

The Spirit of the Age

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The Nineteenth-Century Debate over the
Holy Spirit and the Westminster Confession

J. V. Fesko



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The Spirit of the Age
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Dedicated to
Richard A. Muller

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I dedicate this book to an esteemed colleague, Richard A. Muller. I can remember purchasing two of his books, the paperback

editions of volumes 1 and 2 of his *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. I purchased them through a clearance sale from a print catalog from Christian Book Distributors. At the time, they looked interesting, and I figured they would be a good resource. Little did I know how formative they would be in my own future doctoral work and a continued resource long into my own professional academic labors. Now all of his books sit on my shelves adorned with copious notes, and scores of his essays rest on my computer's hard drive—a testimony to how much I have learned and continue to learn from his work. You are a model scholar and a valued friend. Thank you for your willingness to offer assistance, whether through reading material I have written or offering counsel when needed. I hope in your retirement that you find more time to write and paint!

In the end, I am ultimately grateful to our triune God—the Father who sent the Son and anointed Him with His Holy Spirit that He might in turn pour out the Spirit on fallen but nevertheless beloved elect sinners. Apart from your outpoured love we would be incapable of loving you or one another. *Veni Sancti Spiritus*.

The State of the Question

A survey of recent works reveals that the doctrine of the Spirit has piqued the church's interest.¹ If one compares contemporary systematic theologies with those of earlier generations, the impression is that our theological forefathers gave scant attention to the third person of the Godhead. Open to the table of contents of Louis Berkhof's (1873–1957) *Systematic Theology*, a commonly used text in many Reformed and evangelical seminaries, and you find one slender chapter of eight pages under the rubric of the application of the work of redemption dedicated to the work of the Holy Spirit.² By comparison, Baptist theologian Millard Erickson (1932–) has

1. See, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994); Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2013); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit: Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006); David Coffey, *Grace: The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2011); Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015); John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit—In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Holy Spirit, New Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); and Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: Love and Gift in the Trinity and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

2. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (1932, 1938; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 423–31.

two chapters on the person and work of the Spirit totaling forty-one pages, and Anglican theologian Anthony Thiselton (1937–) has two chapters on the doctrine and historical insights totaling forty-six pages.³ One of the latest developments in Roman Catholic theology has been called Spirit-Christology. These authors claim that in the past the church myopically focused on the doctrine of Christ to the exclusion of pneumatology. They offer, therefore, a corrective by coordinating Christology and pneumatology to avoid this erroneous Christomonistic approach to doctrine.⁴ This overall focus on pneumatology characterizes twentieth-century theology and has led some theologians to criticize historic Reformed theology for its supposed deficiencies.

Some within the broader Reformed community, such as Daniel Migliore (1935–), claim that the early church's creedal treatment of the Holy Spirit is almost "slipshod" and that neglect and suspicion of pneumatology has damaging effects on Christian life and theology.⁵ More specifically, T. F. Torrance (1913–2007) and James B. Torrance (1923–2003) have identified deficiencies with the pneumatology of the 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).

3. Millard Erickson, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 845–86; and Anthony Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 264–310.

4. See, e.g., Ralph Del Colle, *Christ and the Spirit: Spirit Christology in Trinitarian Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Roger Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 52 (1992): 257–87; Harold Hunter, "Spirit Christology: Dilemma and Promise," *The Heythrop Journal* 24, no. 2 (1983): 127–40; and Philip Rosato, "Spirit Christology: Ambiguity and Promise," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 423–49. An exception to this largely Roman Catholic trend is 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* (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 11–67, 301–44. Critics of Spirit-Christology include Wolfhart Pannenberg, who contends that to accord the Spirit a chief role in the ministry of Christ leads to an adoptionistic Christology (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975], 115–21).

5. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 166.

T. F. Torrance argued that pneumatology was the weakest of all doctrines in the church because it had never been given the disciplined attention it requires, but he sympathetically then presents the teaching of the Westminster Standards to show “the tendencies at work in Reformed theology.”⁶ T. F. Torrance’s brother James, however, offers a much less sympathetic analysis of the Westminster Confession:

There is a wealth of biblical teaching here which is absent, about the Holy Spirit as the bond of union between the Father and the Son, in whose communion we are given to participate through the Spirit of adoption; that Jesus is the recipient of the Spirit in our humanity in sharing a common anointing; that He is the Mediator of the Spirit and the Dispenser of the Spirit.... The doctrine of the Spirit would doubtless have been given a fuller place had the Westminster divines adopted a Trinitarian pattern for the Confession.⁷

The Torrances believed that the Westminster Confession was deficient because it was a product of its age, one marked by scholasticism. This trend appears in other analyses of the broader Reformed confessional tradition. I. John Hesselink claims that the scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century was ignorant of and unfaithful to John Calvin’s (1509–1564) magnificent theology of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Other theologians have similarly opined that pneumatology was all but forgotten in the Reformed tradition after

6. T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), xcv–xcvi.

7. James B. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession Today*, ed. A. I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1982), 53.

8. I. John Hesselink, “The Charismatic Movement and the Reformed Tradition,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 380.

Calvin. In fact, modern Reformed theology has suffered an eclipse of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁹

In contrast to these critics, others have recently made theological and historical analyses and come to very different conclusions. In his recently published doctoral dissertation, Yuzo Adhinarta surveys the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century confessional documents and concludes that the Holy Spirit is crucial to the historic Reformed tradition. He bases this claim on the fact that the major Reformed confessions discuss pneumatology in virtually every major doctrine, including Scripture, the Trinity, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, the sacraments, creation, providence, and the Christian life.¹⁰ Other historians have come to similar conclusions regarding pneumatology in Reformed orthodoxy.¹¹ Similarly, others have ably taken up a specific defense of the Westminster Confession and explained its doctrine of the Spirit.¹² But this does not mean that the subject has been exhaustively treated.

The Nature of This Study

If we believe the contemporary critics of Reformed confessional theology, the historic Reformed tradition inadequately treats the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. More specifically, according to the Torrances, the Westminster Confession has a deficient pneumatology.

9. Myung Yong Kim, "Reformed Pneumatology and Pentecostal Pneumatology," in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 174.

10. Yuzo Adhinarta, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Major Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Carlisle, U.K.: Langham Monographs, 2012), 210–15.

11. Maarten Wisse and Hugo Meijer, "Pneumatology: Tradition and Renewal," in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 465–518.

12. O. Palmer Robertson, "The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Confession," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2003–9), 1:57–100.

I address, therefore, the issue of the confession's alleged deficiencies. One way to showcase the confession's doctrine of the Spirit would be to examine each of the thirty-nine places where the confession refers to the Holy Spirit.¹³ While this could be a helpful exercise, it might suffer from trying to cover too much ground in too little space. A treatment of the role of the Spirit in the confession could easily fill a hefty monograph. Moreover, in at least some respects, others have done this in their recent historical surveys.¹⁴ I do not want to repeat their work. Instead, my aim is to explore the question of the relationship between the confession and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit through the window of nineteenth-century Presbyterian history. Why examine this doctrinal question within this historical context? There are four chief reasons.

First, some contemporary critics believe that the Presbyterian Church's 1903 revisions to the Westminster Confession remedied its deficient pneumatology. James Torrance, for example, footnotes the 1903 revisions as an added improvement that doubtlessly modified "the severity of the doctrine of the decrees."¹⁵ Torrance believed that the doctrine of the decrees was a seventeenth-century scholastic aberration and blemish on the theology of the Reformation. Yet, to date, there is very little specific literature on the 1903 revisions that explores issues related to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Second, in light of the absence of literature on this specific subject, I want to press beyond the basic question of whether the Holy Spirit is present in the Westminster Confession. The doctrine undoubtedly appears. Rather, I ask the deeper question regarding why nineteenth-century Presbyterians wanted to modify the Westminster Confession. The short answer to this question arises from the significant criticisms that came from two nineteenth-century theologians, Charles Briggs (1841–1913) and Philip Schaff

13. See appendix 1, "The Holy Spirit in the Westminster Standards."

14. E.g., works by Adhinarta, Wisse and Meijer, and Robertson above.

15. James B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses," 53n4.

16. See appendix 2, "The 1903 Additions to the Westminster Confession of Faith."

(1819–1893). These two Reformed theologians led the charge against the theology of the confession and called for its revision. From one vantage point, the temptation might be to resort to a superficial analysis. After all, Briggs complained that the confession was deficient because it did not have a chapter on the Holy Spirit. But a very different and decidedly modern understanding of methodology, history, and theology drove his criticisms. I, therefore, drill down into the modern / early modern divide to explore what separated post-Enlightenment from pre-Enlightenment theology and led theologians like Briggs and Schaff to call for confession revision.

Third, we might be tempted to think that this nineteenth-century debate has been resolved by church splits. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church and later the Presbyterian Church in America broke away from the mainline Presbyterian Church and scuttled the 1903 revisions. What need is there to revisit this debate other than to revel in the clashes between progressives and conservatives at the turn of the twentieth century? While it is true that denominational splits have resolved some aspects of the controversy, the underlying methodological and theological issues are still ongoing discussions in Reformed and evangelical circles. Twenty-first-century Reformed Christians look into the mirror when they explore these nineteenth-century debates surrounding the confession and its doctrine of the Holy Spirit. There is still much to learn from this debate.

Fourth, I suspect that many devotees to the Westminster Confession look at this cherished document and wince because it does, at first glance, appear to give scant attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Yet, upon closer examination, not only is such a conclusion hasty, but I wonder whether people take inventory of the different historical developments that have caused some contemporary theologians to claim that we are now living in the age of the Spirit. Many contemporary theologians have written books touting the age of the Spirit, and on a popular level, upon looking at their Pentecostal neighbors, many Reformed Christians perhaps think

of themselves as living up to their nickname, the Frozen Chosen. Far from this caricature, the Westminster Confession provides a vibrant, biblical, and warm doctrine of the Holy Spirit that should halt fears of theological frostbite. Part of the problem for moderns is one of perception—they perceive that the confession says little about the Holy Spirit, but they do not realize how the Enlightenment has shaped contemporary opinions about what constitutes good theology.

Outline of the Study

Hence, in this study I explore the confession's doctrine of the Holy Spirit through the window of the nineteenth-century confessional revision debates. I aim to prove the thesis that the confession presents a biblical, Reformed, and catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I prove this thesis in three chapters.

Chapter 2 addresses the question, is the Holy Spirit absent from or present in the Westminster Confession? I answer the question in the affirmative—the Spirit is definitely present. I prove this by exploring Briggs's criticisms of the confession and then examining two test cases—the doctrines of Scripture and Christ—to demonstrate the role of the Spirit. In this chapter I set the exegesis of Briggs alongside early modern Reformed exegesis. By comparing the two, we can see that the Westminster divines and the broader early modern Reformed tradition were committed to a theology that was the fruit of careful exegesis. I also give some provisional reasons as to why nineteenth-century theologians like Briggs believed that the confession's pneumatology was deficient. In brief, Briggs's concept of doctrinal progress led him to believe that nineteenth-century theology had evolved beyond seventeenth-century theology. The confession was outdated and obsolete and thus required revision.

Chapter 3 explores the catholic roots of the confession's pneumatology. Some modern critics accuse seventeenth-century Reformed theology of falling prey to scholasticism and failing to embrace Calvin's theology of the Spirit. As much as some might try

to credit Calvin with presenting groundbreaking insights regarding the work of the Spirit, Calvin and the Westminster divines shared a common catholic heritage from which they both drew to construct their respective pneumatologies. The confession's theological roots undoubtedly lie deep in the soil of Scripture, but they have grown under the care and pruning of theologians like Augustine (354–430), Peter Lombard (1100–1160), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). The sixteenth-century Reformers stood on the shoulders of these giants when they constructed their own theology. This does not mean they merely repristinate earlier formulations, but they definitely benefit from them. This chapter traces these developments through major Reformation and early orthodox confessions and catechisms to set the context for the confession's doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This chapter examines the debates during the Westminster Assembly and key contributions from some of the divines, such as Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Samuel Rutherford (ca. 1600–1661), and John Arrowsmith (1602–1659), as well as other theologians of the period. This chapter demonstrates that the divines believed they were not creating theology anew but merely reforming the elements within their common catholic tradition. The divines were Reformed *catholics*.

Chapter 4 explores the theological rationale behind the confession's pneumatology. In the simplest of terms, why does the confession not have a separate chapter on the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question lies in different conceptions of doctrine. If we approach the question with post-Enlightenment conceptions of methodology, history, and theology, then we will undoubtedly find the confession deficient. If, however, we approach the confession with a pre-Enlightenment understanding, then the confession's pneumatology will likely ring true. Some might want to present the variances between Briggs and the confession as new versus old or modern versus early modern, and at one level this is true. But at another level, we must recognize that the roots to the supposed modern outlook of Briggs lie in the theology of a medieval mystic.

This chapter explores these issues and explains why Briggs and the confession have different doctrines of the Holy Spirit.

The study concludes with a brief summary and presents six points of continued relevance for this historical debate. Far from being mere history sidelined by denominational splits, the underlying methodological and theological issues continue to surface in ongoing debates. Reformed churchmen should study this debate and its underlying philosophical assumptions and ask a fundamental question: To what degree can Enlightenment-influenced theology peacefully coexist with classic Reformed theology? In simpler terms, can post-Enlightenment Reformed churches still profess the early modern theology of the Westminster Confession? Can we put old Reformed theological wine into new Enlightenment wineskins?

Conclusion

Far from being deficient, the Westminster Confession offers a biblically rich, Reformed, and catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Armed with a better knowledge of the confession's pneumatology, its underpinning exegetical support, and the doctrinal rationale behind its formulation, Reformed Christians can greatly benefit from the work of the Westminster divines. They can also see that, far from deficient, most of the modern criticisms against the confession originate from philosophical and theological presuppositions that are fundamentally at odds with the confession, and especially the Bible. Rather than being outdated or obsolete, Reformed Christians who subscribe to or appreciate the theology of the confession can know that it represents a faithful exposition of the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).