

Sins against the Holy Spirit

Graham A. Cole

INTRODUCTION

As I write there is ongoing war in Afghanistan, a bloody civil war in Syria, bombings in Iraq and mass shootings in the United States in a theater and a Sikh temple. Christians are saddened but

unsurprised. Paradise has been lost. Sin is at work in the good world that God made. Indeed sin is the great spoiler as Genesis 3 shows. Sin spoils our relation to our creator. Fellowship gives way to flight and our relation to one another (blame shifting), to our very selves (shame) and to our environment (to the dust we return). And sin is the great disrupter. It fractures relationships: upward towards God, outward to the human other, inwards within ourselves, and downwards to the natural order.

We have become paradoxical beings capable of great compas-

sion and great cruelty. Pascal of the seventeenth century summed up the paradox in these startling words: "What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe!"¹ Pascal further contended in another of his *pensées* that "Man's greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness."² The doctrine of humanity as *imago dei* (theological anthropology) captures the glory. The doctrine of sin (hamartiology) captures the refuse side. Pascal also argued that a believable religion "must also account for such amazing contradictions."³

In this study we explore a subset of the doctrine of sin. Our focus is on sins against the Holy Spirit of God.⁴ Two categories of such sins will be considered. We first deal with sins of the outsider (the unbeliever). These include blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and resisting the Holy Spirit.⁵ Next we

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treat sins of the insider (the believer). In the following section our focus will be on quenching the Holy Spirit and grieving the Holy Spirit.

SINS OF THE OUTSIDER

BLASPHEMING THE HOLY SPIRIT

It was only a few years ago now that a young man sat in my study carrying a great internal burden. He was a theological student who believed that he had committed the unpardonable sin. He had blasphemed the Holy Spirit. Had he? He was clearly a believer. Is this a sin that a believer can commit? Or is this a sin that only an outsider to the faith may commit? In the section title I have already tipped my hand as a believer in the perseverance of the saints. (The defense of this position lies beyond the scope of the present task.) I believe that blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is a sin of an outsider, but am I right? We need to turn to the biblical testimony like the Bereans of old to see if these things are so. That is the noble pathway (Acts 17:11).⁶

Mathew, Mark, and Luke refer to this sin, only John does not. In each of the Synoptic Gospels we read that blasphemy against the Son of Man is forgivable but not so with regard to slandering the Spirit (cf. Matt 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; and Luke 12:10). Blasphemy is slander directed against God that denigrates the divine character. Because this sin finds no forgiveness, it has been described as “the unpardonable sin.” Significantly, in Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts, Jesus’ warning about this sin is directed to those on the outside. The Pharisees and the scribes are in his purview. Luke’s account is different in this respect. Jesus warns disciples about it, people he describes as “my friends” (Luke 12:4).

How have these accounts in the Synoptic Gospels been interpreted in the past and in the present? Generally speaking, the interpretation of these passages falls into two groups. On the one hand some, for example, Arnold G. Fructenbaum, argue that this sin was only possible while Jesus walked the earth. The Son of Man had to be physically present for this sin to be possible. From a classic dispensational perspective, he maintains,

“The unpardonable sin, or the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, is defined, therefore, as the national rejection by Israel of the messiahship of Jesus was while He was present and claiming He was demon-possessed.”⁷ This view raises the question as to the rationale for the gospel writers to include such stories in their accounts of Jesus. Jesus was now ascended and at the right hand of the Father. The readers of the Gospels were not able therefore to commit this sin. On the other hand, there are others who argue that this sin remains a real possibility. Thomas Oden is one theologian who believes that this sin can be committed today. He argues, “The blasphemy referred to is that of directly ascribing to the power of evil, the coming of God into history through the Son and the Spirit (Mark 3:28, 29, and parallels). This sin *instantly* places the self beyond the range of forgiveness, because every step toward repentance and faith is enabled by the Holy Spirit (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit*).”⁸ In my view the latter position that the sin remains a possibility makes better sense of the inclusion of the warnings in the Gospels. But what exactly is this sin? Is Oden right? I believe not.

In Matthew’s account, Jesus heals a demon-possessed man (Matt 12:22-23). He is no longer blind and mute. The crowds understandably are amazed and raise the question (12:23): “Can this be the Son of David?” The Pharisees take offence when they hear of it and pronounce (12:24): “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons that this man casts out demons.” Jesus responds with a *reductio ad absurdum* (reduction to absurdity) argument.⁹ He argues (12:25-27), “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.” Jesus gives the true interpretation of his actions and their importance (12:28): “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” As R. T.

France comments, “There is a *kingdom of Satan* as well as a kingdom of God, and this passage reveals the two as locked in mortal conflict in the ministry of Jesus.”¹⁰ Jesus then compares what he is doing to that of a tying up a strong man in order to despoil him (12:29). Satan is clearly the strong man and Jesus the despoiler. He next issues a stark warning (12:31-32): “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy [*blasphēmia*, ‘slander’] against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”¹¹

What we say matters. What we say can betray the orientation of the heart. For Jesus goes on to declare to his objectors (Matt 12:33-35), “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” Jesus then strikes an eschatological note (12:36-37): “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Dale C. Allison, Jr., comments that these words of warning “[oppose] the possible supposition that blasphemy cannot really have eternal consequence because it consists of nothing but words with the assertion that to speak evil is to be evil: words reflect the true self and so can be the criterion of divine judgment.”¹²

Mark’s account adds a nuance to the picture for in it Jesus did not declare that they had actually committed it (*enochos*, may be translated “liable”). After all, in both Matthew and Mark we find he reasoned with them in an *ad hominem* way by pointing out the *reductio ad absurdum* nature of their accusation. If Satan is fighting against Satan, then his kingdom is divided and doomed. This appeal to reason suggests that the Pharisees had

not yet fallen into the abyss of an eternal sin (Mark 3:29). J. I. Packer rightly contends, “Jesus saw that the Pharisees were getting close to committing this sin, and he spoke in hope of holding them back from fully lapsing into it.”¹³ Given the Matthean and Markan accounts, to blaspheme the Spirit is to adopt a particular stance in relation to Christology, i.e., the person and work of Christ to which the Spirit bears witness.

The Gospel of Luke tells a similar story but with no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit or blaspheming the Spirit. In this account the Pharisees aren’t identified *per se*. We are told only that some of the crowd objected (Luke 11:15). The same *reductio ad absurdum* argument reappears (11:17-18). What is new in the account is Jesus’ using the image of the finger of God (11:20): “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The next chapter in Luke’s account does thematize both the Holy Spirit and the blasphemy against the Spirit. Jesus is teaching the disciples in the first instance but the crowds are listening in (cf. Luke 12:1 and 12:13). He warns in 11:8-9, “And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” He elaborates (11:10): “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” The contrast should not be missed. To speak against the Son of Man is forgivable, but against the Spirit, never. One can imagine how sobering 11:10 would have been to hear.

Importantly the very next verse is one of reassurance (11:11): “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

Importantly, speaking against Jesus on another occasion or at an earlier time in one’s life does not

mean one has committed this sin. Paul described himself as a blasphemer, but God made him his apostle to the Gentile world (cf. Acts 7:58-8:3; 1 Tim 1:12-17). Saul, the blasphemer, received mercy. Blaspheming the Spirit is the settled rejection of the Spirit's testimony to Jesus. The Pharisees and Saul of Tarsus were in danger of just that. Nor is blasphemy against the Spirit committed by the disciple who denies his or her Lord on occasion. Peter denied Christ three times yet he was restored to Christ's service (cf. John 18:15-27 and 21: 15-19). Blaspheming the Spirit is not an episode but a way of life.¹⁴ Put another way, this is the sin of persistent impenitent unbelief. John Paul II was right to describe this sin as "the radical refusal to be converted."¹⁵ The lights are on in the Father's house but the prodigal persistently refuses to come home.

What, then, of those genuine Christians who worry that they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit? J. I. Packer offers this helpful pastoral point: "Christians who fear that they have committed it [the unpardonable sin] show by that anxiety that they have not done so."¹⁶ I counseled the young theological student whom I mentioned at the beginning of this section along those very lines.

RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT

The one explicit reference to resisting the Holy Spirit is found in Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Stephen, we find, in the previous chapter has been appointed with others to relieve the apostles of table duty (Acts 6:1-6). Of those so appointed Stephen soon emerges as a significant person in his own right (Acts 6:8): "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people." Controversy quickly ensued. He was accused of blasphemy and brought before the Jewish authorities. It was alleged that he was speaking both against the temple and the law of Moses (Acts 6:12-14). Acts 7 is taken up with his address to the Jewish council with no lesser figure than the high priest present. Stephen rehearses the history of Israel's sorry disobedience climaxing in Acts 7:51: "You stiff-necked people, uncircum-

cised in heart and ears, you always resist ['unceasingly,' *antiptete*, 'resist,' lit. 'fall against,'] the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." The question raised by this text in Acts is the nature of this resistance to the Spirit.¹⁷ According to Stephen such resistance had been a feature of Israel's history with God. The problem began even before the exodus from Egypt when, Stephen points out, the question was raised (Acts 7:27), "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" Moses was rejected and fled from Egypt. After the exodus and in the wilderness Moses received a "living oracle" from God to deliver to Israel. The result was infamous: our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, "Make for us gods who will go before us" (7:40). Stephen's concluding question is a stabbing one (7:52a): "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" The underlying implication of this rhetorical question is that they persecuted every one of them. That persecution culminated in "And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (7:52b-53). Resisting the Spirit in context appears to mean rejecting the Word of God in promise, prophecy and law.¹⁸

The response to Stephen's stinging address was immediate and deadly (7:54): "Now when they heard these things they were enraged [*dieprionto*], and they ground [*ebryxon*] their teeth at him." Soon Stephen joined the persecuted and the slain but did so in a way so reminiscent of Jesus himself (7:59-60): "And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" This account stands in stark and illuminating contrast with the earlier one presenting Peter's Pentecost address. Both Peter and Stephen lay blame for Jesus' death at the door of their Jewish hearers. Peter preaches (Acts 2:36), "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God

has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you [*humeis*, pl. and emphatic] crucified.” Stephen makes it clear by speaking of Jesus as “the Righteous One, whom you [*humeis*, pl. and emphatic] have now betrayed and murdered” (7:52). However the Pentecost crowd is cut to the heart by the word of God that they had heard in Acts 2:37): “Now when they heard this they were cut [*katenygēsan*] to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Their response is an anxious question. In contrast at the council meeting we find (Acts 7:54), “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.” No question, only bloody action. The Pentecost crowd embraced the poured out Spirit’s message, the council resisted it.

In Matthew 23:34-36 Jesus makes this intriguing statement that puzzled me for some time:

Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Who are these prophets? Who are these scribes? Who are these wise? A case can be made that the apostles exhibit the characteristics of the three groups but only the apostles? Could it be that Stephen was one of these wise? Given the descriptors in Acts 6:3, “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of *wisdom*, whom we will appoint to this duty” he is a most likely candidate.¹⁹

Our response to the Word of God, which is the Spirit’s Word, whether from the lips of an apostle or wise man like Stephen or God’s Word written, is no trifling matter.

SINS OF THE INSIDER

We now turn to the church and the sins of the insider against the Holy Spirit and we begin with quenching the Holy Spirit before turning to the sin of grieving the Holy Spirit.²⁰ The references to both sins appear in the Pauline epistles addressed to churches whereas the two sins of the outsider, which we considered above, do not appear in any epistle but in narratives.

QUENCHING THE HOLY SPIRIT

The key text is 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21: “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” Translations have differences in their punctuation. The ESV, NIV, and NRSV break up 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 into more than one sentence. The ESV presents three sentences and separates verse 19, which speaks of the Spirit and verses 20-21 which speak of prophecies. The NIV links the Spirit and prophecies by translating verses 19-20 as one sentence, but then breaks up verses 21-22 into three sentences. The NRSV provides two sentences and separates verse 19 from the rest. However, in both Greek texts that I used in preparation, verses 19-22 are one complex sentence that connects quenching the Spirit and despising prophecy. Paul’s concern is not with quenching the Spirit’s ministry in general, but specifically with prophesying.²¹

Why does Paul write this? As Gordon Fee points out, our text (1 Thess 5:19-22) surprises the reader since nothing else prior in the letter prepares the way for it.²² So finding the apostolic rationale for the injunctions about the Spirit, prophecy, and discernment is not easy. Is Paul addressing a misuse of such a charismatic gift at Thessalonica, or is his aim preventative? Literally, Paul is commanding them—the imperative is second person plural—not to keep on quenching the Spirit. The verb “to quench” is in the present tense but does it have a continuous aspect? Scholars are divided.²³ We may not be able to definitively answer these questions. What is clear, however, is that prophecy was a *bona fide* practice in congregational life and

one that was sourced in the Holy Spirit, but even so discernment was necessary. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians shows the necessity for such discernment as he instructs the Thessalonians not to be shaken by purported spirit or word or letter from Paul if such communication were characterized by an over-realized eschatology as though the day of Christ had already come (2 Thess 2:1-2).²⁴ The idea of quenching (*sbennumi*) the Spirit in the Thessalonians' context involves a metaphorical use of language.²⁵ The NIV brings this out in a virtual paraphrase of 1 Thessalonians 5:19: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." In the Thessalonians' context, quenching the Spirit arguably involved a nullifying of the Spirit's work in the congregation.

The specific activity in view with regard to quenching the Spirit is prophecy. But just what was it? Were they Spirit inspired applications of the gospel that Paul had preached to the situations of the hearers? Or were they Spirit inspired applications of Paul's letter as it was being read out in the congregation?²⁶ Indeed Paul commands the Thessalonians to read his letter to the entire church (1 Thess 5:27). Or were they spontaneous revelations given by the Spirit through different congregational members concerning the state of the hearers as 1 Corinthians 14 might suggest? The prophecy of which Paul writes then does seem to stand on a lower level than either the gospel Paul preached or the word of the Lord that he shared with the Thessalonians. Grudem appears to be largely right to suggest that this sort of New Testament prophecy does not have the intrinsic authority of Old Testament prophecy.²⁷ This kind of Thessalonian prophecy needs testing. The word Paul uses for "testing" (*dokimadzein*) could be used of a variety of critical examinations ranging from scrutinizing people to testing metals.²⁸ The need was to sift the genuine from the false. Quality control was essential. The good needs to be separated from the bad, and that good embraced. Evil of every sort was to be avoided.²⁹

My suggestion is that whatever else New Testament prophecy may have been, it was an oral com-

munication sourced in the Spirit. In Acts it could be a very public phenomenon. At Pentecost, for example, its content was forth telling the mighty works of God in the gospel (Acts 2:11, *ta megaleia tou theou*, the ESV and NRSV are better than the NIV here, which has "wonders") and at Corinth, prophetic activity could disclose the secrets of the heart (1 Cor 14:25).¹² Interestingly, knowing or exposing the moral state of the human heart seemed to be a necessary condition for identifying a prophet for some in the first century—according to Luke 7:36-50 and John 4:1-38. In the former case, Simon the Pharisee thought to himself that if Jesus were a prophet he would know the moral state of the woman showing him such deference by washing his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, kissing them, and anointing them (Luke 7:39). And in the latter case the woman of Samaria, when confronted with Jesus' knowledge of her marital and extra-marital history, declared him to be a prophet (John 4:19). Peter's prophetic discourse on the day of Pentecost confronted the hearers with "this Jesus ... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).³⁰ The hearers "were cut [*katenug'san*] to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Returning to the Thessalonians, as we have already seen, Paul instructed the Thessalonian believers to not despise prophesying and yet called for discernment on their part (1 Thess 5:19-21). He instructed those at Corinth similarly (1 Cor 14:29).

The insider quenches the Holy Spirit whenever he or she embraces evil rather than good. However, to practice discernment when prophecy is claimed to be operating is not to sin against the Spirit. Rather it is to be wise rather than foolish. Gullibility is not next to godliness as far as the New Testament is concerned.

GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

The key text for grieving the Holy Spirit appears in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians 4:30: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." Context is crucial here. Paul's command not to grieve the Spirit

falls into that part of Ephesians dealing with the lifestyle that fits with the unity God's call for (Eph 4:1-3). There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph 4:4-6). Indeed the ascended Christ bestows his gifts for ministry with the aim creating one new man whose head is Christ (Eph 4:7-16). This is a unified reality. To live in ways that are in keeping with this new reality means putting off the characteristics of the former life and putting on, like a new set of clothing, the defining characteristics of the new one (Eph 4:17-29). A wardrobe change is needed. This is the context in which we read that the Holy Spirit of God is not to be grieved (Eph 4:30). And furthermore we learn that the Spirit either is the authenticating stamp, as it were, that we belong to God and that God's future for us will come to pass for us, or, perhaps, it is the Spirit who stamps us to the same effect. Francis Foulkes usefully comments, "The Spirit's presence now is the seal and assurance of the life and inheritance that Christians will possess fully in the end, and the very contemplation of that should lead them to purify their lives.... There may be here the thought also of the work of the Spirit as keeping the Christian inviolate under his seal for the day of redemption."³¹

Paul does not explain what grieving the Spirit precisely involves, but the context makes it plain that our moral life is the key.³² Negatively speaking, we grieve the Spirit by lying, giving place to the devil, stealing, speaking corruptly, in bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and malice (Eph 4:25-31). Positively speaking, we don't grieve the Spirit when we speak truth with our neighbor, are angry but don't sin with it, work, and use the product of our labor to do good to the needy, use speech to edify and impart grace to our hearers, are kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving (Eph 4:25-32).

The word translated "grieve" is *lupeō* and covers a range of meanings including "grieve," "suffer pain" and "suffer injury." Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians provides an example of the term in action when he counsels the Thessalonians not to grieve

over the death of loved one, as though they had no Christian hope (1 Thess 4:13). Paul has sadness in mind. Likewise he has sadness in view when he writes to those troublesome Corinthians, informing them in his second letter that he had determined not to come to them in sorrow or to make them sorrowful. What Paul wants instead is joy (2 Cor 4:2-5 with its use of a mix of *lupeō* and *lupē*).³³

This text has an important bearing on the question of divine suffering. The Spirit of God may be grieved. On this question of divine suffering B. B. Warfield had these relevant words to say: "Men tell us that God is, by very necessity of His nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducements from without; that he dwells in holy calm [the apathy axiom] and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human suffering or sorrows.... Let us bless our God that it is not true. God can feel; God does love."³⁴ He then adds to powerful effect, "But is not this gross anthropomorphism [more precisely anthropopathism]? We are careless of names; it is the truth of God. And we decline to yield up the God of the Bible and the God of our hearts to any philosophical abstraction."³⁵ Although Warfield is preaching on Philipians 2 his words may apply, with the necessary changes, to Ephesians 4:30. J. I. Packer adds to the chorus: "Let us be clear: A totally impassive God would be a horror, and not the God of Calvary at all. He might belong in Islam; he has no place in Christianity. If, therefore, we can learn to think of the *choseness* of God's grief and pain as the essence of his impassibility, so-called, we will do well."³⁶

If on the one hand, we claim to be Christian, yet live as though Christ had never come, then we grieve the Spirit. If, on the other hand, we live as though he has indeed really come and that we truly belong to him then we do not grieve the Spirit. Instead we exhibit the true righteousness and holiness that should characterize the restored images of God that we are in process of becoming (Eph 4:23-24). Such images should indeed imitate God as Paul goes on to argue (Eph 5:1).

A further feature of the context is important. It is a communal one. Paul's desire is to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Gordon Fee observes: "Life in Christ means to live the life of God in the context of 'one another.'"³⁷ How we behave in relation to one another is the crucial part of the story of not grieving the Spirit. As Max Turner rightly suggests in the letter to the Ephesians the horizontal dimension of Christian community, as well as the vertical one of communion with God in Christ by the Spirit, are integral to this letter.³⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Anselm of Canterbury made the classic statement: "Yet you have not duly estimated the gravity of sin."³⁹ I trust that in this piece we have indeed considered its gravity. For the outsider who blasphemes the Holy Spirit and the outsider who resists the Holy Spirit to the end the result is the same—no life with God in the world to come. To sin against the Spirit is to sin against God. For the insider quenching the Holy Spirit and grieving the Holy Spirit involves attitudes and behaviors that need to be eschewed. To so sin against the Spirit is to sin against the one who gave us an affection for Christ. This too is serious but not eternally fatal. Importantly, sinning against the Holy Spirit is yet further evidence that the Holy Spirit is no mere impersonal force at God's disposal but a divine person. You cannot grieve an influence. Here then we are encountering the awesome mystery of the triune God. The teaching in Scripture concerning sins against the Holy Spirit ought to be of significance to the teachers of the church in two respects. As Paul put it to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." The responsibility is twofold. Doctrine matters so keep faithfully to it. More specifically keep a close watch on your teaching about the Holy Spirit. Pay attention to yourself. Sinning against the Spirit is not only what others do.

ENDNOTES

¹Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées* (trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Harmondsworth, England: Penguin), 64.

²Ibid., 76.

³Ibid.

⁴Given a Trinitarian understanding of God, it would be an interesting question to pursue whether there are some sins which are specifically against the Father and some which are specifically against the Son.

⁵For more comprehensive discussions of these two sins see my *Engaging with the Holy Spirit: Real Questions, Practical Answers* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 19-34 and 35-49, respectively.

⁶Biblical citations will be taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

⁷Arnold G. Fructenbaum, "Israelology, Doctrine Of," *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: a Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies* (ed. Mal Couch; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 197-203.

⁸Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 519. My emphasis in bold. Oden writes from a Wesleyan perspective. Oden also write from his Paleo-orthodoxy position with copious quotations from the Fathers. In places in his discussion on blaspheming the Spirit his use of the Fathers makes it somewhat unclear whether the sin against the Spirit is an instant one or a persistent one. Cf. 520 the reference to Gregory of Nyssa and 520 the reference to Leo I.

⁹Interestingly, Scripture is full of familiar forms of argument. Another form of argument that Jesus seemed fond of was *a fortiori* (e.g. Matt 7:11). The great antithesis is Scripture is not between reason in the sense of argument and faith but faith and fear (Jesus e.g. Matt 8:23-27) and faith and sight (Paul, e.g. 2 Cor 5:6-7).

¹⁰R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 210, France also usefully points out: "The unusual use of *kingdom of God* (instead of Matthew's regular 'kingdom of heaven') serves not only to echo 'Spirit of God', but also to point out the contrast with the 'kingdom of Satan' (see on v. 26)." (Original italics.)

- ¹¹Alan R. Cole suggests: "Nevertheless, Jesus dealt graciously with them, in spite of their stubborn blindness." R. Alan Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 141. This is unpersuasive given Jesus' stinging rebuke in Matthew 12:34: "You brood of vipers."
- ¹²Dale C. Allison, Jr., "Matthew," *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Batron and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 861.
- ¹³J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide To Historic Christian Belief*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 245.
- ¹⁴John B. Nielson would disagree. He writes: "Jesus limits the unpardonable sin to the intention of attributing the work of the Holy Spirit done in Christ to the power of Satan" John B. Nielson, "Blasphemy," in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Richard S. Taylor; Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 79. However, on this view it is hard to understand why Jesus bothered to reason with his critics since they had just put themselves beyond the reach of divine forgiveness.
- ¹⁵John Paul II, *The Holy Spirit In The Life Of The Church And The World: Dominum et Vivificantem* (Boston: Pauline, 1986), 79.
- ¹⁶J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 245. J. Kenneth Grider argues similarly: "the most important thing to remember about the unpardonable sin is that anyone who fears that he has committed the unpardonable it, and is concerned about the matter, hasn't." J. Kenneth Grider, "Unpardonable Sin," in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Richard S. Taylor; Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 537.
- ¹⁷In my view this text is not relevant to the debate about irresistible grace between Reformed and Arminian theologians. For my reasons for this claim see my, *Engaging with the Holy Spirit*, 35-49.
- ¹⁸I. Howard Marshall comments on Stephen's accusation that his hearers were "stiff-necked" and "with uncircumcised hearts and ears": "Such obstinacy was particularly seen in *resisting the Holy Spirit* (Isa 63:10), who was regarded as speaking through the prophets and now through the Spirit-filled apostles and witnesses in the early church. There was a well-established tradition in Judaism that the Jewish people had been responsible for the deaths of *the prophets* (1 Kgs 19:10, 14; Neh 9:26; Jer 26:20-24; Luke 6:23; 11:49; 13:34; 1 Thess 2:15; Heb 11:36-38); Stephen takes up this accusation and repeats it." I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 155.
- ¹⁹My emphasis.
- ²⁰For more comprehensive discussions of these two sins see my *Engaging with the Holy Spirit*, 67-81 and 83-97, respectively.
- ²¹Commentators divide on the question of the general versus the particular. For example, Robert L. Thomas argues with reference to quenching the Spirit that, "In particular, this is his impartation of specialized capabilities for ministry to others in the body of Christ." Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), CD-Rom version, comment on 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22. However, F. F. Bruce treats 1 Thessalonians as a coherent unit of thought with quenching the Spirit as referring specifically to prophecy. Bruce's position is to be preferred.
- ²²Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 56.
- ²³For example, Robert L. Thomas argues with reference to quenching the Spirit, "When Paul commands, 'Stop putting out the Spirit's fire,' as v. 19 might literally be translated, he advocates the cessation of something already being practiced," Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," comment on 1 Thessalonians 5:19. However, F. F. Bruce maintains: "It is doubtful if we should press the use of the present imperative ... here and in v 20 to mean that the recipients are being told to stop doing something they have already begun to do. Like the positive imperatives in vv 16-18 and 21-22, the negative imperatives in vv 19 and 20 indicate what they must habitually do (or refrain from doing)," "1 Thessalonians," comment on 1 Thessalonians 5:19.
- ²⁴For this paragraph I have drawn upon my *Engaging with the Holy Spirit*.
- ²⁵The verb, *sbennumi* is used of quenching fire or things on fire (e.g. Matt 12:20, 25:3; Mark 9:44, 46, 48; Eph

6:16, Heb 11:34 as well as 1 Thess 5:19). See G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon Of The New Testament* (3rd ed; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), 403.

²⁶There is some evidence in Acts that prophets could so use letters. For example, take Judas and Silas as prophets and the letter of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22-32, especially vv. 30-32). I owe this insight to David Peterson. See his discussion, *Prophecy and Preaching: Acts and the Church Today* (Buxton: Fellowship of Word and Spirit, 1997), 5.

²⁷See D. A. Carson, *Showing The Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2003), 93-100, for a carefully qualified acceptance of Grudem's argument. Like Old Testament prophecy, New Testament prophecy exhibits both forthtelling of God's word and foretelling the future. On this, see especially, D. A. Carson, *Showing*, 92, n. 56.

²⁸The verb "dokimadzō" is use primarily of testing, proving, trying metals (e.g. Prov 8:10, 17:3 LXX) of other thing (e.g. Luke 12:56) and men and women (e.g. 1 Tim 3:10). See G. Abbott-Smith, *Manual*, 120.

²⁹Robert L. Thomas suggests: "Ponerou ('of evil') likewise presents two options: if it is taken as an adjective qualifying *eidous*, the phrase is 'evil kind,' or taken as a substantive, a practical equivalent of the noun *ponerias*, the phrase is 'kind of evil.' Though the anarthrous adjective in Paul is more frequently adjectival in force, the nature of the present contrast with *to kalon* (v. 21) resolves this particular issue in favor of the substantival use adopted by NIV," Thomas, "1Thessalonians," comment on 1 Thess. 5:22.

³⁰See David Peterson, *Prophecy*, 7: "The sequence of events in Acts 2 suggests that Peter is acting as prophet when he proclaims the gospel so powerfully."

³¹Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 142.

³²This is also the case in the Old Testament. This is not a new idea in the biblical testimony. Psalm 78 rehearses the history of Israel's disobedience up until the rise of David. Speaking of the wilderness period the psalmist says: "How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert" (Ps 78:40). Isa 63:10 is more precise: "But they [Israelites] rebelled and

grieved his Holy Spirit." In fact, a number of commentators have seen in Eph 4:30 a clear allusion to Isa 63:10. A different Greek word is used in the LXX version of Isaiah 63:10 (*paroxunō*: to provoke, to stimulate, to irritate). Paul's use of the full descriptor "The Holy Spirit of God" though does point to a deliberate allusion to Isa 63:10 with Paul correcting the LXX rendering of the Hebrew. See the discussions in Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 713, n. 175, and Frank S. Thielman, "Ephesians." in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 825-26.

³³The argument, that grieving the Spirit is offending the Spirit and therefore runs the risk of losing the Spirit may have support in early church commentary but not in the Pauline text. This is the argument found in early church literature beginning with the *Shepherd of Hermas*. See Dennis W. Johnson, *Grieving And Quenching The Holy Spirit* (Thesis; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993), 12. Johnson understands Eph 4:30 as referring to "the outrage and indignation of a king who discovers a traitor among his most loyal subjects," *ibid*, 129. However, comparing 2 Cor 2:2-5, 1 Thes 4:13 and Eph 4:30 makes his suggestion doubtful.

³⁴B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 570.

³⁵*Ibid*. Warfield knew great personal suffering in his life because of the chronic illness of his wife. This may account for his passion. See M. A. Noll, "B. B. Warfield," W. E. Elwell (ed.), *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1993), 27.

³⁶J. I. Packer, "What Do You Mean When You Say God?" *Christianity Today* (September 10, 1986), 31. Contra Packer, I would argue that God's knowing grief and pain flows from his essential nature as love and is not satisfactorily accounted for by Packer's voluntarist metaphysic "chosenness."

³⁷Fee, *Presence*, 713.

³⁸Max Turner, "Ephesians, Book of," 189-90. Turner, following others, describes the letter as the "crown of Paulinism."

³⁹Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* in *The Christian Reader* (ed. Alister E. McGrath; 4th ed., Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 298.