

A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit: Bible, Doctrine, Experience

Anthony C. Thiselton

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Twice now Anthony Thiselton, Professor Emeritus of Christian Theology at the University of Nottingham, has written very large books and then followed them up with shorter alternative volumes. The first was his 1500-page commentary on First Corinthians (Eerdmans, 2000), followed by the 300-page *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2006). Now he has followed his award-winning 570-page *The Holy Spirit: In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Eerdmans, 2013) with this *Shorter Guide*.

“Shorter Guide” is a peculiar genre. Though it is on the same topic by the same author, this volume is an entirely new book rather than a condensed version of its predecessor. Several features account for its brevity: the writing style is more clipped and concise; the footnotes point to representative texts rather than to comprehensive literature reviews; and it offers lighter commentary on issues that were fully explored elsewhere. But the main reason the volume is slimmer is that it omits the church-historical development of pneumatology (the “through the centuries” element of the longer volume). The resulting presentation of biblical and doctrinal material is an easily manageable survey that may work well for the classroom and for general readers.

There are 17 chapters: seven on the Bible, six on doctrinal themes, and four on Pentecostal experience. The author divides many of his chapters into numbered lists of key points. The chapter on the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, for example, advances through eight numbered sections that roughly correspond to historical

periods or major authors, and the eschatology chapter through four. These sections range from a single paragraph to a few pages long, and the result is a volume conspicuously made up of bite-size sections. Some of these sections are very satisfying little essays: two well-documented pages on how New Testament prophecy came to be identified with preaching, for example, or a sprightly account of how and why Paul uses both personal and impersonal language for the Holy Spirit. *A Shorter Guide* reads something like a reference work, but with more of a continuous thread holding it together. *A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit* is rigorous but diffuse, more of an exploration than an argument.

There are a few theses running through all this material. One of the most important is that we should unlearn the pervasive bad habit of associating the Holy Spirit with heightened human capacities. The Holy Spirit, as God, is truly and fully transcendent. To confuse the Spirit's otherness with the otherness of human nature in its most excited state is to cancel the Spirit's divine identity. Thiselton hears this confusion at work in the widespread use of the word "spirituality," which has migrated from its original reference to the work of the third person of the Trinity to a way of talking about a domain of human experience. Whether in the Hebrew *ruach* or the Greek *pneuma*, "spirit" in Scripture is a homonym whose various meanings must be distinguished in usage: breath, wind, life, and God are not the same. If this distinction between the Spirit of God and excited human spirits were consistently acknowledged, Thiselton notes, we would not identify spiritual vitality with mere excitement, spontaneity, or intense feeling. We would not esteem people with more personal charisma as divinely gifted for church leadership.

Nor would there be so much talk of "Pentecostal hermeneutics" as some sort of special openness to the Holy Spirit's supernatural help in interpreting Scripture. One of the most surprising elements of Thiselton's big book was that a non-Pentecostal scholar of his stature treated Pentecostalism as a major and sustained dialogue partner. This book extends that dialogue, interacting extensively with Pentecostal sources. On the subject of a special, Spirit-empowered Pentecostal hermeneutics, however, Thiselton is skeptical. Here again he sees the fatal substitution, with mere human excitements and enthusiasms trying to pass themselves off as the work of the Spirit. Against this, Thiselton urges the possibility that God works mainly through the ordinary scholarly exercise of exegetical and hermeneutical wisdom. By way of illustration, he provides a brief autobiographical testimony on how this has been the case in his own writings.

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