

# THE HOLY SPIRIT AS GIVER, GIFT, AND GROWING EDGE OF GOD

by Don Schweitzer

The earliest testimonies to the Holy Spirit in the biblical traditions describe an elusive, mysterious presence that strengthened, renewed and saved life.<sup>1</sup> It was not subject to human control. It could also endanger life. As Jewish and Christian traditions developed fuller understandings of God's Spirit, they continued to affirm its elusive and mysterious dimensions, partly because of the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit and the ways it can be present. The Holy Spirit is one. But the biblical traditions do not describe it as always present in the same way.<sup>2</sup> The gifts of the Spirit can also vary greatly. The Spirit gives peace and joy. Yet it may also be present in anger<sup>3</sup> and sorrow. It is a Spirit of unity, but also of prophetic truth, which is frequently divisive. The church has developed creedal statements and theologies of the Holy Spirit to facilitate worship of God, participation in the Spirit's activities, and discernment of the Spirit's presence. But a constant danger here is the development of reductive understandings in which aspects and gifts of the Spirit are ignored or denied. To avoid this it is necessary to employ several different images for describing the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

## The Holy Spirit as Giver

The earliest testimonies to the Holy Spirit in the biblical traditions, found in the books of Judges and 1 Samuel, speak of an unpredictable power that came upon people in situations of

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Schweizer, *The Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections*, ed. by Carol Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) pp. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Brend Jochen Hilberath, "Holy Spirit," in *Christianity: The Complete Guide* ed. by John Bowden (London: Continuum, 2005) p. 590.

communal distress.<sup>5</sup> In 1 Samuel 11:1-11, the people of Jabesh are depicted as helpless before the military might of Nahash the Ammonite. But when Saul hears of the horrendous terms of surrender that Nahash is demanding from Jabesh, “the spirit of God came mightily” upon him.<sup>6</sup> Filled with the Spirit, Saul rallies the Israelites and the threatening Ammonites are defeated. The Spirit is described here as effecting deliverance by restoring communal solidarity. It leads the people out of complaint and paralysis by generating a capacity for common action. The Spirit does not replace human activity, but rather enables it through its gifts. It empowers the community by inspiring leaders. They are fallible, sometimes very imperfect, people like Samson or Saul, who are thus not moral heroes. These early accounts also emphasize that those moved by God’s Spirit are frequently brought into danger and suffering. The inspiration given by the Spirit to charismatic leaders like these restores the community’s capacity for common action and creates a new beginning where no future was expected. In these early accounts, the Holy Spirit gives the courage, strength, cunning, inspiration and hope that enable the community to overcome adversity. The Spirit continues to work in this way in the present.<sup>7</sup>

In time the Spirit came to be seen as also present in Israel’s institutions, resting permanently in the temple, upon the king, and inspiring sacred writings. Here the Spirit is seen as giving the wisdom, diplomacy and integrity needed for good leadership, social stability, maintaining justice and creatively interpreting tradition. The Spirit was seen to be present here in a more constant way, as opposed to earlier experiences of it as an unpredictable power. The Holy Spirit also came to be seen as the source of life, present in all living things, moving throughout creation, there at its birth (Genesis 1:2). Present-day theologies

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<sup>5</sup> Welker, *God the Spirit*, p. 52. This paragraph relies on Welker’s discussion in *Ibid.*, pp. 52-65.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 11:6, Revised Standard Version.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent account, see Gregory Baum, “Ivanhoe, VA: Local Theology and the Global Connection”, *The Ecumenist* 3/1 (January-March, 1996) pp. 12-15.

see the Spirit as enabling the universe to develop and evolve.<sup>8</sup> A significant difference in the ways in which the Spirit is present and the gifts it gives can be seen here. On the one hand, the Spirit is active wherever life is found, as “the unceasing, dynamic flow of divine power that sustains the universe, bringing forth life.”<sup>9</sup> It is also affirmed as constantly present in the social institutions and traditions that give life form and structure. On the other hand, the Spirit is an irruptive force that comes upon people, rescuing and renewing life in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways, often disrupting existing institutions and structures. Here the Spirit is a source of new things, of change and transformation.

As the source of life, the Holy Spirit is present in both ways, partly because of its eschatological nature. The Spirit works toward the coming of the reign of God. It builds up and preserves institutions, ways of life and communities. It also works to change and transform these. In this transformative work, the Spirit sometimes “cuts into itself”<sup>10</sup> as it were. As the Spirit works toward the coming of God’s reign, institutions, practices and communities that have served God’s purposes may be sidelined or brought to an end to make way for something new. An example of this can be found in the record of the last general meeting of the Congregational Union of Canada before the formation of The United Church. The record speaks of “mingled feelings of regret and anticipation”<sup>11</sup> over the passing of a form of church life in which the Holy Spirit had been active. This was passing away because the majority of its members had discerned the same Spirit to be calling them to leave it for the sake of a greater union. The hope and joy of the new beginning that formed The United Church of Canada was real, yet there

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<sup>8</sup> Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993) p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Outlook I/4* (July 1, 1925) p. 30.

was also an element of sorrow over the passing of the old. The transformative work of the Spirit can bring sadness along with hope and joy.

As the Spirit came to be seen as present in more and more ways, the need for discernment grew. Who is inspired by God's Spirit – Micaiah, who counselled the kings of Judah and Israel against going to war, or the four hundred prophets who urged them on (1 Kings 22)? When is the Spirit working in the forces acting to preserve an institution, a culture, a community, and when is it present in initiatives that will transform or end it? As the story of Micaiah suggests, the Spirit is not always on the side of the powerful or those victorious in conflicts. The Spirit can be quenched, grieved and sinned against. Even those inspired by it may act in misguided ways.

The need for discernment arises also from the diversity of the Holy Spirit's gifts. The Spirit may inspire patience, humility, sacrifice and self-withdrawal. It may also inspire self-assertion, resistance, and struggle for recognition.<sup>12</sup> The same Spirit inspires both humility and creative audacity.<sup>13</sup> It dwells in the church and is present in its worship, service and study. Yet the Spirit may also be present in movements for social justice outside the church that stand in judgment upon it.<sup>14</sup> The Holy Spirit may even work through voices outside the institutional church to lead it through a process of questioning and re-reading the Scriptures to a new understanding of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> In Christian traditions, Jesus Christ has always been the basis for discerning which gifts are from the Spirit and where it is present. This is not always a question of whether the Spirit is present in one initiative or another. As Calvin's understanding of Christ as

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Victorin-Vangerud, *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000) p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) pp. 303-313.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Who or What is the Holy Spirit?" *Christian Century* 113/2 (January 17, 1996) p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) pp. 157-175.

prophet, priest and king<sup>16</sup> indicates, Jesus Christ has a multi-faceted identity. The gifts of the Spirit are similarly diverse, and may be present simultaneously in different movements and institutions, even when they contend with each other. Latin American liberation theology has offered the preferential option for the poor as a criteria derived from christology for discerning the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> In contemporary Canadian society, many communities are poor, marginalized, or oppressed in different ways, and movements and institutions offer different approaches to solidarity with them. The Spirit is rarely present in only one place or only one way. Also, it is not always a question of whether the Spirit is present in a social movement or church initiative, but to what extent it is present, or what aspects of a movement reflect the Spirit, and what do not. For instance, one can recognize the Spirit at work in the demand of Quebec nationalism for “recognition of Quebecers as a nation”, without agreeing with all the policies of the Parti Quebecois.<sup>18</sup> The Spirit is often found in mixed company.

Christology is the key to discerning the Spirit. However, this discernment also requires two ongoing practices. One is the cultivation of roots in Christian traditions. This respects the importance of christology and the wisdom of preceding generations, and is necessary for developing a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the criteria these provide for discerning the Spirit. A second is ongoing engagement with surrounding society. This respects the cosmic scope of the Spirit, its creative freedom and the pilgrim nature of the church.<sup>19</sup> It is necessary, in

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<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.) p. 494.

<sup>17</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “Option for the Poor”, in *Mysterium Liberationis* edited by Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books/ New York: CollinsDove, 1993) p. 240.

<sup>18</sup> Gregory Baum, *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001) pp. 149, 138-150.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Barter Moulaison, *Lord, Giver of Life* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007) pp. 100, 133.

order to develop the practical skills of discernment, to learn how to use the criteria the tradition provides.

As the giver of gifts, the Holy Spirit is described in personal terms in the New Testament. Paul speaks of the Spirit as interceding for the church, searching peoples' hearts, and leading them (Romans 8:26-27,14). As Paul Tillich pointed out to Albert Einstein, God is more than personal, not less.<sup>20</sup> As God is more than personal, so is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is never simply an object. It is one of the three "persons" of the Trinity. But this term "person" has to be used carefully when applied to the Holy Spirit, in a way that preserves the transcendence of God.<sup>21</sup> There are also aspects of the Spirit that are best expressed by likening it to cultural and natural objects. So the Spirit is described as being like a river, a flame, or the wind (John 3:8). The Spirit can also be described in spatial terms. The Holy Spirit dwells within Christians, and they dwell in it.<sup>22</sup> These spatial terms are important in relation to a particular aspect of the Spirit to be discussed in the third section.

### **The Holy Spirit as Gift**

The gifts of the Holy Spirit work to prepare for the coming of Christ, or to actualize the salvation that Christ brings, both in broad historical movements and in personal terms. New Testament authors typically see the Spirit working to prepare the way for Christ over centuries in the development of Jewish traditions and messianic expectations. They also depict this preparation as happening more immediately in the lives of characters in the gospel narratives, like Mary, Elizabeth and John

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 131-132.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the personhood of the Holy Spirit, see Bernd Jochen Hilberath, "Identity Through Self-Transcendence: The Holy Spirit and the Fellowship of Free Persons," in Bradford Hinze and Lyle Dabney editors, *Advents of the Spirit* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001) pp. 278-285.

<sup>22</sup> St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) p. 95.

the Baptist. This pattern is also replicated in communal life. No one can receive Jesus as the Christ without the Holy Spirit first preparing the way. For all the work that may go into preparing a sermon, speech, Bible study, class, meeting, worship service, party, or demonstration, the Spirit must enliven the proceedings if it is to go well.

Conversely, the Spirit works to actualize what Jesus Christ brings. In Christ, a new reality becomes present. This can be conceptualized as hope in the face of entrenched social injustices,<sup>23</sup> or as being accepted by God in spite of one's sin.<sup>24</sup> This new reality, received in faith, becomes actual in the life of individuals and communities through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers and enables people to express in their own lives what they have received from Christ. The work of the Spirit thus surrounds the work of Christ, and the two, Christ and the Spirit, always work together, though they do different things. Christ makes the new reality of God's reign present in history. The Holy Spirit works to prepare for its coming, and then to actualize its presence in the lives of those who receive it.

This pattern of preparation and actualization was present in the life of Christ as well, yet with a difference. The synoptic gospels speak of Jesus as inspired by the Holy Spirit, like others before him. The Holy Spirit thus prepared the way for Jesus' work by enabling him to do it. Yet while Jesus stood in a long line of Spirit-inspired prophets, teachers and healers, he was more than that.<sup>25</sup> He was not only inspired by the Spirit. As the Christ, he exemplifies what the Spirit inspires, and is a source of the Spirit himself. The Holy Spirit prepared the way for the work of Jesus by inspiring him. Then through him, it became actualized itself in a new way, as the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This

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<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "An Invitation to Jewish-Christian Dialogue: In What Sense Can We Say That Jesus Was 'The Christ'?" *The Ecumenist* 10/2 (January-February 1972) p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 224-227.

<sup>25</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1947) pp. 71, 77.

brings us to the image of the Holy Spirit as gift, as opposed to giver.

The new reality that Christ brings is a new experience of the Holy Spirit. As one comes to have faith in Christ, one enters into a new relationship to God, receiving the Spirit in a new way. The Spirit is itself the gift that Christ brings. It is the “down-payment and guarantee” of the salvation still to come.<sup>26</sup> As such, it is present in the lives of believers in two ways. On the one hand, the gift of the Holy Spirit is peace. According to Augustine, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.<sup>27</sup> When a person receives the Spirit through faith in Christ, they find that rest. At the same time, as the down-payment and guarantee of the coming reign of God, the Spirit creates within believers a passion for what is possible,<sup>28</sup> a desire to see justice and reconciliation realized on earth. The gift of the Spirit thus both calms and stirs up. It brings peace, enabling one to accept one’s self and others with all our limitations. It also creates a passion for the coming of God’s reign, for active faithfulness to the earth and all living things. Without the peace of the Holy Spirit, activism tends toward burnout and legalism. Without the Spirit’s passion for the coming of God, Christian teaching and practice degenerate into a spiritualized acceptance of injustice and suffering. The gift of the Spirit brings both peace and passion, and the wisdom to discern the time for each.

The idea that Christ mediates a new relationship to God is deeply rooted in Christian traditions, yet is very problematic at present. It seems at best chauvinistic, if not imperialistic in relation to other religions. It can engender a triumphalism dangerous to those who claim it and those who practise other faiths. In this respect, it may help to think of the gift of the Spirit as a promise to the church, not as something it possesses. The

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<sup>26</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Christ and The Spirit: Vol. 2 Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998) p.4

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961) p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967) pp.212

elusive and mysterious dimensions of the Spirit are elements of its transcendence. It is given to people, but it is never something that people can achieve, own or manipulate. Many aspects of the Spirit are frequently manifested far more fully outside the church than within, and longtime members of the church sin against the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. The promised Spirit sometimes leads the church to publicly repent of past and present wrongs toward other religions, and to enter into sustained dialogue with other faith communities, or communities within itself, who may manifest aspects of the Spirit more fully than it does. In recent years, the United Church has been moved to such actions in relation to Judaism, First Nations peoples and Islam.<sup>29</sup> The Holy Spirit has led many churches to rethink their relationship to other faith communities in certain contexts, so that they no longer seek to evangelize these. The idea that the Spirit is given to those who believe in Jesus is a promise to the church that, as it gathers in Jesus' name, the Spirit will be with it, and there will always be a possibility for it to participate in the Spirit's saving work, regardless of the church's sin or pathetic condition. To receive the gift of the Holy Spirit is to receive assurance of salvation. It is also to receive a capacity for self-critique<sup>30</sup> and to become open to correction.

### **The Holy Spirit as a Growing Edge of God**

As noted above, the Spirit can be described using spatial terms. Its in-dwelling presence makes Christians the temple of God (2 Corinthians 6:16). The use of this kind of spatial metaphor to describe the Spirit's presence is very important for

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<sup>29</sup> The Committee on Inter-Church and Inter-Faith Relations, *Bearing Faithful Witness*, (Etobicoke, ON: The United Church of Canada, 1998); The United Church of Canada, *Justice and Reconciliation* (Etobicoke, ON: The Division of Mission in Canada, 2001); That We May Know Each Other: Statement on United Church-Muslim Relations Today, accessed at [www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126\\_finalstatement.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/files/sales/publications/400000126_finalstatement.pdf) January 16, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) p.30.

addressing certain questions concerning how God relates to history.<sup>31</sup> If God is absolute, radically transcendent to history, not needing it for self-fulfillment, what is the meaning to God of God's involvement with history? Process theologies and others portray God as achieving a fulfillment through history, but at the cost of undermining God's radical transcendence to the world. The idea of God's transcendence is important, as it is intrinsic to the idea of God being able to save from all evil. Without radical transcendence, "there is nothing in God for us but solidarity",<sup>32</sup> and hope for the final overcoming of evil, which sustains the pursuit of peace and justice, is lost. However, Jesus reveals that there is an element of eros in God that finds fulfillment through God's involvement in history.<sup>33</sup> Spatial terms for the Holy Spirit, together with the doctrine of the Trinity, help to conceptualize this without jeopardizing the radical transcendence of God.

As the doctrine of the Trinity first developed, there quickly followed notions of the immanent and the economic Trinity. The immanent Trinity is God as God is in God's self, prior to and apart from creation. The economic Trinity is God in relation to the world, creating and redeeming it. The immanent Trinity is always the basis of the economic Trinity. What is expressed in salvation history, in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, is already present in God in eternity. Miroslav Volf describes the relationship between the two as follows:

There is always a surplus in the immanent Trinity that the economic Trinity does not express. And the other way around: something new is introduced into the life of the Trinity with creation and redemption – the encounter of the self-giving love of God with the world of enmity, injustice and deception.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 160.

<sup>32</sup> Eugene Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005) pp. 118.

<sup>33</sup> Cooke, *Power and the Spirit of God*, p. 61.

But the love of God encounters more than sin and evil in creation and redemption. It also finds a home in peoples' hearts, and further expression in peoples' lives. What does this reception and further expression of God's love mean for God?

Following Bonaventure, the immanent Trinity can be described as follows.<sup>35</sup> In the immanent Trinity, the first person of the Trinity is characterized by a dynamic goodness and love that seeks to express itself. The divine will rejoices in this goodness, and in rejoicing consents to its expression. This generates the Word, the second person of the Trinity, who is the eternal expression of God's goodness and love. The second person expresses and rejoices in the goodness and love of the first, and the first person rejoices in the beauty of the second. Out of their mutual joy and praise of each other is spirated the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the other two, the third person of the Trinity. As God's goodness and will would not be fulfilled without the Word and the Holy Spirit, God is necessarily triune.

The goodness and love of God find full expression among the three persons of the immanent Trinity. God's goodness needs no further expression. God's being is complete. Yet while the eros in God for the expression of God's goodness is satisfied, it remains open to further fulfillment.<sup>36</sup> And while the being of God is complete in the immanent Trinity, it too is capable of further expressing God's goodness and love. There is no external necessity compelling God to create the universe. But as God is able to express God's goodness further, and as this is a good thing, there is a moral necessity, grounded in God's own goodness and love, linking the immanent and the economic Trinity. God freely chooses to create and redeem the world. But

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<sup>34</sup> Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Programme": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* edited by Alan Torrance and Michael Banner (New York: T & T Clark International, 2006) p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Bonaventure* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965) p. 163.

<sup>36</sup> Kevin Keane, "Why Creation? Bonaventure And Thomas Aquinas On God As Creative Good", *The Downside Review* Vol.93 (1975) pp. 113-117.

this choice is not a whim, or matter of indifference to God. It is grounded in God's own being. What God does in creation and redemption through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is a further expression of who God is in eternity. Thus the economic Trinity is a further expression of the goodness, beauty and love of God already fully expressed in the immanent Trinity.

Basil the Great first drew attention to the use in Scripture of spatial terms for the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup> Contemporary theologians continue this when they speak of the Spirit as the domain of resonance for Jesus Christ, that people help constitute.<sup>38</sup> As people come to have faith in Jesus Christ, this domain increases. Also, as people seek justice, peace and wholeness, regardless of their religious faith, this domain also increases, for wherever there is love, there is God.<sup>39</sup> Thus, as people come to have faith in Jesus Christ and live this out, and wherever people seek justice, peace and wholeness, there is an increase of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit is fully divine, where there is this increase there is an increase to the being of God.

This is the reason for which the universe was created, for which Christ came.<sup>40</sup> As people love one another, as they give thanks to God for the beauty of creation and the beauty of God's love, the bond of love that joins the first and second persons of the Trinity is repeated in time and space, between God and creation, and there is a relative, but still very real, increase to God's own being and joy. "Through the Spirit we participate in that circle of love which is trinitarian communion."<sup>41</sup> And through this participation, God's own goodness, beauty and love find further expression and increase.

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<sup>37</sup> St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Welker, *God the Spirit*, p.314.

<sup>39</sup> Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, p. 337.

<sup>40</sup> This paragraph depends on the exposition of Jonathan Edwards' theology in Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) pp. 214-233.

<sup>41</sup> Kilian McDonnell, *The Other Hand of God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003) p. 180.

Creation here is not simply a means for the fulfillment of God. As God's goodness and love find further expression, creation and the people in it find wholeness and fulfillment as well. The world was created for the glory of God. The glory of God is creation and humanity fully alive, expressing God's own love and beauty as fully as they can. God does not need the world. And yet God and the world find a fulfillment together in the Holy Spirit, the bond of love that joins both. The Holy Spirit is thus giver, gift, and growing edge of God.