

The Holy Spirit in the New Testament: A Study of Primitive Christian Teaching
Henry B. Swete
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A work by Dr. Swete on so important and central a subject as the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit naturally raises great expectations. By unique exegetical qualifications as well as by a theological position broadly in sympathy with the historic faith of the Church, the author would seem most eminently fitted for giving us the ideal pneumatology, which, after all that has of late been written on the subject in a fragmentary way or from a less believing standpoint, still remains a desideratum. That such high expectations are scarcely realized in the work before us is due not so much to a failure of accomplishment on the author's part, but rather to the self-imposed limitations with which he has set out upon his task. Dr. Swete is so keenly conscious of these limitations that he uses the very first sentence of his preface to tell us that "this book is not an attempt to demonstrate the truth of the catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit by an appeal to the New Testament," "nor professes to make a formal contribution to the study of New Testament Theology." And positively his avowed purpose is "to assist the reader in the effort to realize the position of the first Christian teachers and writers, when they speak of the Holy Spirit in connection with the history of their times or out of their own experiences of the spiritual life." It does not seem quite clear how the purpose thus defined could be adequately attained without making what the author does not mean to make, a formal contribution to New Testament theology. To realize the position of the first Christian teachers and writers in regard to the Holy Spirit as a factor in history and experience is scarcely possible without a careful biblico-theological investigation of the place held by the conception of the Holy Spirit in the belief of the apostolic period. And such an investigation certainly the book does not offer. To be sure it is constructed on a plan that could scarcely have been improved upon, had a thorough, painstaking study of this kind been contemplated. In a first part the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the history of the New Testament is traced, and this is followed in a second part by a review of the Spirit's manifestation in the New Testament teaching, an arrangement which well brings out and upholds the principle that the doctrine is subsequent to and the interpretation of the facts. To these two parts there is added a third division, which gives a summary of the New Testament doctrine under the seven heads of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Spirit in the Church, the Spirit and the Ministry, the Spirit and the Written Word, the Spirit and the Personal Life, the Spirit and the Life to Come. In the first two divisions the method of procedure is strictly exegetical, even painstakingly so, the full original text of the passages under discussion being each time printed at the head of the several paragraphs in a carefully revised form. The performance however, does not come up to the preparations, the comment on the texts being on the whole cursory and going very seldom beneath the surface of the common traditional understanding of the matter. The result is an exposition which the intelligent believer may follow almost from first to last with uninterrupted assent, but from which he will learn comparatively little that is new. The freshness and originality arising from the specifically biblico-theological mode of approach are too little in evidence. We miss the finely modulated insight into the differences that exist between the various New Testament writers in their apprehension of the Spirit, and which gave a peculiar perspective in each case even to the area they have in common. That Peter and Paul, while both deriving the mission of the Spirit from the ascended Christ, yet view the relation existing between the Spirit and the Christ in glory each from his own standpoint, Peter regarding it after the nature of an objective, external gift bestowed by the Lord, Paul regarding it as a self-communication in which the Lord bestows

what had become part subjectively of his own glorified humanity, this and similar other things Dr. Swete does not tell us. Although a paragraph is devoted to the Spirit and the life to come, the broad eschatological significance which the Spirit has in Paul as the element of the heavenly sphere and the future aeon is nowhere clearly brought out. In general we feel that the author looks at the subject with the eyes of the exegete and of the dogmatician, but that the peculiar intermediate kind of vision which constitutes the chief equipment of the biblical theologian is not his forte. He puts himself into rapport with the New Testament consciousness through the medium of the general faith of the Church, and by doing this loses sight of what is the individual, incommunicable physiognomy of the period and of the several writers, that in their apprehension of the Spirit which no later age could ever fully share or repeat. We do not overlook, of course, that this defect carries with itself the advantage of giving the reader a vivid impression of the thorough agreement of the Church's doctrine of the Spirit with the main lines drawn in the apostolic development of truth. While Dr. Swete disavows every intention of demonstrating the truth of the catholic doctrine of the Holy Spirit by an appeal to the New Testament, yet, as a matter of fact, a more convincing argument to that very same effect than is contained in his discussion could scarcely be constructed.

It goes without saying that even in the cursory comment of so able and careful an exegete, as the author has proved himself to be, there must of needs be much that deserves the attention and will repay the perusal of students of the New Testament. Especially in the notes that are collected in the appendix there is valuable material. We may specify note P on "Spirit" and "the Spirit" which throws much light, more, indeed, than we have been able to find elsewhere, on the peculiar anarthrous use of πνευμα and αγιον πνευμα in the New Testament. Such a taste of what the author is able to give makes us all the more keenly regret that he has not seen fit to expand the present fragmentary presentation into an exhaustive study of his subject such as would have instructed, not merely the average reader, but would have also put under obligation the professional student of New Testament Theology.