father and the Son are said to send the Spirit in the economy of salvation (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). If God *is* as God *does*, then this indicates that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity. Secondly, Jesus says that the Spirit, in

carrying out his mission, will not speak on his own initiative but will glorify the Son (John 16:13-14). If God *is* as God *does*, then the eternal hypostatic identity of the Spirit in the Godhead is not according to his own initiative but manifests the glory of the Son. Suggesting that the traditionally conceived model of immanent Trinitarian relations is the culprit in theological neglect of the Spirit is a serious move that should not be taken lightly. The *raison d'être* of the traditional model is to preserve the Christocentric soteriological paradigm of the New Testament. There is a priority given to Christ in the Trinitarian work of salvation that is not given to the other persons, not because his divine identity is more dignified, but because he is the divine person who is the supreme revelation (Word) of the Triune God and the divine person at the center of God's saving purposes as the incarnate, crucified, and risen Savior. Surely Fred Sanders is right that "there is no such thing in Christian life and thought as being too Christ-centered." It is possible to be "Father-forgetful and Spirit-ignoring."⁶² However, as Sanders observes, to be properly mindful of the Father and the Spirit is to emphasize the Son. The fact that some theologians have exploited a modified account of immanent Trinitarian relations, specifically the rejection or reversal of the *filioque*, to propose an inclusivist soteriological model (e.g., Pinnock and Yōng) illustrates the reality of this danger. Any emphasis on the person and work of the Spirit that results in the eclipse of the glory and honor of the Son has failed both the Spirit and the Son and dishonored the Father (John 5:23). Just as it is unwise to construct a model of Christology without due reference to the role of the Holy Spirit, so it is unwise to construct a pneumatological soteriology without due reference to the centrality of Christ.

A fourth danger of Spirit Christology involves the exegesis of key gospel texts pertaining to the life of Christ. Earlier, it was suggested that the perspective of Spirit Christology can vivify one's understanding of certain passages in the gospels. However, once a robust Trinitarian Spirit Christology is embraced, there is an equal danger of missing the full import of other passages in the gospels which seem to indicate that Jesus' supernatural signs serve the purpose of bearing witness to his deity. For example, when Jesus calms the storm, and the disciples respond by asking, "Who then is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mar 4:41), the expected answer is not, "This is the man anointed with the same Spirit with which you can be anointed." Rather, the expected answer is, "This is Yahweh incarnate."⁶³ There can be a

tendency in Spirit Christology proposals to miss the import of such a passage as this. Thus, a healthy Trinitarian Spirit Christology must be able to account for and embrace biblical passages which put the inimitable uniqueness of Christ as God the Son incarnate on full display.

A fifth inherent danger of Spirit Christology is the tendency to overemphasize the potential for ecumenical dialogue. Jesus, in his high priestly prayer, did indeed pray that his disciples would “all be one” (John 17:21). Thus, a certain ecumenical impulse among Christians is right and good. However, there is a tendency in much ecumenical dialogue to treat ecumenical unity as the *criterion* for truth rather than the *consequence* of it. This is not a biblical model. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus prayed that his people would be sanctified in the truth, which is God’s word (John 17:17). It is this people, sanctified in the truth of divine revelation, whom Jesus prays would be one. That is, in Jesus’ high priestly prayer, unity is the consequence of truth, not the criterion for it (cf. 1 John 1:7). If proponents of Spirit Christology are embracing the model because of its ecumenical potential and arguing from that starting point to its plausibility as a theological paradigm, then errors are sure to abound. Rather, Spirit Christology should be embraced primarily for its faithfulness to Scripture and secondarily for its consistency with tried traditions. Ecumenism may be the welcome consequence of a healthy Spirit Christology, but it should not be motivation for it.

The dangers attending Trinitarian Spirit Christology proposals jeopardize cherished biblical and theological convictions at the heart of the Christian faith. The potential for pneumatological enrichment does not outweigh these dangers. Thus, for Trinitarian Spirit Christology to hold out the promise of pneumatological enrichment for evangelical Christology, these dangers must be clearly and coherently avoided.

CONCLUSION

Spirit Christology is a complex theological paradigm that has been used to refer to a wide range of models across a number of theological traditions. Some kinds of contemporary Spirit Christology are heresies of the first order, amounting to little more than a re-articulation of the old heresy of adoptionism. However, some Spirit-Christology proposals are self-consciously Trinitarian and cling confessionally to the ontological deity of Christ. These Trinitarian

Spirit Christologies bring a number of important theological advantages to the table, but they can bring their share of dangers as well. There is work to be done here, but if a robust Trinitarian Spirit Christology can carefully and coherently avoid the theological dangers identified in this article, the potential advantages will result in a welcome and valuable pneumatological enrichment for evangelical Christology.⁶⁴

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- ¹ Logos Christology, of course, derives its name from the first chapter of John's gospel, in which the eternally divine Word (Gk. *logos*) became flesh. Thus, Logos Christology holds to the ontological deity and pre-existence of the Son.
 - ² Myk Habets distinguishes between these two broad kinds of Spirit Christology in his book *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Princeton Monograph Series; ed. K. C. Hanson, Charles M. Collier, and D. Christopher Spinks; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010). For a more concise presentation from Myk Habets, see "Spirit Christology: Seeing in Stereo," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (2003): 199-234.
 - ³ The labels for these methodological approaches are my own.
 - ⁴ Gary Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 145.
 - ⁵ Theodotus and Paul of Samosata had clear predecessors in the Jewish-Christian sect of the Ebionites, one variety of which taught that Jesus was a mere man imbued with power from on high when the Holy Spirit descended upon him at his baptism.
 - ⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper, 1959), 116.
 - ⁷ Myk Habets is right when he says of adoptionist Christologies, "The Spirit is thus seen as a divine power and not a person, so that Jesus the man is indwelt by the divine power of God" (Habets, *Anointed Son*, 58.).
 - ⁸ Badcock, *Light of Truth*, 146.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.* To be clear, Badcock is not advocating an adoptionist Spirit Christology
 - ¹⁰ See James D. G. Dunn *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) and Roger Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 257-87. Each nuances the discussion in his own way. Dunn's objective is primarily historical, and his method is primarily exegetical. Through a rigorous examination of the relevant New Testament texts Dunn seeks to present an objective historical presentation of the way that Jesus and the earliest Christian communities understood their experience of God as Spirit. In spite of the brevity of his treatment, Roger Haight is worthy of mention because he explicitly refers to his Christological formulation, which is theologically the same as that of Lampe and Dunn, by the term Spirit Christology. In spite of different methodological approaches and nuances in their proposals, the Christological conclusions of the authors are of the same kind. Thus, the conclusions drawn concerning Lampe's Christology could also be drawn concerning the Christology of Dunn and Haight.
 - ¹¹ Geoffrey Lampe, *God as Spirit: The Bampton Lectures 1976* (London: SCM, 1983), 11.
 - ¹² *Ibid.*
 - ¹³ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140. Similar statements showing these concepts to be interchangeable are made throughout the volume.
 - ¹⁵ Roman Catholic theologian Ralph Del Colle recognizes this feature of Lampe's theology: "[Lampe] completely dispenses with hypostatic distinctions within the trinity of God. There are not hypostases (or persons) distinct from the Father who function as divine mediators. God as Spirit present in Jesus and now to believers as the Christ-Spirit is an exercise in monopersonal theism" (*Christ and the Spirit: Spirit-Christology in Trinitarian Perspective*, [New York: Oxford, 1994], 163).
 - ¹⁶ Lampe, *God as Spirit*, 139. Interestingly, Schleiermacher makes a similar appeal to the early modalist understanding of the Trinity, suggesting that a return to modalism is the best way forward for Trinitarian theology. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2nd

- ed.; Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile, 2011), 787.
- ¹⁷ Roger Haight expresses his unitarian theology in terms very similar to those used by Lampe. In fact, he cites Lampe as support for his views (“The Case for Spirit Christology,” 266-8). Dunn, for his part, is less forthcoming about his own theology in light of the fact that he is attempting an objective history of the experience of Jesus and the early Christians. However, he does indicate his disdain for moving from the triadic pattern of the believer’s experience of God to speculations about the eternal identity of God. Rather, Trinitarian talk should be reserved for the economy of salvation and never referred back to the being of “Godself” (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 325-6).
- ¹⁸ Lampe, *God as Spirit*, 120.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 23.
- ²³ Schleiermacher contends that Christ is distinguished from all other humans “by the constant potency of his God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in him” (*The Christian Faith*, 385).
- ²⁴ These labels are my own. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they broadly characterize the methodological emphases in the respective approaches. In my estimation, a thorough proposal of Spirit Christology that blends the best elements of these two approaches is needed. I hope to provide such a proposal in my forthcoming dissertation from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- ²⁵ Authors who take the biblical-exegetical approach seldom, if ever, use the term Spirit Christology. Nevertheless, given the literature on the subject, it is accurate to use the label to describe their proposals.
- ²⁶ See Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005); *idem.*, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).
- ²⁷ Klaus Issler, “Jesus’ Example: Prototype of the Dependent, Spirit-filled Life,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Intermediate Christology* (eds. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 189-225.
- ²⁸ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Contours of Christian Theology; ed. Gerald Bray; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).
- ²⁹ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, vol. 3 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).
- ³⁰ Originally published in 1991 by Word. The book has recently been reprinted: Gerald Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010). All subsequent references are to the Wipf and Stock reprint.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 35.
- ³³ Hawthorne divides the phases of Christ’s life (each a chapter in the book) as follows: The Spirit in the Conception and Birth of Jesus (ch. 2), The Spirit in the Boyhood and Youth of Jesus (ch. 3), The Spirit in the Baptism and Temptation of Jesus (ch. 4), The Spirit in the Ministry of Jesus (ch. 5), The Spirit in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus (ch. 6).
- ³⁴ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 114.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24. Later in the book, Hawthorne takes up this accusation again: “In a legitimate concern to preserve at all costs the deity of Jesus Christ, many contemporary teachers of the church have followed the lead of the ancient fathers and have become *de facto* Docetists, failing to estimate fully the humanity in which divinity made itself visible” (205).
- ³⁶ Bruce Ware writes, “Jesus could not really have experienced life as we know it, or lived life as authentically human, if, for example, he was omniscient in his own consciousness as the person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. While his divine nature continued to possess the attribute of omniscience, Jesus accepted the limitation of not having access to this infinite knowledge so that he could live as we live, and grow in wisdom and understanding, through the hard work of learning, by the power of the Spirit” (*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 92).
- ³⁷ This is the main point of Klaus Issler’s essay, “Jesus’ Example: Prototype of the Dependent, Spirit-filled Life” and is a prominent feature in Bruce Ware’s *The Man Christ Jesus*.
- ³⁸ Philip Rosato is a Jesuit Catholic motivated by a concern for ecumenical dialogue, and he believes that Spirit Christology holds out promise for ecumenism. See “Spirit Christology: Ambiguity and Promise” *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 423-49.
- ³⁹ David Coffey is another Roman Catholic who has contributed many articles to the subject of Spirit Christology, though he does not use that term. See especially “The ‘Incarnation’ of the Holy Spirit in Christ” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 466-80. Coffey’s thought is very important to Ralph Del Colle, who is considered in some detail in this article.

- ⁴⁰ Yves Congar is another Roman Catholic theologian with a great interest in ecumenical dialogue. See *The Word and the Spirit* (trans. David Smith, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).
- ⁴¹ Myk Habets is a New Zealand theologian who has done for Protestants what Del Colle did for Roman Catholics. Synthesizing the work of many who came before him, Habets' book, *The Anointed Son* is a scholarly tour de force and a must read for any serious student of pneumatology and Christology. In addition to his thorough summaries and critiques of others, Habets makes his own proposal for a model of Trinitarian Spirit Christology.
- ⁴² John D. Zizioulas is an Eastern orthodox theologian, famous for his social exposition of Trinitarian theology. For his proposal of Spirit as a Christological category, see *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).
- ⁴³ Badcock, *Light of Truth and Fire of Love*.
- ⁴⁴ Amos Yong is a Pentecostal theologian who develops Spirit Christology as part of his larger project of developing a theology of world religions that blurs the distinction between pluralism and inclusivism. See *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). Yong's thought bears striking resemblance to many of the ideas of Clark Pinnock, who will be considered in some detail in this article.
- ⁴⁵ *Filioque* is Latin for "and the Son." The early Nicene Creed affirmed that the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father." With the addition of *filioque*, the affirmation was made that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son.
- ⁴⁶ Del Colle, *Christ and the Spirit*, 12.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ For an introduction to and defense of the doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity, especially as articulated by Augustine and John Owen, see Kyle Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," *JETS* 56 (2013): 781-800.
- ⁴⁹ Within the one being of God, the three distinct hypostases are distinguished by relations of origin or opposition. The Father generates the Son, and the Son is generated. The Father spirates the Spirit, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Son spirates the Spirit also, and the Spirit also proceeds from the Son.
- ⁵⁰ For a clear discussion of Del Colle's own appropriation of this model, apart from the dense interactions with the neo-scholastics and David Coffey, see Ralph Del Colle, "Reflections on the *Filioque*" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34 (1997): 202-217.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ⁵² Myk Habets, like Del Colle, has proposed a modified account of immanent Trinitarian relations of origin, in which there is reciprocity. Habets believes his model holds out hope for ecumenism. However, unlike Del Colle, Habets is not Roman Catholic and prefers that the *filioque* clause be dropped from the Nicene Creed (*The Anointed Son*, 224, 279). The hope of furthering ecumenical dialogue and critiquing the *filioque* clause is a common feature of the literature on Spirit Christology. Many prefer to jettison the *filioque*, or even reverse it, as in the case of Clark Pinnock.
- ⁵³ Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 62.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 185-217.
- ⁵⁹ Pinnock's conclusions in *Flame of Love* are remarkably similar to those of Amos Yong in *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*. Some differences include the fact that Yong does not explicitly ground his universalist tendencies in a pneumatologically conceived doctrine of creation. Also, Yong is more explicit in his attempt to accommodate traditional Christocentric categories while Pinnock is happy to simply reverse the paradigm: the Spirit sends the Son rather than the other way around.
- ⁶⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmatio* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 1.
- ⁶¹ I am not suggesting that traditional models that do not employ some form of Spirit Christology are necessarily Docetic. Traditional Christology is a rejection of Docetism. This is why I use the term "implicit" in this regard. Some have spoken of Jesus' exercise of divine power in a way that makes his solidarity with the rest of humanity difficult to grasp conceptually. Spirit Christology is a tool in service of traditional Christological categories that can be used to strengthen the long-held conviction that Jesus is simultaneously fully God and fully human.
- ⁶² Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 171.
- ⁶³ A comparison of this story in Mark 4 with the words of the psalmist in Psalm 89 is helpful here. In Psalm

89:8, the psalmist asks the question, "Who is like you, Oh mighty LORD?" The implied answer is, "No one." Yahweh is utterly unique. His uniqueness is then described in v. 9: "You rule the swelling sea. When its waves rise, you still them." The uniqueness of Yahweh is described in terms of calming the swelling sea. Thus, when the disciples ask, "Who is this?" the expected answer is, "This is Yahweh who calms the swelling sea."

⁶⁴ My forthcoming dissertation from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary will be an attempt to construct a holistic model of Trinitarian Spirit Christology that tries to achieve these advantages while avoiding the dangers.