

“I cannot imagine that there are many pastors who have not heard each of the six questions that Graham Cole raises. Here are serious, careful, practical, theologically-alert answers. This book deserves the widest circulation.”

—D. A. CARSON, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Pneumatology has been sadly neglected in recent evangelical theology and, when it has been touched upon, it has trended toward either the speculative or the sensational. But here is a book on the Holy Spirit that is practical, relevant, balanced, and useful in the lives of God’s people everywhere. This book provides important grounding for a fuller theology of the Holy Spirit, and I commend it to all believers who are serious about the Christian life.”

—TIMOTHY GEORGE, Dean, Beeson Divinity School,
Samford University; Senior Editor, *Christianity Today*

“Drawing from the well of his extensive and rigorous study of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, Dr. Graham Cole gives refreshingly clear answers to six crucial questions that earnest Christians invariably ask about the Holy Spirit. The answers are sure to grace the church, because what Christians believe about the third Person of the Holy Trinity will determine how they live. This is an important, accessible, life-giving book.”

—R. KENT HUGHES, Senior Pastor Emeritus,
College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

“Dr. Graham Cole’s book makes a significant contribution to the life of the church. Uncertainty about the person of the Holy Spirit sometimes leads to division in the local church and often to confusion in the life of the individual believer. I have found in my pastoral calling that the challenges churches face about the doctrine of the Spirit all come back to the six questions Dr. Cole addresses. In fact, his subtitle is an accurate description of this insight-filled book—*real questions, practical answers*. Dr. Cole handles all the relevant

biblical texts carefully and accurately and then places his findings into a coherent theological framework. He distills the views about the Holy Spirit that have been held by brothers and sisters in Christ of the past. Then, with clarity and relevance, he points out how his biblical, theological, and historical findings might be applied to the concerns church people face in their daily lives and in their understanding of the triune God. I believe every pastor, Christian counselor, and lay leader should keep this book close at hand. When churches wrestle with division over contradictory views related to the work of the Holy Spirit, this book will provide lucid and succinct guidance. When individuals fear they have sinned against or grieved the Holy Spirit, Dr. Cole's teaching will provide clarity and encouragement. When church leaders long for their congregations to know the filling of the Spirit of God, they will find, in this book, wisdom. I recommend it highly."

—GREG WAYBRIGHT, Former President, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Senior Pastor, Lake Avenue Church, Pasadena, California

ENGAGING *with the*
HOLY SPIRIT
REAL QUESTIONS, PRACTICAL ANSWERS

GRAHAM A. COLE
Foreword by David Peterson

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FOREWORD

DESPITE THE MANY BOOKS that have been written on the subject in recent decades, the person and work of the Holy Spirit remains a fascinating area for further exploration. Graham Cole has focused his research firstly on ways in which we may sin against the Spirit, secondly on whether it is right to pray to the Spirit, and thirdly on what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Each chapter confronts us with important challenges about our relationship with the Spirit, either as believers or as unbelievers.

However, in fulfilling his aims, Graham has also enriched us with some valuable reflections on theological method. How do we handle the biblical evidence reverently and responsibly? How do we interpret the Bible's teaching in the light of many centuries of differing insights and opinions? In particular, can we agree on an approach to certain biblical texts about the Spirit? Graham shows us in practice how valuable it is to have a clearly defined and articulated theological method that takes the biblical text seriously, learns from others in the process of interpretation, and works hard at application to the contemporary context.

This is exactly what we hope for at our Annual School of Theology, where college graduates and others come together for a day to reflect on their ministries and to be inspired in their pastoring and teaching of others. We were blessed at Oak Hill by Graham's lectures in 2006 and it is my prayer that many readers will be similarly blessed by the publication of this expanded version of his work.

David Peterson

Principal, Oak Hill Theological College,
London

INTRODUCTION

IN THEIR 1967 PUBLICATION, *The Spirit within You: The Church's Neglected Possession*, A. M. Stibbs and J. I. Packer wrote: “‘No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Such was the reply of the Ephesian disciples to St. Paul’s question, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ (Acts 19:2). Their words express a state of mind to which the modern church, to put it mildly, is no stranger.”¹ The rise of the charismatic movement and the growth of Pentecostal churches worldwide soon made their comment out of date. In fact, twenty years later when Watson E. Mills compiled a bibliography of assorted works on the Holy Spirit, there were 2,098 entries.² One can only imagine how much larger such a bibliography would be by now. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is no longer neglected.

Even so, real questions remain concerning the Holy Spirit, especially with regards to sinning against the Spirit. What sort of questions? To start with, how may the Holy Spirit be blasphemed? This is a particularly important question, since it troubles numbers of Christians. It is the so-called unpardonable sin. Can Christians commit it, or is it the sin of the outsider? Again, how may the Spirit be resisted? Is this a sin that a person is even conscious of committing? What is its character? These questions arise from reading the biblical text. The next question does not. Rather it stems from the practice of some Christians of praying to the Holy Spirit. Ought we to do so? There are no biblical commands as such to pray to the Spirit. There are no biblical precedents. For example, we do not read of David praying to the Spirit in the Old Testament or Paul praying to the Spirit in the New. What are we to make of the

¹A. M. Stibbs and J. I. Packer, *The Spirit within You: The Church's Neglected Possession* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), 9. Note the subtitle.

²Watson E. Mills, *The Holy Spirit: A Bibliography* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), cited in Craig S. Keener, *3 Crucial Questions about the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 203.

practice? The remaining three questions return us to the text of the New Testament. What does it mean to quench the Spirit? How may the Holy Spirit be grieved? Finally, what does it mean to be filled by the Spirit? I have left this question to last as it ends the discussion on a positive note.

Such questions are the burden of this book, which began life as the Annual Oak Hill Lectures for 2006. Each question has a chapter devoted to it and may stand alone. In other words, the reader can begin anywhere. There is logic, though, to the sequence. The question about blaspheming the Holy Spirit is raised by the Gospels, that of resisting the Spirit by the book of Acts, and the rest of the questions emanate from the Epistles. Thus we move through the major kinds of literature found in the New Testament canon. “Gospel” and “apostle” is how the early church termed it.³ Only the book of Revelation as a literary genre is left out.

This brief work is an exercise in doing applied theology. At various points in the unfolding discussion I will draw attention to key elements in thinking theologically, and some of the implications for belief and behavior will be explored. The structure of each address will be the same: after an introduction I will draw attention to some past and present perspectives on the topic. Some of the great names of the past and present will figure: Augustine, Calvin, Owen, and Barth, to give only some examples. Next we engage the biblical testimony on the question before offering a theological reflection on what we have seen. All this will be followed by a brief conclusion, as will the work as a whole.

Thinking theologically involves several important components. Logically speaking, *the word of revelation* is foundational. Scripture as special revelation from God—albeit in human words—is the norm of norms. Scripture is the key to Christian quality assurance. If the ideas in this work are not faithfully and responsibly based in the Bible or consistent with the scriptural testimony then they ought to be rejected. However, having said that, I am not the first Christian convert after St. Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road

³See Donald Robinson, *Faith’s Framework: The Structure of New Testament Theology* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1985), chap. 2, “The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Apostle.’”

to Damascus. There is a great cloud of witnesses, past and present. *The witness of Christian thought* is another significant part of doing theology. We should learn from others, especially from their engagement with Scripture and their attempts to apply it to life's circumstances. Speaking of life's circumstances introduces a third vital element in the work of theology—what I like to term *the world of human predicament*. In biblical terms we live outside of Eden in the midst of the great rupture. We also live between the cross and the coming again of Christ. Classically put, we wrestle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are not yet in the world to come. Theology ought not to be left in some ethereal world like Platonic ideals. Heaven and earth need to connect. Making that connection is the *work of wisdom*. Wisdom is that activity, predicated on the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7), which brings the word of revelation, the witness of Christian thought, and the world of human predicament together in meaningful and practical relation.

The title of the book is *Engaging with the Spirit: Real Questions, Practical Answers*. The questions are both crucial and real. People ask them. In fact, one of them in particular, blasphemy against the Spirit, has been discussed from the earliest centuries of Christianity. And our answers ought to affect the practice of the Christian life, whether individual or corporate. As the wise say, theology without application is abortion.

chapter one

WHAT IS BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT?

I RECALL AS A YOUNG theological student doing pastoral visitation on Friday afternoons. One person on whom I called was very uneasy at my presence. She had been trained at a sister institution to my own theological college and ordained as a deaconess. She ministered until one day she was so angry with God—she did not tell me why—that she cursed him. Having done so, she was convinced that she had committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and had fallen irrevocably from God’s favor. She was now eternally damned. She left her ministry and her church and had lived in misery over the years since. The question of whether we have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit and thus have committed the unpardonable sin troubles many.

Sometimes preachers and writers discuss the question in ways that make this anxiety, especially for young Christians, very understandable. For example, Edwin H. Palmer writes:

Every sin and blasphemy may be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven (Mt. 12:31). If any reader of these lines commits this sin, he can never be saved. He will never have a second chance. He may read the Bible or hear the gospel

preached, but entrance to heaven is eternally closed to him. It is too late. God will never pardon. The whole church may pray for him, but it will never help because he has sinned a sin unto death (1 John 5:16). As a matter of fact, the church should not even pray for such a person (1 John 5:16).¹

Given such forceful language, the question we are addressing then is pastorally a very sensitive one. It needs careful handling. How shall we proceed?

We will look at what has been said about this sin in past times and also some suggestions found in the present. We next turn to the biblical testimony. In doing theology the pastor or theologian ought never to bind the consciences of others with less than the Word of God responsibly interpreted, taught, and applied. There is a moral dimension to doing theology. After that I will offer a theological reflection before concluding the chapter.

BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE SPIRIT: SOME PAST AND PRESENT PERSPECTIVES

According to Bruce Demarest, generally speaking, the term *blasphemy* “connotes a word or deed that directs insolence to the character of God, Christian truth or sacred things.”² However, with regard to the Holy Spirit in particular, Augustine thought that the biblical texts concerning the blasphemy against the Spirit raise “one of the greatest difficulties for theological understanding” to be found in Holy Scripture.³ Each of the Synoptic Gospels makes reference to this sin. In broad terms, blasphemy against the Son of Man may find forgiveness in this life (cf. Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:28; Luke 12:10), but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit finds forgiveness neither in this life nor in the life to come (cf. Matt. 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). It is an eternal sin. Hence it has become known as the unpardonable sin. Some other biblical texts have also been identified as describing unpardonable sins, if not the same one on view in the Gospels. These texts include the warning passages found

¹Edwin H. Palmer, *The Holy Spirit*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 165.

²B. Demarest, ‘Blasphemy,’ *NDOT*, entry on “Blasphemy,” *EIRC*.

³Augustine, “*Sermo 71: De verbis Evangelii Matthaei (XII 32)*,” in Michael Welker, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 214.

in Hebrews 6:4–8 and 10:26–31, which speak of falling away and “sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” Also 1 John 5:16 is adduced by some as further evidence of an unpardonable sin (“sin that leads to death”). References to this kind of sin, when read in the Gospels (or Epistles), have made many a sensitive Christian conscience very alarmed. What then is on view in these accounts, according to church leaders and theologians past and present?

A Sin No Longer Possible

One view, championed by some major figures in the early church, argues that since Jesus no longer walks the earth performing exorcisms, this sin is no longer a possibility. It was only possible before the ascension of Christ, but not after. Chrysostom (c. 347–407) and Jerome (c. 342–420) held this position.⁴ This ancient line of interpretation has some contemporary advocates. A dispensational variation of this view is that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was a specific sin of unbelieving Israel in the time of Jesus. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, for example, argues that: “The unpardonable sin, or the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, is defined, therefore, as the national rejection by Israel of the messiahship of Jesus while He was present and claiming He was demon-possessed”⁵ (the strange syntax is in the original). He claims further that: “The consequence for Israel is the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, fulfilled in A.D. 70” (the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans).⁶

A Sin Still Possible but Not in Every Aspect

According to Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof, there are a number of New Testament texts that are thought to refer to the unpardonable sin “or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The Savior

⁴Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 252. Not all the Fathers, of course, took this line. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–c. 395) thought that his contemporaries the Macedonians, who denied both worship of the Spirit and that the Spirit possesses divine glory, were in danger of the blasphemy against the Spirit, *On the Holy Spirit: Against the Macedonians*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers> (accessed August 29, 2005).

⁵Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “Israelology, Doctrine of,” ed. Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 198.

⁶*Ibid.*

speaks of it explicitly in Matthew 12:31–32 and parallel passages; and it is generally thought that Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26, 27 and John 5:16 [sic., actually 1 John 5:16] also refer to this sin.”⁷ After briefly examining the relevant New Testament texts, he concludes:

It is evidently a sin committed during the present life, which makes conversion and pardon impossible. The sin consists in the conscious, malicious, and willful rejection and slandering, against evidence and conviction, of the testimony of the Holy Spirit respecting the grace of God in Christ, attributing it out of hatred and enmity to the prince of darkness.⁸

He maintains that the Gospel texts about sinning against the Holy Spirit and Hebrews 6:4–6 and 10:26, 27, 29 and 1 John 5:16 are referring to the same sin. However, he offers a qualification; namely, that the warning passage in Hebrews 6 “speaks of a specific form of this sin, such as could only occur in the apostolic age, when the Spirit revealed itself [sic.] in extraordinary gifts and powers.”⁹

A Sin Still Possible

Edwin H. Palmer’s approach largely comports with that of Berkhof’s own. However, there is a major difference. Palmer, writing also as a Reformed theologian, sees Hebrews 6:4–5 as the grid through which to understand blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. He carefully distinguishes what is not the unpardonable sin: “Final Unbelief,” “Denial of Christ,” “Denial of the Deity of the Holy Spirit,” “Grieving the Holy Spirit,” and “Falling Away of the Saved.”¹⁰ The last sin on the list is impossible, since in his Calvinist theology the saints persevere to the end. Consequently, the blasphemer against the Spirit is not a Christian, but someone who has experienced the Holy Spirit’s working “though in a non-saving way.” This blasphemer has been enlightened (received a knowledge of the truth, as in Heb. 10:26). His example is Judas. The blasphemer has tasted of the heavenly gift (the gift is the life and work of Christ). Such persons have

⁷Berkhof, *Theology*, 252.

⁸*Ibid.*, 253.

⁹*Ibid.*, 254. Berkhof appears to be a cessationist as far as the charismata are concerned. Miracles as described in the pages of the New Testament are not part of the present church’s story.

¹⁰Palmer, *Spirit*. For the substance of this paragraph I am indebted to Palmer’s work, 165–71.

partaken of the Holy Spirit, but not in the sense that the Spirit has indwelt them. Rather they have experienced the Spirit's influence. His examples are Balaam, Saul, and Judas. This person has tasted the Word of God. Affection for the Word has been shown, yet that Word has not been embraced (e.g., King Herod). The powers of the age to come have been tasted (miracles have been seen as in Heb. 2:4) and yet these persons have fallen away and denounced Christ willfully (Heb. 10:26).

So, unlike Berkhof, Palmer argues that Hebrews 6 and 10 apply as they stand to today's world. (Palmer links Hebrews 6 and 10 together.) He writes:

This same sin can happen today as much as it did in biblical times. Although the age of miracles has passed, it is possible for modern man, enlightened by the Spirit of God and tasting that the Word of God is good, to rebel against Christ openly, brazenly and without remorse. This is especially true of those reared in orthodox Christian homes and churches where they have heard the gospel fully, plainly and properly over the years. It is possible for them to be warmed to the clear presentation of the gospel and then willfully, hatefully and openly to renounce Christ completely.¹¹

Like Berkhof, Palmer is convinced that the elect child of God cannot commit such a sin. The biblical warnings about it then are addressed to the outsider.¹²

Arminian theologian J. Kenneth Grider is not convinced that 1 John 5:16 is relevant to the discussion. According to him, the Johannine text refers "to a sin which carries the death penalty in civil law."¹³ The church is not necessarily to pray for someone so condemned, if such praying aims at the alleviation of the penalty. How Grider arrives at this view is not clear. As for the Gospel texts, these refer to that sin where a person knowing full well that the Holy Spirit is the source of Jesus' ministry attributes it to an evil

¹¹Ibid., 171.

¹²For a different view with regard to the Hebrews passages, see Mark E. Biddle, who argues that the passages are speaking about believers, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 29–30.

¹³J. Kenneth Grider, "Unpardonable Sin," ed. Richard S. Taylor, *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1983), 537. All contributions to this valuable resource are written from an Arminian stance.

spirit instead. Grider's Arminianism becomes especially apparent when he suggests that such a sin "is unpardonable because the person himself sets himself into this kind of stance and *will not let God transform his mind and forgive him*. It is therefore unpardonable more from man's standpoint than from God's—for we read elsewhere in Scripture that God will graciously forgive anyone who asks for pardon."¹⁴ Miroslav Volf argues similarly: "*There are no unforgivable sins. There are no unforgivable people.*"¹⁵ A reviewer of Volf's book on grace, John Wilson, rightly raises the question: "What about the sin against the Holy Spirit?" Volf's answer is: "That is the sin of closing oneself off to the One through whom God forgives all people and all sins."¹⁶ However, this approach seems to turn the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit into the sin of unasked-for forgiveness. Also writing from an Arminian stance, John B. Nielson maintains that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not to be confused with the sin leading to death of 1 John 5:16, nor with the apostasy referred to in Hebrews 6 and 10. He argues: "Jesus limits the unpardonable sin to the intention of attributing the work of the Holy Spirit done in Christ to the power of Satan."¹⁷

As can be seen in this brief survey of opinion past and present, there is much variety in interpretation. What then are we to make of the biblical testimony?

BIBLICAL TESTIMONY

In Matthew, Jesus warns the Pharisees about this sin. He has just cast out a demon. But their response is to attribute the exorcism to Beelzebub, the prince of demons. In the Matthean account Jesus counters: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28).¹⁸

¹⁴Ibid. (my emphasis). Grider's commitment to libertarian freewill is evident here, but it is questionable whether he has done justice to the thrust of relevant Gospel texts.

¹⁵Quoted in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, reviewed by John Wilson in *Christianity Today*, June 2006, 61 (original emphases).

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷John B. Nielson, "Blasphemy," in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, 79.

¹⁸With regard to Matt. 12:28, Max Turner points out: "This is striking, as no available Jewish sources directly connect exorcisms with the Spirit nor do they explicitly interpret exorcisms as evidence of the arrival of the kingdom," *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts Then and Now*, rev. ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 32.

The pericope ends with Jesus issuing a generalized warning which is addressed to “whoever [*hos*] speaks a word . . . against [*kata*] the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 12:32). In Luke, Jesus warns the disciples—not the Pharisees this time—about the sin. The warning is applicable to “the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit” (Luke 12:10).¹⁹ Mark does not name the Pharisees but refers to “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem” (Mark 3:22). The Markan account is more specific: “but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin—for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (Mark 3:29–30). For readers who are also preachers the differences are no surprise. The same teaching may allow multiple applications depending upon audience and occasion. Likewise here. There is no need to postulate one of these accounts as more primitive than the other or merely a reworking of the other by a redactor. What is common to the accounts is the rejection of Jesus and its consequences. But what does that rejection of Jesus entail exactly?

A common interpretation has been to suggest that on view in these accounts, whether addressed to Pharisees (outsiders) or scribes (outsiders, perhaps also Pharisees) or disciples (insiders), is unbelief or impenitence. In the patristic era Augustine held this view, as did Melancthon in the Reformation period.²⁰ The unbelief reading has had, then, a long history in the church. But is this interpretation too general in attempting to cover outsiders and insiders?

Another interpretation is that the sin refers to a specific deed: knowingly attributing Jesus’ miraculous works to Satan rather than to the Spirit of God. In contrast to blasphemy against the Son of Man (Jesus), which may flow from ignorance, this sin is malicious in intent. Good has become evil. Louis Berkhof championed this reading, as we have seen. The person who so describes Jesus is so locked into the abyss that the sin is unpardonable, either because God will not forgive such a blasphemy, or because such a person will never embrace the proffered grace of God.

¹⁹Turner convincingly argues that the parallel to Matt. 12:28 found in Luke 11:20 which speaks of “the finger of God” rather than “the Spirit of God” probably has the Spirit in view and is using an image drawn from the Old Testament, *ibid.*, 33.

²⁰Berkhof, *Theology*, 253.

A still further interpretation maintains that Luke 12:10 has the specific sin of apostasy in mind. Unlike the Matthean and Markan accounts, this text is unconnected to the Beelzebul controversy.²¹ Jesus addresses disciples (his *philoï*, “friends”) in this context. The backdrop is a warning concerning the Pharisees: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees” (Luke 12:1). (Is this leaven their false view of Jesus?) Then Jesus warns the disciples still further about not fearing those who can kill only the body as opposed to the soul (Luke 12:4–7). Against that background the disciples are encouraged to acknowledge Christ before others in contrast to denying him (Luke 12:8–9). Speaking a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be (Luke 12:10). Next, Jesus speaks of the disciples having to face the authorities for their faith, but the Holy Spirit will teach them what to say (Luke 12:11–12). Because of these elements in the context some have suggested that for Luke apostasy under hostile pressure is tantamount to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.²² However, it is difficult to account for Jesus’ intercession for Peter, Peter’s denial of Christ, and Peter’s subsequent reinstatement on this view (cf. Luke 12:8–12; 22:54–62; 22:31–34).

Yet another possibility has been suggested by H. A. G. Blocher. He argues that Christ was incognito in his earthly ministry. Consequently, failing to recognize his glory did not merit the culpability it would attract subsequent to his glorification. However, to ascribe the Spirit’s works to demonic power is fatal. The Spirit is the one who draws us to Christ without whom there is no forgiveness. Blocher contends: “To oppose the Spirit, refusing to be convinced by his witness to the only way of salvation, it [sic., is?] to deny oneself access to salvation.”²³

Still another suggestion, that of Graeme Twelftree, is that the incident narrated in Acts 5:1–5 concerning Ananias and Sapphira is a Lukan example of the unpardonable sin or blasphemy against the

²¹Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” *EBC*, comment on Luke 12:11–12: “This separation [from the Beelzebul controversy] not only raises questions of tradition history beyond the scope of this commentary but also makes exegesis of the passage difficult.”

²²See, for example, W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 79, and A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 182.

²³H. A. G. Blocher, “Sin,” *NDBT*, *EIRC*. This view was also championed earlier by G. C. Berkouwer, and Blocher acknowledges his debt.

Spirit.²⁴ The suggestion is an interesting one. A specific deed is on view in the text. Ananias and Sapphira sin against the Holy Spirit by misrepresenting how much they had donated to the needs of the community. However, the sin is never described *in situ* as blasphemy; rather it is described as a lie. Furthermore, there is no hint in the text that this is an unpardonable sin. Luke has a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit story in his Gospel, so that category was known to the writer. But he does not employ it in Acts. A better analogue perhaps is the Corinthian situation, where some had died because of their abuse of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:30). There are sins, it seems, that are worthy of removal of the perpetrator from this life. This does not mean necessarily that such persons are lost for ever.

One further suggestion is worth noting. Michael Welker contends that the blasphemy against the Spirit is nothing less than “disregarding God’s already experienced intervention [through Jesus] in the world of human beings. It means, *contrary to better experience*, not taking either God or oneself and suffering and liberated people seriously—and to do one is always to do the other.”²⁵ The Pharisees disregarded “the undeniable experience of diverse deliverance out of distress from which there is, by human standards, no escape.”²⁶ Jesus’ warning then is “directed against those who take the last hope away from others [because the Pharisees and scribes are religious authority figures their judgment of Jesus will be listened to by the poor], and who obstruct their own access to a last hope.”²⁷

A verbal blasphemy against the Son of Man may be forgiven. Paul, in his former life as Saul of Tarsus, is a case in point. Paul describes himself to Timothy as “a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” of the faith (1 Tim. 1:13). However, he also writes of his acting “ignorantly in unbelief.” As history shows, his was not a fixed, unalterable hostility to Christ. The grace of God transformed him (*hyperpleonasen*, grace “overflowed,” 1 Tim. 1:14). But the settled rejection of the Spirit’s testimony to and through Jesus is

²⁴G. H. Twelftree, “2. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” *DJG*.

²⁵Welker, *Spirit*, 219 (original emphasis).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 218.

²⁷*Ibid.*, cf. 212, 218. As Welker suggests: “. . . the judgment of religious experts carries a lot of weight.”

eternally freighted in its consequences.²⁸ What is clear in the various Gospels' accounts is the nexus between Christology and pneumatology in blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But as we have seen, the Ananias and Sapphira story in Acts 5:1–6 does not exhibit such a nexus. Moreover, there is no suggestion in the text that their sin resulted in more than physical death. However, there may well be other sins—in addition to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—that are unpardonable ones. For example, 1 John 5:16–17 may refer to such a sin. However, there is no hint in the text that either Christology or pneumatology or both are in mind. So although some (e.g., Edwin Palmer and Louis Berkhof) would like to link the Gospel texts with 1 John 5:16, it is too much of a stretch to do so (e.g., so Grudem rightly argues).²⁹

My own view is that Jesus warned the Pharisees and scribes that they were in danger of committing the sin, not that they had committed it (*enochos* may be translated “liable”).³⁰ They had attributed Jesus' work to the devil, but that mere attribution was dangerous, not yet deadly. More than a specific deed appears to be in mind as Jesus spoke. Persistent willful rejection of Jesus and thus of the Spirit's revelatory work through him, together with depicting such work as an evil, results in no forgiveness in this life, or in the world to come. O. E. Evans comments:

To call good evil in this way is to deliberately pervert all moral values, and to persist in such an attitude can only result in a progressive blunting of moral sensibility, the ultimate conclusion of which will be to become so hardened in sin as to lose for ever the capacity to recognize the value of goodness and to be attracted to it. To reach such a state is to be incapable of repentance; the sinner

²⁸I cannot subscribe to Donald G. Bloesch's view that “[t]he sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven, but it can be changed—from a curse to a blessing, or from an unmitigated curse to a curse with a blessing.” *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 218. He does not preclude the possibility of a passageway from hell to heaven as he believes in “Grace Invincible,” *ibid.*, 226, 232. Too much Barth, too little Bible, in my view.

²⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 509. Although Grudem is indebted to Berkhof at a number of points, he does not follow Berkhof in including 1 John 5:16 in discussing the Gospel accounts of blasphemy against the Spirit. With regard to his indebtedness, the only theologian referred to in his footnotes as well as in the main text is Berkhof.

³⁰See Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1 – 8:26*, WBC 34A, comment on Mark 3:22–30: “In so doing, Mark clarifies the seriousness of the charge in 3:22a through the warning of 3:28–29, but stops short of pronouncing final judgment on the scribes.”

has shut himself out, irrevocably and eternally, from the forgiving mercy of God.³¹

Even so, the very fact that Jesus reasons with his opponents suggests that they had not yet crossed the line of no return. In other words, simply saying “He has an unclean spirit” or even temporarily thinking it is not sufficient to have committed this calamitous sin.³²

In sum, the blasphemy against the Spirit is that self-righteous persistent refusal to embrace the offer of salvation in Christ: his ministry of restoring his Father’s broken creation. It is to set one’s face against the Spirit’s testimony to Christ as the Son of Man with the authority to forgive sins. The problem is the human heart settled in opposition to God. Without repentance there is no forgiveness.³³ As Mark E. Biddle suggests: “Thus, all three traditions [the Synoptic Gospels] regard failure to recognize Jesus as the ultimate sin.”³⁴ Of course, the person who persists in the view that Jesus was an agent of the prince of darkness would exemplify such a sin.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

As we wrestle not only with the meaning of the biblical texts but also with their import for Christian life and ministry today, we shall address two issues: the role of blasphemy against the Spirit texts and related ones with regard to the sensitive Christian and the pastoral care of the anxious believer.

The Role of Such Warnings

I remember being told as a young Christian that if I was worried that I had blasphemed the Holy Spirit and committed the unpardonable sin, then most probably I had not. I have heard and read that

³¹Quoted with approval by Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), 295–96.

³²See G. Burge, “Sin, Unpardonable,” *EDT*, 1017: “The meaning of this sin in Christian thought is best viewed as a total and persistent denial of the presence of God in Christ. It reflects a complete recalcitrance of heart. Rather than a particular act, it is a disposition of the will.”

³³John Paul II rightly argues in his treatment of the sin against the Holy Spirit: “If Jesus says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven either in this life or in the next, it is because this ‘non-forgiveness’ is linked, as to its cause, to ‘non-repentance,’ in other words to the radical refusal to be converted,” *The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World: Dominum et Vivificantem*, trans. Vatican (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1986), 79 (original emphases).

³⁴Biddle, *Missing*, 146, fn. 20.

advice many times since. As for those Christians fearful that they have committed the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—and I have met some who have been—there is great wisdom in the old advice that those troubled about committing this sin are the least likely to have committed it. For example, Louis Berkhof, writing as a Calvinist theologian, argues: “We may be reasonably sure that they who fear that they have committed it and worry about this, and who desire the prayers of others for them, have not committed it.”³⁵ And J. Kenneth Grider, writing as an Arminian theologian, counsels: “The most important thing to remember about the unpardonable sin is that anyone who fears that he has committed it, and is concerned about the matter, hasn’t.”³⁶ If that is so, then what role do such warnings—whether found in the Gospels or Hebrews or 1 John—play in the Christian’s life?

Before we address the question we need to note that there is a long-standing difference of theological opinion amongst Christians with a high view of biblical authority as to whether a genuine Christian could ever commit such sins and therefore be irredeemably lost. On the one hand, Calvinist theologians argue for the eternal security of the saints, for such is God’s sovereign grace. On the other hand, Arminian theologians believe that genuine believers may be lost, for such is the reality of human free will. In the light of the debate, Scot McKnight wisely argues that “because apostasy is disputed among theologians, it must be recognized that one’s overall hermeneutic and theology (including one’s general philosophical orientation) shapes how one reads texts dealing with apostasy.”³⁷ My own approach assumes that the genuine believer cannot be plucked out of the Father’s hand—as Jesus taught (John 10:29).³⁸

Let me approach the question in a somewhat oblique fashion,

³⁵Berkhof, *Theology*, 254.

³⁶Grider, “Unpardonable Sin,” 537.

³⁷Scot McKnight, “Apostasy,” ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 59. McKnight includes the blasphemy against the Spirit in his discussion.

³⁸Scot McKnight takes a very different approach, *ibid.* 60: “*Pastorally, apostasy needs to be muted by the sufficiency of God’s work in Christ and through his Spirit while it is held up as a rare, but real, possibility*” (original emphasis). In my view, the warning passages in Hebrews, in the writer’s own mind, are not in the first instance true to his knowledge of his Christian readers (Heb. 6:9–12). So why write them? Probably because the writer also knows that he could be wrong about some of them and that congregations are mixed multitudes.

but I hope in a way that offers a useful analogy. In Acts 27 we find a graphic account of a shipwreck that Paul experienced on his way to Rome to appear before Caesar. He is under guard. Because of the time of year, Paul warned the centurion that if they put to sea then lives would be lost (Acts 27:9–10). His advice was ignored by both the centurion and the ship’s owner. The ship meets a dreadful storm (Acts 27:13–20). A night came in which the situation seemed hopeless, but Paul had a revelation from God to share. An angel had told him that very night: “God has granted you all those who sail with you” (Acts 27:24). But the storm still raged and some of the crew decided to save themselves by using the ship’s boat to make for shore. However, Paul warned: “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (Acts 27:27–32). The centurion believed Paul. All stayed aboard. Eventually the ship was lost, but all on board were saved just as the angel had said (Acts 27:39–44).

How is this story relevant to our question? God is a God not only of ends (objectives) but of means (processes to get there). Paul had the Word of God to assure him that all would be saved and yet he issued a warning. That warning becomes the very means by which the divine promise comes to pass. Let me suggest that the warning passages in the New Testament function like that in the genuine Christian’s life. It is the genuine Christian who is troubled by them. The outsider is not. Sadly the warning passages about the blasphemy of the Spirit—whether heard preached or read in Scripture—then function as instruments of judgment for those who want to call good evil and who persistently dismiss Jesus’ kingdom claim on their lives. This is especially true of those characterized by that settled opposition to God and his Christ that I have argued is the blasphemy against the Spirit.

Pastoral Care

How then is the Christian troubled by such passages to be helped pastorally? Clarification may be the first need. Blaspheming the Spirit is not backsliding. According to Scot McKnight: “Many theologians distinguish between ‘backsliding’ (forgivable lapses of the

believer) and ‘apostasy’ (permanent, unforgivable lapses).³⁹ The distinction is sound. Christians do sin. John’s first letter makes that plain (1 John 1:9). A Christian who has been drifting away from Christ and is now troubled by that fact and is wondering if there is a way back needs to be assured that there is. Blaspheming against the Spirit is not simply to experience doubt.

In fact, there are different kinds of doubting in the New Testament. John the Baptist had doubts about whether Jesus was the coming one after all. He sent disciples to put the question to Jesus (Matt. 11:2–3). Jesus answered them, but at no stage criticized the Baptist for asking the question. Instead he praised John for his part in the unfolding story of salvation history. According to Jesus, the Baptist is the promised Elijah figure of Old Testament hope, “more than a prophet” and “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:9–14). But with Thomas, Jesus responds to his doubts with a rebuke. Thomas is to stop his unbelief and believe: “Do not disbelieve, but believe” (John 20:27). There is then doubt that arises from perplexity as in the case of John the Baptist, and then there is the doubt of unbelief as exhibited by Thomas. In both cases, Christology is the answer. Back to Christ, his person, words, and works.

Moreover, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not being angry with God. There are many laments in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. There is a common acronym used to sum up prayer found in evangelical circles: ACTS. “A” stands for adoration (e.g., Psalm 150). “C” is confession (Psalm 32). “T” is thanksgiving (Psalm 118). And “S” is supplication (Psalm 116). Each of these practices has good biblical warrant. What is missing is *the problem of pain*. What are God’s children to say to God when the divine government of the world seems derelict? How are they to relate to God when needless tragedy is experienced? I recall a friend who, while training to be a missionary, accidentally backed over his infant who was crawling on the lawn. Each parent thought that the other was watching out. ACTS seems most inadequate in such circumstances. But Scripture provides a language in the Psalms not only for our joys, sorrow over

³⁹Ibid., 58.

our sins, delight in God, and burden for others. The Bible also gives us the language of *lament* (Psalm 22). Lamenting to God, whether in anguish or anger, is not to commit the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is to be real. I suspect God prefers to be related to in anger by his children than not to be related to at all. ACTS needs to be LACTS to do justice to the pastoral wisdom of Scripture.

Anxious Christians who are wondering whether they have committed the unpardonable sin by blaspheming against the Spirit need to be helped to name what they are experiencing and pastored accordingly. They also need to know what the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is about; namely, a settled, persistent refusal to give Jesus his due and with it failing to acknowledge the truth of the Holy Spirit's testimony to God's saving project. And that project is to restore his creation, which centers on the Son of Man. I recall sharing the gospel the best I could with someone who, having heard me out, declared: "Your God is a bastard!" I have prayed for him off and on since. That attitude, unless repented of, will never lead to the Father's house but into a darkness that never ends. The very fact that a person asks anxiously whether they have sinned the unforgivable sin betrays a very different spirit. Hence the long-standing Christian wisdom, already mentioned, that the person who is so troubled is displaying the evidence that such a sin is not true of them.

CONCLUSION

Reading Scripture can be a sobering experience. God is not only love (1 John 4:8). God is also light (1 John 1:5). Scripture not only contains words of incredible invitation, love, and hope (e.g., John 3:16). It also presents warnings of the direst kind (2 Thess. 1:5–10). The blasphemy against the Spirit is found amongst the warnings, and it is a sin that has eternal consequences. Attributing the source of Jesus' healing power to Satan is to slander the Holy Spirit and is symptomatic of an attitude to God which, if settled and never abandoned, leads only into a darkness without end. This sin is against the Holy Spirit. Moreover, there is a nexus between Christology and pneumatology in this regard; Jesus' ministry is

deeply devalued in this sin. In my view, this is a sin of the outsider, not the insider. Any Christian disturbed as to whether they have committed this sin needs to be encouraged to think that they have not. Rather, such warnings, I suggest, are used by the Spirit to recover the drifting Christian and to encourage perseverance in the faith. The tender Christian conscience is a sign of hope, not evidence for despair.