

The Pneumatology of Brevard S. Childs

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia  
in Candidacy for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Religious Studies

University of Virginia  
May, 2014

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The past few decades have offered a strong resurgence in scholarship on the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. And however one might want to delineate its past path and continuing trajectory, one aspect certainly stands out: the movement's willingness to explore an enormous variety of hermeneutical methods.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I will suggest that there is an often overlooked and promising area of Christian thought for scholarship on Christian interpretation that is 'closer to home' than one might think. This area, in the Christian tradition, is called pneumatology. And while constructing a theology of the Holy Spirit and its relationship to interpretation would be a worthwhile task, mine will simply be to argue for its significance in the work of one scholar—Brevard S. Childs.

Scholarship on Brevard Childs, though often overlooked, is certainly not waning. Furthermore, his influence on scholarly communities can certainly be described as lasting.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, George Lindbeck opens an article on Childs exclaiming, "Brevard Childs is first among the scriptural scholars engaged in the postcritical retrieval of classic scriptural hermeneutics. Other retrievalists do not match him in quantity and quality of exegetical work."<sup>3</sup> And yet, for a biblical scholar who gained such attention from theologians and who held such outspoken theological interests, most scholars writing on his work appear to

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<sup>1</sup> This is by no means a phenomenon endemic to the past few decades. Diverse readings of the Marxist, ethnic, feminist, psychological, etc. variety have had a lasting presence. Though I would argue that treatments of so-called 'narrative theology' (I am thinking specially of Hans Frei's famous, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*) have freed an entire generation of scholarship from preoccupations with entirely external referents.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the recent festschrift, Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards, eds., *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). In fact, this is the second festschrift dedicated to Childs.

<sup>3</sup> George A. Lindbeck, "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, eds. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 26.

come at his legacy from the biblical side of the biblical-theological divide that he worked so persistently to unify.<sup>4</sup> This tendency is, in fact, understandable; Childs was an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar trained at the peak of the divide between biblical and theological studies. However, because Childs was so explicit in calling for a proper joining of biblical and theological labor, I believe there is a gap in scholarship on Childs, most notably in his theology of the Holy Spirit. There have been short essays published on his theology; theologians have utilized particular aspects of his work; and certainly his legacy as a teacher has impacted generations of theologians and clergymen. But an extended, thoroughgoing analysis of his pneumatology is, to my knowledge, non-existent. While I do not have the space to endeavor on a full-blown delineation of his theology, in this thesis I will give an in depth analysis to this one particular area of his work, that is, his theology of the Spirit.

This analysis will take three primary stages. First, I will give close readings of Childs' work pertinent to the topic of pneumatology. Part of this outlining will exist to defend the position that Childs' theology does display a robust pneumatology. Second, I will synthesize the first section to present a fully elaborated understanding of Childs' doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I will thoroughly describe what kind of pneumatology he offers. Finally, I will argue that Childs' project is empowered, that is, enabled, and made possible by his understanding of the third person of the Trinity.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course there has been some excellent work on Childs by theologians—particularly the aforementioned essay by George Lindbeck, “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation”. Also, Ephraim Radner and George Sumner, eds., *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1998).

### Setting the Scope of the Topic

An immediate challenge to my project is the sheer breadth and depth of Childs' interests. His work is complex, subtle, and covers enormous expanses of scholarly boundaries. A brief glance at a bibliography of Childs' work reveals publications from traditio-historical analyses of specific texts, to theological examinations of the Pauline Epistles, to critical evaluations on the exegesis of Patristic Fathers.<sup>5</sup> Of course, his publications are still not representative of his expansive interests. So, making the claim that a certain aspect of his thought is essential to his entire project might easily be countered with the simple question: which project? And how can one realistically connect a singular aspect of his theology to such a colossal endeavor? Well, that does appear to be the salient issue at hand. Does Childs' legacy, in fact, leave us with a coherent *system* of thought? The debates have been more heated in the past than they are now.<sup>6</sup> But embedded within this issue is exactly why a focus on Childs and his life of scholarship requires the attention of theologians; his work is a large-scale theology. The breadth of his *oeuvre* requires the acute consideration of systematic theology because Childs, though he saw a right division of labor within the academy, never bifurcated the textual with the ontological and epistemological. And thus evaluating his work demands the focus of systematic, theological thought. His work stands or falls on theological claims. One scholar helpfully notes, "If... we think carefully along with Childs about reading scripture, we will discover that his thinking presupposes and articulates a particular doctrine of God... Childs knew that to

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<sup>5</sup> See "A Traditio-historical Study of the Reed Sea Tradition", *Vetus Testamentum* 20/4 (1970): 20-31. And *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). And also, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 33-36.

<sup>6</sup> Again, note how the debate between Childs and James Barr is evident in large sections of each other's work. What is more astounding is the amount of misunderstanding between the two.

think about the Bible was to think primarily about God.”<sup>7</sup> So, not only must we think of his work as theological, we must also recognize that Childs understands the theological ‘aspect’ of his work to be inextricably connected with the rest of his thought—interpretation, historical analysis, ethics, canon, etc. Childs himself writes,

We have hitherto argued that biblical exegesis moves dialogically between text and reality. Biblical theology has a similar movement, but extends the hermeneutical circle in several directions. Its crucial focus lies in pursuing the different aspects of that reality testified to in multiple forms in the biblical texts of both testaments, and in seeking to establish a theological relationship.<sup>8</sup>

One can begin to see the relationship defined here; the witness of the biblical text and the reality to which it points must be held together in such a way that to understand one requires understanding the other.

In this way, my effort will be a focused examination into the coherence of Childs’ systematic thought through his use of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. By taking such a singular task, I will make an explicit departure from a qualitative analysis of his theological vision and legacy. I believe the important and foundational question to ask about Childs’ work is: does it offer a consistent theological framework? And how does it function?<sup>9</sup> My answer is, yes, it does offer a coherent theology, and much of it requires and initiates in a pneumatology. So, my scope here will be modest, but significant. Defending (or criticizing) Childs’ lasting impact is certainly an endeavor worth taking up, but there is, in my

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<sup>7</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “The Doctrine of God is a Hermeneutic: The *Biblical Theology* of Brevard S. Childs”, in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs*, eds, Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) 157.

<sup>8</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 86. The term “Biblical Theology” here is used by Childs in some continuation with earlier movements under the same title, but we must realize that his reconstruction is exactly that, a new way forward (that of course involves a retrieval of sorts) in understanding the relationship between scripture and theology. The term should not sidetrack us.

<sup>9</sup> One can begin to see a parallel here in the question: Is the Bible coherent? Of course, this is the central topic for the canonical approach—how to understand scripture as a unified, but two testament witness. Ultimately, this is, for Childs, more or less the same question, and we will revisit this later in unpacking the dialectic relationship between theology and scripture.

estimation, more to say about the ostensible organic structure of this man's theological, biblical vision. My goal will simply be to fill in one of the important gaps in scholarship on his work.

The following sections will take on two purposes: first to argue that Childs' work does provide a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. And second, I will argue that this theology of the Spirit is central to the coherence of his thought and that to overlook its importance is to fundamentally misunderstand his work. Much scholarship on Childs has concerned how and where his work fits in the greater field of biblical or theological scholarship, and also on discerning how his work relates to the burgeoning "theological interpretation of scripture" discussion.<sup>10</sup> These, I believe, are secondary tasks. More germane to the continuing analysis of his work is to simply understand the coherence of his work with precision and clarity. If there is in fact a gap in scholarship on his work, and there is more to be understood about how his theology functions, then it will be difficult to truly discern his lasting significance in the field, much more exactly where it fits, unless one thoroughly comprehends his vision.

### **The Holy Spirit Throughout Childs' Work**

In this section I will move chronologically through Childs' corpus and highlight the sections of his work that have important pneumatological contributions. While Childs never presented a fully elaborated systematic doctrine of the Spirit, the topic often comes to the fore whenever he enters into primarily theological discussions. Part of the purpose of this section will be to show that Childs' work does, in fact, display a certain doctrine of the

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<sup>10</sup> A helpful assessment of this topic can be found in Daniel Trier's treatment of the subject: Daniel J. Trier, "Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 16-31.

Holy Spirit. For the sake of space, I have used my own discretion in utilizing pertinent treatments of the topic.

*Biblical Theology in Crisis*

With the publication of *Biblical Theology in Crisis* came Childs' first extended expression of his vision for the relationship between theology and the Bible. Whatever opinions one might have about changes and turns in the structure of Childs' thought, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* is certainly his first publication to make a lasting outline of the central themes found throughout his greater publications. As Christopher Seitz will affirm, "Already in Childs's 1970 work, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*... one can see at least five features emerging that have proved durable and of sustained interest for a canonical approach."<sup>11</sup> In this piece, Childs outlines and defines the problems of the Biblical Theology Movement, explains why there is a need for something like what the old Biblical Theology Movement was, and then constructs his own vision of a Biblical Theology. He writes, "there is a need for a discipline that will attempt to retain and develop a picture of the whole, and that will have a responsibility to synthesize as well as analyze."<sup>12</sup> Of course, this is also where he first affirms with depth "that the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate context from which to do Biblical Theology."<sup>13</sup>

Though there is no lengthy exposition of a pneumatology in *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, we do begin to see the structure or the foreshadowing of the doctrine's importance

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 29. For more on the topic of the change in Childs' thought, see the introduction in: Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs: Biblical Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) 2-3. Driver eventually concludes, "That Childs' thought develops over time does not make it a moving target." I would agree.

<sup>12</sup> Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.



for his task. Childs writes in a discussion regarding the failure of prior doctrines of inspiration,

In our opinion, the claim for the inspiration of Scripture is the claim for the uniqueness of the canonical context of the church through which the Holy Spirit works. Although there are innumerable other contexts in which to place the Bible—this is part of the humanity of the witness—divine inspiration is a way of claiming a special prerogative for this one context. The Bible, when understood as the Scriptures of the church, functions as the vehicle for God’s special communicating of himself to his church and the world.<sup>14</sup>

So, the Holy Spirit here is active in this particular context. It is important to note that this context, the canon, is brought into the context of the church. Canon and church here are two separate entities, but canon cannot be understood or defined outside of its relationship and interaction with the church.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, canon requires the humanity of the church, and, of course, church requires canon in Childs’ understanding. The Holy Spirit is the active agent in this particular relationship that forms the inspired context.<sup>16</sup> Here we see an initial move to relate a doctrine of the Spirit to the expansive vision of church, canon, and continued witness.

Congruent with the last section, Childs closes *Biblical Theology in Crisis* with an extended and telling paragraph on the grand scope of his project. Because of this, it is worth including almost in its entirety:

The God of the Bible is not a theological system, but a living and acting Lord, the one with whom we have to do—now. We are confronted, not just with ancient witnesses, but with our God who is the Eternal Present. Prayer is an integral part in the study of Scripture because it anticipates the Spirit’s carrying its reader through the written page to God himself. Again, obedience is the source of the right knowledge of God... The ancient

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> This is an aspect often overlooked by critics of Childs’ work. Canon involves process, formation, as the church interacted with the formation of its texts. The complications of its two testaments will be accounted for later.

<sup>16</sup> Hence Childs’ affirmation of the need, albeit modified, for historical critical methods. The church’s relationship to canon requires a historical analysis precisely because of the “humanity of the witness.”

medium becomes a living vehicle into the presence of God only insofar as it becomes the witness of each new generation.<sup>17</sup>

Similar to the last section is an emphasis on God's activity in the Spirit. Yet the locus of divine action is different in this section. While the past paragraph emphasized the Spirit's activity in the contexts of church and canon, this paragraph outlines its work in the reader; the Spirit "carries" the reader from the witness of the text to the reality of God for every generation. This is foundational to Childs' theology, as one of the primary themes we will see as we continue is his affirmation that the "carrying" of the Spirit is one that occurs independently of frameworks or methods. For Childs, confessing a "living Lord", a phrase we will see repeatedly, means that an exegetical method cannot be established outside of divine activity. And this is precisely why "canon" is the context for theology and exegesis: its formation is a divine activity. More will be said on this topic later, but of immediate importance is noting the locus of the Spirit's activity in these two paragraphs: church, canon, and reader. The Spirit is actively engaged in each of these contexts, but specifically in this work Childs is concerned with showing the relationship of the Spirit to his concept of canon.

#### *The Book of Exodus*

In 1974, Childs writes *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, his first major commentary displaying a full blown 'canonical approach'. The format of the work is interesting in that theological reflections occur throughout the work, rather than in

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<sup>17</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 219. From the outset of his Biblical Theology project, Childs is outspoken in defining his work as "confessional." In *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, he writes, "'To speak of the Bible now as scripture... implies its continuing role for the church as a vehicle of God's will. Such an approach to the Bible is obviously confessional. Yet the Enlightenment's alternative proposal which was to confine the Bible solely to the realm of human experience is just as much a philosophical commitment.'" Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 9.

a single section. He moves sequentially through sections of *Exodus* and offers a translation, an outline of historical development, a treatment of the OT context (the bulk of the commentary), how the NT treats the given section, a history of exegesis, and finally, theological reflections. He makes no effort to defend his theory of interpretation in this work; rather he affirms that each of his sections is indispensable “to interpret the book of Exodus as canonical scripture within the theological discipline of the Christian church.”<sup>18</sup> It is important to realize that the structure is attached to his theological vision and marks a certain departure and continuation of the established historical-critical conception of exegesis: “serious theological understanding of the text is dependent on rigorous and careful study of the whole range of problems within the Bible which includes text and source criticism, syntax and grammar, history and geography.”<sup>19</sup> In ostensible contrast, he later writes, “Although the book [the Bible] in its canonical form belongs to the sacred inheritance of the church, it is incumbent upon each new generation to study its meaning afresh, to have the contemporary situation of the church addressed by its word, and to anticipate a fresh appropriation of its message through the work of God’s Spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the commentary Childs makes extensive use of critical scholarship, yet resituates it into a role that exists within an actual relationship to his theology, rather than completely trumping it. Child’s theological exegesis in this commentary, which includes a treatment of the Spirit, does not abandon the need for critical assessments of the biblical text. In this particular work, Childs’ explains the relationship between textual-critical

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<sup>18</sup> Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), xiii. Furthermore, he understands that “Whether or not the exegesis is successful cannot be judged on its theory of interpretation, but on the actual interpretation itself.”

<sup>19</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, ix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

scholarship and confessional theology not in abstract terms, but in the unfolding of his exegesis.

Each section in which Childs utilizes the Holy Spirit communicates a certain attachment of the Spirit to God's action in history. Naturally, this has important ramifications for interpretation. By Childs' understanding, the reader "is constantly tempted to understand life completely within the confines of human experience."<sup>21</sup> Of course, by "human experience" Childs is primarily aiming at critical methods. On the positive end, the reader "remains open in anticipation to those moments when the Spirit of God resolves the tension and bridges the gap between faith and history," because "the function of the canon is to bear testimony to God's work which cannot be once and for all accepted, but must be responded to in a renewed commitment of faith."<sup>22</sup> The Spirit of God manages the tension between what the text 'meant' within its biblical context, and what its witness is to the present community in which it speaks. In this regard, the Spirit has a way of legitimizing both historical-critical inquiry and witnessing to the newness of a community's given situation in time. Of course, he does not elaborate on exactly how this action of the Spirit occurs; the book is an exegetical commentary of Exodus, not a volume on traditional systematic theology.

Later in *Exodus*, Childs names the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ, rather than in the aforementioned quote where he describes the Spirit as "the Spirit of God." Here the Spirit takes on slightly different characteristics. The context here is a theological reflection on the Decalogue, and among these reflections Childs asserts,

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

The church strives to be obedient to the will of God through the gift of the Spirit of Christ, which continues to open up new and fresh avenues of freedom. This transformation of the law through Jesus Christ guards against both a deadening legalism and an uncharted enthusiasm in which the life of the church in and for the world is endangered.<sup>23</sup>

The Spirit of Christ is a gift that enables “new and fresh avenues of freedom” in the church’s striving to follow the will of God. Childs’ is not overly descriptive in this section, but he is clear that in this context, freedom has something of a double meaning. On the same page he writes that the theological challenge for today is to “bear witness to the divine will in a man-centered society to the end that man may be freed to fulfill his authentic role.”<sup>24</sup> This “authentic role” is freedom from utter solipsism through following the will of God. Childs maintains that the Spirit of Christ opens this avenue. And part of the Spirit of Christ opening this avenue is a “transformation of the law through Jesus Christ”, meaning a fulfillment. So, this Spirit opens avenues of freedom both by enabling obedience and by fulfilling the law as the Spirit of Christ. In accordance with the past understandings of the Spirit, the Spirit of Christ enables freedom in each new context in which the church finds itself, and yet, as Spirit of Christ, it is distinct in facilitating freedom.

Finally, near the end of the Exodus work, Childs discusses the apostle Paul’s treatment of the renewed Covenant, and closes the discussion in this way, “Paul’s interpretation of II Corinthians 3 is a classic example of a genuine theological dialectic. He brings *to* the text the perspective of faith which had learned to hope in Christ, but he brings *from* the text a witness which conversely forms his understanding of God and shapes

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>24</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 439. In this quote Childs’ use of the masculine pronoun is not mine. I have only included his non-gender neutral language for the sake of not altering his words. My use of pronouns is gender neutral throughout.

the Christian life through his Spirit.”<sup>25</sup> Childs argues that Paul displays a dialectic pattern of theological thought, or a true hermeneutical circle—a bringing to and from the text. Clearly, Childs also attaches a pneumatology to this dialectic. The Spirit forms and shapes the life of the Christian as well as the understanding of the text’s witness. For Childs, the Spirit is holistically active in the hermeneutical pattern. Differing slightly from *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, where Spirit is related to canon, Childs’ Exodus work outlines the action of the Spirit of God and Christ in the broader aspects of the exegetical, hermeneutical process for the reader in every new historical context.

*Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*

By 1992 Childs offers the largest and most theologically systematic volume of his career, the magisterial *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (BTONT)*. The book is a bold response to the interpretive crisis that he remains preoccupied with for decades. Walter Brueggemann writes of it in *Theology Today*, “It is an achievement worthy of his passion, erudition, interpretive sensitivity, and courage.”<sup>26</sup> Brueggemann says the commitment of the work “is to move very far toward systematic-dogmatic theology... to shape the reading of texts for ready use in systematic categories.”<sup>27</sup> Of course, Brueggemann is leveling this comment at Childs in a somewhat critical fashion, but the thrust of it is exactly right; *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (BTONT)* is deeply and unabashedly theological.<sup>28</sup> And yet, as one might expect, Childs makes no move to

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 624. The emphasis in this quotation is mine.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Against the Stream: Brevard Childs’s Biblical Theology,” *Theology Today* 50 (1993): 279.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>28</sup> The critical side of Brueggemann’s comment obviously resides in a wariness to push a dogmatic lens onto the biblical text, but this debate is not germane to our discussion here. The lasting, but

construct a theology apart from extended reflection on the biblical text itself, thus making the work enormously optimistic in its scope—a biblical theology of the entire Bible.

Much of the discussion on the Holy Spirit in *BTONT* is similar to other treatments of the topic in past volumes, but there are a few distinct and revealing contributions in this work, not to mention a far more thoroughgoing handling of the subject. With *BTONT* and *The New Testament as Canon*, Childs expresses a greater interest in the connection between the Spirit and theological exegesis.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, *BTONT*, I would argue, proves Childs' interest in a robust pneumatology and not simply a referential interest in the subject as a Christian interpreter of the Bible.<sup>30</sup> What was once implicit in his past publications now becomes explicit.

Of immediate importance to the current task is Childs's use of John Calvin. This is the first time in Childs' larger work that we see the full extent of his use of Calvin. Much of what Childs notes regarding Calvin emerges later in the volume, not just in theory or methodological discussion, but also in exegetical practice. This short section, however, is devoted entirely to describing Calvin's work as a biblical theologian, and in it Childs' admiration for him becomes immediately apparent. He outlines Calvin's hermeneutics in this way: "it is only by the illumination of divine grace, 'by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit', that the word is heard and understood (*Inst.* I. vii. 12). Moreover, Calvin is at pains to make clear that word and spirit are not to be separated, but only through the biblical

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altogether generous Childs/Brueggemann debate continues for years after *BTONT* is published. It is worth noting that Brueggemann is often very vocal in his respect for Childs' work.

<sup>29</sup> This is natural, of course, because these two volumes, published within two years of each other, display a true leap in the development of his affirmation of the wedding of biblical and dogmatic theology.

<sup>30</sup> Also, the sheer amount that Childs uses Calvin is telling. In the volume, Childs references him at length no less than ten times. See *BTONT*, 730.

text does the Spirit illumine.”<sup>31</sup> For Calvin, the Spirit completes the task of the biblical interpreter, which is “to pursue the subject matter of scripture, the *scopus* of which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>32</sup> The Spirit enables the text to witness to Christ as the reader engages the text, and furthermore, this comes to the reader as a motion of grace. Childs emphasizes this aspect of Calvin’s thought in his section, and then continues throughout *BTONT* to adapt it to his own biblical theology. He writes later in one of the most revealing passages of the book:

Biblical Theology seeks not only to pursue the nature of the one divine reality among the various biblical voices, it also wrestles theologically with the relation between the reality testified to in the Bible and that living reality known and experienced as the exalted Christ through the Holy Spirit within the present community of faith. These two vehicles of revelation—Word and Spirit—are neither to be identified, nor are they to be separated and played one against the other.<sup>33</sup>

And just a paragraph later, he voices a similar theme; “The true expositor of the Christian scriptures is the one who awaits in anticipation toward becoming the interpreted rather than the interpreter.”<sup>34</sup> This waiting is of course, not a hopeless waiting, but “an *expectation* of understanding through the *promise* of the Spirit to the believer.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, illumination of the Spirit can be anticipated and hoped for because it is “promised by Christ to his church.”<sup>36</sup> It should be more than apparent that Childs’ project at this point sounds unmistakably like aspects of Calvin’s theology.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 48.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 40. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>36</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 722.

<sup>37</sup> Though Childs certainly utilizes much of Calvin’s thought and vision, he is in many aspects not a Calvinist. As Christopher Seitz writes, “Childs is no more a ‘Calvinist’ or ‘Lutheran’ or ‘Catholic’ reader



This retrieval of Calvin's understanding of interpretation as grace through the Spirit will become increasingly central to Childs' thought, and is worth our attention here because as we eventually move to outline Childs' pneumatology, Calvin's influence will give us greater clarity into the doctrine's function. Also, because Calvin's theology of the Holy Spirit is often more explicit than Childs' own treatments, understanding certain aspects of Calvin's use will give a fuller sense of Childs' own theology.

*The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*

The final publication in our review of Childs' pneumatological contributions is his last book, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, published posthumously in 2008. *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul* offers Childs' most extensive, complex, and technical treatment of the Spirit. It offers an extension and expansion of his prior methods and conclusions found in *The New Testament as Canon*, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, and *BTONT*. Evaluating the book's contributions to Pauline scholarship is complicated and debated, but for our purposes, the book makes helpful contributions to an understanding of Childs' pneumatology.<sup>38</sup> Much of the book is spent situating his own work within current Pauline scholarship, and the unique aspects of Childs' understanding of the Spirit crystallize in his treatments of scholars such as Richard Hays, Ernst Kasemann, Wayne Meeks, Frances Young, and others.

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than he is a canonical reader, and frequently there is sympathetic overlap." *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 48. Seitz simply means here that Childs is no more trying to reconstruct one theological vision of a pre-critical era than any other.

<sup>38</sup> For a negative review, see, Matthew W. Bates, "Book Review: *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 40:57 (2010): 57, 58. Bates disagrees here, among other things, with the priority given to Romans as a theological aid for understanding the rest of the Pauline corpus. Though worthwhile, this debate is not immediately important for our current task of outlining Childs' use of the Spirit.

Child's longest sections on the Spirit occur in his chapters "Life in the Spirit" and "Community Gifts and Worship" which both manage the subject of the Spirit from a canonical approach specifically within the Pauline corpus. He sets the topic of life in the Spirit by positioning Romans 8 in dialogue with Galatians 5, then by exegeting 2 Corinthians 3. Later he addresses gifts of the Spirit in a similar way, but focuses on the relationship between Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. Obviously, he focuses on these chapters because of their extended discussions on Spirit. He points out that in Romans 8, the word *pneuma* "occurs twenty-one times in the chapter and offers the apostle's most profound explication of the indwelling of God's Spirit as the divine fulfillment of his promise of freedom in Christ."<sup>39</sup> Through Romans, Childs argues, one can best discern the role of God's Spirit in all of Paul's other writings.<sup>40</sup>

What Childs makes abundantly clear in his exegetical portrayal of the Spirit in *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul* is that the Spirit is the actual living presence of God. This has a few important ramifications for Childs. First, the Spirit enables a new way of obedience for humanity. Because the Spirit presents itself to humanity as the presence of Christ, following the law becomes transformed—not replaced, but transformed. Second, the Spirit empowers the Christian to act and understand. The Spirit is not simply a revealing of the character and will of God, but is the will of God empowering that of man—both to understand and to act. As Childs states, "the Spirit alone empowers the confession that

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<sup>39</sup> Brevard Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 114.

<sup>40</sup> Childs duly notes that this claim is controversial. The role of Romans in the greater Pauline corpus is subject to much historical critical analysis. Either way, Childs plainly questions the "widespread axiom of modern biblical studies that attention to the chronological relationship between two parallel texts provides the key to understanding a text's growth and thus its theological meaning." Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 117.

Jesus is Lord.”<sup>41</sup> As a presence, the Spirit moves with God’s people empowering them to understand, believe, obey, and confess.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the presence of the Spirit exists in the witness of the canon, making revelation occur within and through the tensions of the biblical text. In sum, the Spirit can communicate about God as his presence; it can empower obedience as the Spirit of Christ; and it utilizes the actual text of the biblical canon to perform both of these tasks. All three of these aspects deserve further elaboration here and elsewhere.

In Childs’ understanding, the Spirit in the Pauline corpus has much to do with the event of Christ’s death and resurrection. His descriptive language concerning the Spirit consistently deals with the concept of freedom: “God’s Spirit in Christ Jesus has set humanity free from the law of sin and death;”<sup>43</sup> “the freedom of the Spirit-filled life gained by the victory of Christ;”<sup>44</sup> and “the Spirit filled life of the liberated community.”<sup>45</sup> Obviously much of this language is from the Pauline text itself, not strictly that of Childs, and a result of this close exegesis is a focus on the Spirit and justification. Childs points out that the Pauline language regarding Spirit implicates intercession both from God to Christ and from Christ to humanity. Because the Spirit of God is in Christ incarnate, the Spirit is thus “the power that sets the human in the presence of the exalted Lord.”<sup>46</sup> And in this way, “the Spirit produces a filial union with God, enabling us [the church] as heirs to

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<sup>41</sup> Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 140.

<sup>42</sup> This claim is similar to Richard Hays portrayal of the Spirit in: Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989). For Hays, the Spirit acts within the members of the church community to interpret correctly. What Childs wants to navigate away from is a position where revelation occurs primarily through the community of believers rather than the biblical witness.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

address God as father.”<sup>47</sup> Childs describes a scenario where the Spirit is both active in the justification of humanity and is also active in freeing individual humans from the activity of self-justification. Humanity encounters a living knowledge of God through the action of the Spirit of Christ unifying God to humanity.

With this treatment of the Spirit, Childs jumps directly into the Pauline tension of law and gospel, or as he prefers to phrase it, spirit and letter. While Childs’ technical debates within current scholarship are helpful in positioning certain theological positions, the truly important contribution to our outline of Child’s pneumatology is his depiction of the Spirit’s role in human obedience. The Spirit, by enabling the presence of God to humanity, reconfigures the nature of obedience. “The Christian lives under this transformed law, in the sense not of a *nova lex* but of the active presence of Christ’s Spirit leading the Christian, both individually and communally, in obedience.”<sup>48</sup> What Childs does not want to do here is pit Spirit, as a NT concept, against Law, as an OT/HB concept. This is why he is careful to use the word “transformation” as descriptive of the law rather than terminology such as “replace”, or “abolish.” The Spirit does not erase the law, but is the communication of God functioning in a similar way to the law. And yet it is a true transformation because the Spirit is not simply the communication of God, but is the Spirit of God—his presence. And so Childs reconfigures this dividing line between Spirit and letter by drawing it through the entire canon and the history of God’s people. His own words are helpful in construing it with clarity: “The law of Moses remains for Paul good and holy, but because of human sin has become misconstrued as “letter,” causing Israel to

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

stumble. Thus the law functions on both sides of the great divide between letter and Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> In Childs’ depiction, the law is not the problem within a Pauline paradigm; human sin is the problem. And thus Spirit and law are not caught in an established binary of opposition, but the law of Christ is an “ontological transformation of the Mosaic law”<sup>50</sup> because of Christ’s death and resurrection. Constitutive of the law’s transformation in the Spirit is the activity of the Spirit empowering the activity of humanity. Humanity does not become perfect, but is perfectly justified and freed to act in obedience as the Spirit acts on behalf of humanity.

The final important feature to discuss concerns the locus of the Spirit’s action. Childs is specific about this location: “The Christian church is transformed through a Spirit-filled reading of its Scriptures. The role of the written Word is not replaced by an ‘embodied community,’ but continues to provide for continual guidance through the work of the Spirit.”<sup>51</sup> That is, the Spirit transforms the church through its activity in the scriptures. The Bible is not replaced by the activity of the Spirit revealing God and empowering the church, rather the Spirit acts in scripture to reveal and empower. This of course does not mean that the Spirit cannot act in freedom; Childs makes no claim against such an understanding. His concern is that the community might be pulled into an independence from the normative communication of God through the scriptures. Childs

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 138. Childs attributes his argument on the relationship between letter and Spirit to Ernst Kasemann. See Ernst Kasemann, “The Spirit and the Letter” *Perspectives on Paul* (London: SCM, 1971), 158-66. We will go into greater detail regarding this position and its relationship to canon in the next section.

<sup>50</sup> Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 136. This position would be in contrast to that of Hays, who argues in the aforementioned, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, that the Spirit acts within the community of believers to interpret their own sacred scriptures. For Childs, this turns proper interpretation of the scriptures into a calcified method of listening properly for the promptings of the Spirit rather than a turning to the text itself.

continually affirms in this section that the action of the Spirit is best understood in and through the canon. The Spirit communicates God's presence through the two-testament witness and also empowers obedience through this witness.

In sum, it should be clearly established by now that the topic of the Holy Spirit is extensively present throughout Childs' publications. This thorough outlining should accomplish two things. First, it should be without doubt that Childs does, in fact, offer a pneumatology in his own specific, exegetical manner. His work is a theology, and part of this theology is a pneumatology. Second, I have made clear at least three aspects of this theology of the Holy Spirit. For Childs' the Spirit is simultaneously the presence of God and the presence of Christ. The Spirit is active in the Triune God's economic engagement with human history. And finally, this Spirit must be understood in relation to the witness of the two testaments. If we are to truly understand each of these components, we will need to delve into each with greater clarity.

### **Synthesizing Childs' Pneumatology**

Obviously, the reason we have made such a long lap in covering all of Childs' work on the Spirit is due to the form of his *oeuvre*; he is a biblical scholar and scriptural theologian. He is certainly no twentieth century dogmatist. And it follows that since we are after a condensed pneumatology and its relation to his greater project, we will need to do some synthesizing and uncovering. This means our next task will need to both pull together the material that we just reviewed and it will need to fill in Childs' short descriptions of his pneumatological positions.<sup>52</sup> In other words, we will look to some of his

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<sup>52</sup> Childs' understands thrift of words to be a mark of quality in theological exegesis. He even writes, "The chief excellency of a biblical commentator lies in lucid brevity." *BTONT*, 47.

primary sources to discern more coherently his vision of the Spirit and how it relates to his overall project. Of course, I will argue that this will ultimately reveal the enormous coherence of his theological task and will ground his pneumatology in a centrally important position. The section as a whole will be organized around three important discussions: first, the relationship between Spirit and canon, then the relationship between Spirit and a rule of faith, and finally in the relationship between Spirit and Church.

### *Spirit and Canon*

At the center of Childs' theology of the Spirit is its depth of connection to canon. This is indeed no surprise as Childs continuously draws out the theological aspects of the term. It is not simply "a list of official authoritative books resulting from the exclusion of those writings deemed noncanonical."<sup>53</sup> More holistically, "the term serves to focus attention on the theological forces at work in its composition rather than seeking the process largely controlled by general laws of folklore, by socio-political factors, or by scribal conventions."<sup>54</sup> The canon, by Childs' definition, must be understood attached to the theological foundations that ground its witness, namely that it was received and collected with a Christological referent.<sup>55</sup> In this way, we must note "Childs' frank recognition that

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<sup>53</sup> Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 4 n. 4. Here Childs is positioning himself against Albert Sundberg, Lee Martin McDonald, and James Sanders, who all define canon in this narrow sense. This discussion is important and an understanding of "canonical shaping" will become more clear as we continue. For more detailed descriptions regarding the concept of canon, see Brevard Childs, "The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies," *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005): 26-45. And also, Christopher R. Seitz, "The Canonical Approach and Theological Interpretation," *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Craig Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, Al Wolters; Scripture and Hermeneutics 7; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 71. Childs elaborates, "The term canon points to the received, collected, and interpreted material of the church and thus establishes the theological context in which the tradition continues to function authoritatively for today." *BTONT*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> One will remember that we introduced this topic earlier in the section on *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. "The ancient medium becomes a living vehicle into the presence of God only insofar as it becomes the witness of each new generation."<sup>55</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 219.

canon is unavoidably a dogmatic concept.”<sup>56</sup> Not only does he understand it to be a dogmatic concept, but also he asserts that one will necessarily have a dogmatic stance about canon whether it be historicist, postmodern, etc. Regardless of the stance one chooses, Childs maintains, as we shall see, that canon exists in a dialectical relationship to church, and this dialectical relationship is sustained by the Spirit of God. For Childs, the Spirit shapes how the church has received the canon, by pointing to Christ, and the canon exerts the pressure required for the church to produce the Trinitarian theology that informs an understanding of pneumatology. First I will outline how the canon produces a Trinitarian theology and thus a pneumatology.

Childs, at the outset, recognizes obvious problems with developing a Trinitarian theology from a two-testament canon; “the Bible does not contain a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>57</sup> Certainly there is a plenitude of responses to this longstanding theological issue, but a canonical response navigates the issue in a particular way. Kavin Rowe, borrowing much of his language and ideological framework from Childs, implements the word, “pressure.”<sup>58</sup> He writes, “Traditional Christian exegesis understood its theological reflection to be responding to the coercion or pressure of the biblical text itself.”<sup>59</sup> Note the unique language here. Theology, even as it is construed by humanity, is *pressured* into existence. Rowe will eventually argue that the tension between the two testaments forces a specific kind of theological reflection, a theological consideration that is

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs: Biblical Theologian for the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 29.

<sup>57</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 375. Much of my thought here is in large debt to Rowe's essay, which excellently elaborates on Childs' theological work and instinct.

<sup>58</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11:3 (2002). Rowe notes that he takes this particular word and its use from Childs at the very beginning of the essay.

<sup>59</sup> Brevard Childs, “Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6:1 (1997): 17.



“coerced” and results in the development of a robust Trinitarian doctrine. The sum of his argument moves as follows.

The syntax of the Christian Bible refers to God in such a way that Christians must acknowledge some level of God’s identity as triune.<sup>60</sup> Such a Trinitarian development is what Childs calls a depiction of the economic Trinity, that is, “the attempt to describe God’s identity merely in terms of his acts, apart from his being.”<sup>61</sup> Scripture witnesses to the Trinity’s revelatory action in time through divine activity. And yet, Childs writes that to only focus on the economic Trinity “is not a serious theological option for either Biblical or Dogmatic theology. The subject matter itself requires that proper theological understanding move from the biblical witness to the reality itself which called forth the witness.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, the economic Trinity, acting in the world and in the witness of scripture, demands reflection regarding being or “immanence.” Childs demands that a Trinitarian theology include adequate reflection on matters of ontology. He calls for this because the canon witnesses to God in a particular way; it takes a form in its two testaments. And this form exerts a certain pressure that emerges between the two testaments. If both discrete witnesses—Old and New Testaments—are held together then one must reckon with the monotheism of the Old Testament and simultaneously uphold the Trinitarian syntax of the New. To affirm both truths forces reflection on substance and ontology—issues the early church made great efforts to answer cautiously and thoroughly.

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<sup>60</sup> There is not sufficient space to enter into this position with adequate exegetical depth, but Rowe makes his own lengthy and thorough argument for this in, Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 370.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

“Pressure” is indeed an apt term to describe the situation. Rowe lucidly describes what it produces:

The biblical text is not inert but instead exerts a pressure (“coercion”) upon its interpreters and asserts itself within theological reflection and discourse such that there is (or can be) a profound continuity, grounded in the subject matter itself, between the biblical text and traditional Christian exegesis and theological formulation. Thus... the two-testament canon read as one book pressures its interpreters to make ontological judgments about the Trinitarian nature of the one God *ad intra* on the basis of its narration of the act and identity of the biblical God *ad extra*.<sup>63</sup>

This vision is strikingly similar, Rowe notes, to a statement by Ernst Kasemann, who Childs uses regularly in his later publications. Kasemann writes, “God’s power... is not silent but bound up with the word. It speaks... so that we experience the pressure of its will, and, by means of the Gospel, sets us in the posture... ‘before the face of Christ.’”<sup>64</sup> The essential point in both of these quotations rests in the description of God’s action and power acting *within* the tension and textures of the canon to force reflection by means of confrontation. God’s action within the canon draws the reader to engage with the text’s subject matter, Christ.<sup>65</sup>

What is remarkable about examining both of the aforementioned quotations side by side is how Kasemann progresses Rowe’s (and thus Childs’) use of the word “pressure.” Kasemann describes this pressure as “God’s power... bound up with the word.” This is not

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<sup>63</sup> Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” 308. Rowe is assuming here that one does not want to separate the immanent Trinity from the Economic. This is not the place to properly address such an issue, but it the separation of the two is certainly a difficult ontological issue to navigate.

<sup>64</sup> Ernst Kasemann, “‘The Righteousness of God’ in Paul,” *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 168-82.

<sup>65</sup> Counter to what one might initially think about this position, it paves an interesting and important way forward for relations between Jews and Christians. The affirmation that the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures retain a discrete voice (and thus evoke ontological reflection concerning God’s identity) validates Jewish interpretation of their scriptures in a specific way for Christians. There is not space here for extended reflection on the topic, but it must be affirmed in this theological vision that Christians need Jewish teaching and thought in their relationship with the scriptures of their own tradition.

a simple retrieval of Calvin's commitment to the inseparability of word and Spirit; it is a re-hauling of the vision. Childs, obviously indebted to Calvin's thought, maintains his commitment to this inseparability, but expropriates it to a modern context in the wake of critical interpretation. Childs describes a divinely exerted pressure, which occurs in the differences between the witnesses of each testament, resulting in a confrontation. Notice how the *differences* in the canon are actually accounted for in the divine utilization of the text as a vehicle for God's presence. Rowe puts it well,

the textual pressure we perceive can be theologically formulated in terms of the actuating influence of the divine will through the divine Word. It is in fact the divine will mediated through God's own Word that compels us to speak in Trinitarian terms about God. We may even say that it is the presence of God himself in his Word that wills and moves us to speak in this way about God.<sup>66</sup>

Rowe is describing a situation where the divine will, as a presence, is exerted through the tensions of the text to communicate more of the Trinitarian identity, and obviously part of this Trinitarian identity is the Holy Spirit. That is to say, one comes to reflect on the Spirit in a sufficient way through the witness of both testaments. If one only reflects on the NT, the Spirit remains in the economic realm, and the Spirit is construed as a form of two-dimensional modalism.<sup>67</sup> So, the pressure of the dual witness of Christian Scripture, Rowe asserts, forces reflection on both the economic and immanent Trinity, thus creating a depth of identity to the Spirit.

Rowe's claim holds yet another element. He suggests that the "Trinitarian "pressure" of scripture "is the presence of God himself in his Word."<sup>68</sup> This understanding

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<sup>66</sup> Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," 309.

<sup>67</sup> This would also result in an enormous variety of other problems in Trinitarian theology—not simply pneumatological issues. Obviously, Christological developments require the witness of the OT in a similar way. There is no fulfillment without promise. To ignore its witness would result in a deeply flawed Trinitarian theology.

<sup>68</sup> Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," 309.

of scripture does not simply cause appropriate reflection on the movement and substance of the persons of the Trinity, but is also a vessel for the presence of the Spirit. For Rowe, this tension is not simply a textual irregularity or coincidence, but a will and presence that can confront the reader in the particularity of his or her given situation. As Childs himself describes, “The God of the Bible is... a living and acting Lord, the one with whom we have to do—now. We are confronted, not just with ancient witnesses, but with our God who is the Eternal Present.”<sup>69</sup> This Eternal Present is, by Childs’ understanding, the presence of the Holy Spirit; “that divine reality... who makes understanding of God possible.”<sup>70</sup> There are two important aspects to take into recognition here. First, the tensions in the text create a theology of the Spirit; they force reflection on the ontology and action of this presence. Second, the two testaments display a will—even a presence—that can confront the reader as the Spirit. This is not simply a textual presence. It is also a confessional presence that is not under the methodological control of the reader, but is awaited with anticipation and humility. In this way, Childs presents a unification of word and Spirit. They accompany one another.<sup>71</sup> The Holy Spirit confronts humanity within the text of scripture, not simply despite the differences in the canonical witness of each testament, indeed precisely *because of* these differences. God is known more fully through the distinctives, the

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<sup>69</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 219.

<sup>70</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 87.

<sup>71</sup> This again displays Childs’ indebtedness to Calvin’s affirmation of the correlation between word and Spirit. One knows and experiences the Spirit by the canonical witness. Where I believe Calvin and Childs differ is in an understanding of dictation theory. There is much debate on Calvin’s position regarding the creation of the biblical text as “dictated” by the Spirit. Calvin certainly uses the term, but determining *how* he uses it is another matter. Childs, to my knowledge, does not use such a term to describe the construction of the canon. Childs would certainly not hold the position of conservative Calvin scholars, such as Warfield and others, who would affirm a literal dictation of the Spirit to the biblical writers. For a thorough treatment regarding the topic, see H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1962), 49-65. And yet, it is certainly important to note Childs’ emphasis that “Word and Spirit... are neither to be identified, nor are they to be separated and played one against the other.” Childs, *BTONT*, 86.

different parts of the canon, by the quickening action of the third person of the trinity.<sup>72</sup>

The Holy Spirit is the living presence of God utilizing the different sounds in each section of the canon's witness to richly and sufficiently point to Christ as his Spirit. Indeed, "God is the reality that 'evokes the witness.'"<sup>73</sup>

In sum, Childs' understanding of the Spirit must be discerned within the expression of the canon as text and theological concept. It is precisely in the text of canon and the theological background of its formation that one might know the identity of the Spirit and experience its presence. Without the given structure of the text's two-testament witness, there is unneeded distortion in the Trinitarian identity and thus the identity of the Spirit.<sup>74</sup> And without this theological understanding of the Spirit, there is difficulty in discerning the Spirit's active presence in the tensions of the text; there is distortion in hearing and following a *viva vox*. For Childs, the starting point for adequate pneumatic reflection (and confrontation) must emerge within the context of the canon as the vehicle for God's Trinitarian activity.

#### *Spirit and the Rule of Faith*

One of the more elusive terms within Childs' work, as well as much of the scholarship surrounding his legacy, is the phrase rule of faith or *regula fidei*. What exactly

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<sup>72</sup> One will recall how this emphasis on presence was clearly highlighted in the earlier section on the Spirit in *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*. The Spirit as the presence of God was one of the distinctive features of this particular work.

<sup>73</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, "The Doctrine of God is a Hermeneutic: The *Biblical Theology* of Brevard S. Childs," in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs* (eds. Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 158. Rowe is quoting Childs in *BTONT*, 379. The added emphasis is Rowe's.

<sup>74</sup> Recall the earlier section outlining Childs' use of the Spirit in *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, where Childs describes the freedom of the Spirit as the empowering presence guiding Christian conviction throughout the canon. His point is that the divide between letter and Spirit is not OT pitted against NT, but that for Paul, this line is drawn through the entire Christian canon. Letter is sinful self-justification, and life of the Spirit is faithful obedience to the living God of Israel.

this rule is for Childs is often debated—and if not debated, then thrown about without much care for precision. In my estimation, this rule must be understood in relation to the activity of the Holy Spirit, and understanding Childs’ use of the Spirit is incomplete without determining the Spirit’s relationship to the rule of faith. In the last section I described how the Spirit, both as a theological concept and a divine presence, emerges out of the canon. This section, on the other hand, will shift to the other side of the Spirit’s activity, that is, how the Spirit engages with and in the continuing community that values and receives this canon. This is precisely where rule of faith as a pneumatic concept enters the conversation. In a complex way, the Spirit is the mediator and carrier of this rule to each new generation. If canon is the vehicle for God’s presence as Spirit, then the rule of faith is about being gripped by this Spirit to know, discern, and proclaim Christ.

The rule of faith is admittedly a slippery term. It “eschews any strict and final articulation of its content,”<sup>75</sup> and yet has been a renewed topic of interest in discussions surrounding scripture and interpretation. At a basic level, “the rule of faith is fundamentally about a relationship between the scriptures and the church, the community through time which has developed, passed down, received, interpreted, and cherished those scriptures.”<sup>76</sup> And of course, discussions on this relationship have reached a fever pitch in the wake of historical-critical and post-critical debates regarding the irreparable break between the literal sense of the biblical text and the world in which the Christian

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<sup>75</sup> Leonard G. Finn, “Reflections on the Rule of Faith,” in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs* (eds. Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 221. Much of my treatment on the rule of faith is indebted to Finn’s excellent outline of the topic.

<sup>76</sup> Finn, “Reflections on the Rule of Faith,” 222.

community lives, thinks, and believes.<sup>77</sup> There is indeed a struggle, and it is one that involves an incessant search to establish a guide for opening the scriptures as a source for some sort of truth.<sup>78</sup> One could say this struggle is, in effect, to determine a proper rule of faith for each generation of the Christian community. So, what is Childs' understanding of this rule and how does it operate?

The attempt to define the rule of faith is difficult from the outset. Childs himself seems to prefer describing what the rule does rather than what it is, and he performs this task by utilizing Irenaeus.<sup>79</sup> One scholar defines the relationship well, "For Irenaeus this correct hypothesis of the scriptures emerges for the church dialectically—that is, the scriptures' coherence emerges in a particular relationship to the apostolic preaching."<sup>80</sup> Or put differently, the rule of faith is what emerges in the "encounter between Christian proclamation and the scriptures."<sup>81</sup> It is a way of establishing "both canon and creed as rules"<sup>82</sup> together to guide the continued reflection and proclamation of the church within a

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<sup>77</sup> The classic treatment of this topic is of course Hans Frei's, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. For more on this break, see: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

<sup>78</sup> Finn describes a variety of failed attempts to establish this rule. He writes, "current formulations of the rule of faith are essentially attempts by the church in modernity to understand how to read its scriptures once again in the wake of this history... as a contextual prologue to discussion what Childs's (and others') handling of the rule of faith looks like, let us consider three alternative paradigms below—rule as story, rule as tradition, and rule as community—which I will suggest are finally inadequate because they each, in their respective ways, recapitulate the shift Frei has described: the rule—and with it the meaning and coherence of the scriptures—is conceived in each as something external." Finn, "Reflections on the Rule of Faith," 224.

<sup>79</sup> For his treatment of Irenaeus, see the section specifically committed to the topic of Irenaeus and the rule of faith in *BTONT*, 30-32. And also, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 45-55. Childs' handling of the subject is often short, yet Childs does affirm the importance of Irenaeus as a biblical theologian, and furthermore, attributes much of his understanding of the rule to him.

<sup>80</sup> Finn, "Reflections on the Rule of Faith," 233.

<sup>81</sup> Finn, "Reflections on the Rule of Faith," 233.

<sup>82</sup> George R. Sumner and Ephraim Radner, "Introduction" in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (eds. George R. Sumner and Ephraim Radner; Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1998), vii.

“framework”<sup>83</sup> that emerges from the scriptures themselves. At the most basic level, the rule of faith springs from the event of God’s self-revelation in Christ, and this happens dialectically; God is made known through scripture, and scripture is made clear through the proclamation of Christ as its true subject. In this way, the rule of faith is not a static précis of dogmatic propositions and it is not established externally through historical erudition, a sense of feeling, or even in narrative in and of itself. The rule is established in its own freedom to guide in any given context. The rule exists specifically in the given context of the church in time, not in a conception of the church, but the concrete moment in which it goes about making faithful decisions, preaching, and caring for the oppressed.

Leonard Finn describes the nature of the rule with a cautious clarity:

What makes the rule of faith so difficult to discuss—its lack of final conceptualized expression—is thus its most enabling characteristic for the church: its freedom. Since any expression will necessarily be historically contingent, the rule as conviction, judgment, and grammar renders it free to speak not only into Irenaeus’ second-century dispute with Gnostic heresy, but also the church’s problems today. It is in this freedom, we might say, quoting Childs, that far from being “a static deposit of the past,” the rule is for the church “the ‘living voice’ (*viva vox*) of the truth.”<sup>84</sup>

Described here, the rule of faith is best understood as a conviction, judgment, or in a loose way, as Finn writes, a sort of “grammar” that emerges from the engagement between church and scripture. It is a conviction or grammar that can faithfully draw humans to Christ.

The subtlety of Childs’ position is important. It is not that the scriptures merely confirm this rule of faith, where the tradition of the church passes this rule through time so as to exist over and above, or superior to the witness of scripture.

Nor is the position one where the scriptures eliminate any need for the

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<sup>83</sup> Driver, *Brevard Childs*, 252.

<sup>84</sup> Finn, “Reflections on the Rule of Faith,” 241. The quoted text from Childs is: Childs, *BTONT*, 32.



proclamation involved in this rule of faith. It is best construed as such: “the church’s relationship to its scriptures must be understood as that of a lived relationship with and under them: the church re-encounters the rule of faith in the scriptures.”<sup>85</sup> Or, with a pneumatological focus, the church “encounters” this rule as it encounters the living Spirit of Christ pointing to himself.<sup>86</sup>

Such an understanding of the relationship between rule and community is expressed well in Finn’s use of the word “freedom”. It is, I believe, particularly important here. This term, freedom, suggests a divine activity not bound to the control of a methodology. Furthermore, the language is specifically reminiscent of Childs’ aforementioned section in *The Book of Exodus* where he writes: “The church strives to be obedient to the will of God through the gift of the Spirit of Christ, which continues to open up new and fresh avenues of freedom.”<sup>87</sup> While the rule of faith in content, might not be identified precisely as the Spirit, the rule must certainly be understood here as empowered and enabled by the Spirit. Again, in conversation with Irenaeus, Finn writes about the “*encounter*” with the rule of faith in scripture; “for Irenaeus, they [the scriptures] are not merely confirmation of the Church’s teachings according to a rule; rather the rule of faith is Christ ‘according to the scriptures.’”<sup>88</sup> If the rule is sourced in an encounter with Christ in accordance with the scriptures, then this presence of the living Christ in the

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<sup>85</sup> Finn, “Reflections on the Rule of Faith,” 239.

<sup>86</sup> What is interesting about this position is how it presents something of a departure from aspects of both traditional Roman Catholic theology and traditional Protestant theology. It is a complex construal of *Sola Scriptura* that requires proclamation within the trajectory of the apostolic tradition. On the one hand, tradition does not rule over the scriptures, and yet the scriptures do require a confession that is passed down through the generations of the tradition of the church. It is simultaneously sourced in engagement with scripture and still departs from a “nothing but the text” framework. Where exactly this fits ecclesologically is not my focus here, but it might best be described within an Anglo-Catholic framework.

<sup>87</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 439.

<sup>88</sup> Finn, *Reflections on the Rule of Faith*, 239. The italics are Finn’s.

scriptures should be understood as the Spirit of Christ, pointing to himself. In this way, the rule is not simply about the Christ of the scriptures, but is sourced in the activity of his Spirit within the community and the text. As the scriptures proclaim Christ by the presence of the Spirit in the features of the text (as we outlined in the last section), so also the Spirit of Christ empowers the community—even individuals—to proclaim Christ, by the quickening of the Spirit in this rule of faith. Childs expresses it concisely; “the Spirit alone empowers the confession that Jesus is Lord.”<sup>89</sup> In this way, we must envision the dynamic quality of the rule of faith in association with the activity of the Spirit as the free Spirit of Christ active in the community’s engagement with its scriptures. The Spirit empowers the conviction, discernment, and judgment by which the rule of faith is characterized in the community. The rule is not itself the community, but is the divine activity of the living Lord, as Spirit, existing in and through the church.

There is yet one more topic to clarify within Childs’ theology of the Spirit and the rule of faith, and it concerns the activity of confession or proclamation. If the rule is operative in the community, then it must proclaim. The rule requires a kind of theology or continued communication about God if it is to realize the true significance of the text it claims to be sacred. This requires the rule of faith to be dynamic; it cannot exist in stasis or else the scriptures are not able to speak into each context. In other words, to understand scripture properly requires this rule to be operative in the community of faith, and yet for this rule to emerge as operative in the community of faith will require a continued

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<sup>89</sup> Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 140.

engagement with the scriptures.<sup>90</sup> This is important because it means that proclamation or rule must continue within each new scenario in which the church exists. There is no moment that does not require a fresh proclamation in the conviction of this rule. It is an activity that should never stop, and in a sense, must always be changing because without continued proclamation by this rule, the church will fail to understand its own scriptures. In short, the church must know the subject of its scriptures—Christ—and proclaim him in order that the scriptures might operate in the life of the reader.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, it is because of this dynamic Spirit that the church continues this rule and proclamation in every new context.

#### *The Promise of the Spirit*

The final section in synthesizing Childs' pneumatology concerns the promise of the Spirit.<sup>92</sup> Childs is clear in numerous places that the presence of the Holy Spirit is promised—not controlled by humanity, but promised to God's people both in the living community of faith and in the witness of the scriptures. In an article on Speech-Act theory, Childs affirms this promise. The topic revolves around God's ability to illuminate the human words of scripture that they might speak to the present. He writes, "The crucial

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<sup>90</sup> Finn puts it this way; "The scriptures are not jettisoned as so much excess baggage upon arriving at such a first principle [the rule of faith]; rather the first principle—that is the rule of faith—is that which the church preserves, preaches, teaches, and continues to learn anew, so as to be able those scriptures to speak in a Christian way to each generation." Finn, "Reflections on the Rule of Faith," 238, 39.

<sup>91</sup> An excellent rendering of this Christological hermeneutic can be found in Walter Moberly's exegesis of Luke 24 in: R. W. L. Moberly, "Christ as the Key to Scripture: Journey to Emmaus," in *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 45-70. Moberly examines the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and argues that understanding of the scriptures cannot occur without knowing Christ. And conversely he argues that understanding of Christ does not occur outside of the scriptures. While Moberly never mentions the phrase "rule of faith" in this essay, the knowledge of Christ that he describes is an apt portrayal of this rule. Furthermore, to my knowledge, this is the best current description of the rule of faith that is presented through a close reading of the biblical text.

<sup>92</sup> We outlined some of this in the earlier section on *BTONT* and Childs' similarities to Calvin.

agent for rendering the human words of the past as the continuing divine message – the rendering of human speech into divine speech – was achieved by the promise of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>93</sup> We have already established the mechanics of this position—the relational necessity of Spirit in the rule of faith within the community and in the two-testament witness—but the question now becomes, can this presence be expected? Childs, I believe, would say yes.<sup>94</sup> Not only does Childs use this language of promise consistently, but he also grounds this promise in a Christology. The promise of the Spirit is sourced in Christ’s redemptive act. For Childs, the promise of the presence of the Spirit can be expected because the scriptures speak of this presence as a promise and because the promise occurs out of Christ’s redemptive act in history as a guarantor.

One of the primary affirmations held throughout Childs’ work is an understanding of the biblical witness as a truly human text. In multiple places, Childs will use the incarnation as a helpful (but not controlling) metaphor for understanding the witness of scripture. For instance, he writes,

Although an analogy between Christ’s incarnation and sacred scripture is far from perfect, as theologians are quick to acknowledge, yet it can be helpful in addressing certain issues at stake in the debate over the interpretation of the church’s Scripture, which *in its completely human form* lays claim to speak truthfully of the divine.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Brevard Childs, “Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58:4 (2005): 379. Specifically, the article is a critique of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s use of Speech-Act theory in Christian interpretation of the Bible in, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995).

<sup>94</sup> This position is something of a departure from that of Ephraim Radner, one of Childs’ former students, who has published on the absence of the Holy Spirit in the church. See, Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), and, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), and also his essay, “The Absence of the Comforter: Scripture and the Divided Church” in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (eds. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 355-94.

<sup>95</sup> Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 11. The emphasis is mine.

The point to take here is Childs' understanding of the scriptures as both communicating about God and completely human in origin, and this has important ramifications for the current treatment on the promise of the Spirit. What Childs means by human witness can be comprehended in this way, "it was not that God had supernaturally prevented the biblical authors from sinning in their work of composition, but that precisely in and through their sin God chose and continues to choose to speak."<sup>96</sup> Basic to Childs' portrayal of scripture's witness is a redemptive Christological motion. The text is able to speak because the God of the scriptures is a redeeming God. It is in this God's character and will to redeem, and the Spirit is not at all a peripheral figure in this equation, but is bound completely to its theological reality. In Childs' own words,

Biblical theological reflection [which Childs affirms is dependent on the Spirit a paragraph later] is not a timeless speculation about the nature of the good, but the life and death struggle of the concrete historical communities of the Christian church who are trying to be faithful in their own particular historical contexts to the imperatives of the gospel... *But the heart of the enterprise is Christological*; its content is Jesus Christ and not its own self-understanding or identity.<sup>97</sup>

That is, the struggle for the church to do theology in every age is sourced not out of its own self-reflection, but out of a Christology that entails the redemptive action of God in history. Childs describes this action on the part of the church as a struggle—not a failure—and it is a struggle by and through the power of Christ's redemptive Spirit that the church might continue to be "faithful."

Following in line with this conviction, Childs writes, "The Scriptures not only are inspired in their origin, but are continuously infused with the promise of divine

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen B. Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, and Al Wolters; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 199.

<sup>97</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 86. The emphasis is mine.

illumination.”<sup>98</sup> The position here is one where the absolute humanity of scripture’s witness (and formation) as well as the obvious humanity of the church’s position in interpreting these scriptures is operative under the power of the Spirit. It is within the church’s own humanity as well as the humanity of the scriptures that the Spirit performs the redemptive work of Christ. In Childs’ own words, “God has willed salvation for his people. He continues to exercise absolute power to fulfill it. His presence is unfailing in spite of human frailty.”<sup>99</sup> As Christ’s salvific act promises redemption to sinners, even in their continued sin, so Christ’s Spirit is promised to establish his people—broken though they be—in knowing his own redemptive presence until he comes again. Childs posits that “The ability of the scriptures continually to evoke new and fresh undertakings [is] commensurate with the promised Spirit of the resurrected Christ to illuminate and guide his church through his living word.”<sup>100</sup> In this way, the Spirit is promised as the Spirit of the resurrected Christ. By Childs’ estimation, if the church affirms Christ’s resurrection, then his Spirit must be understood as a promise to enact resurrection through active engagement within the church and its scriptures.

There are a few crucial questions that become immediately apparent after defining Childs’ vision of this promise. First, if such a promise is operative, what does this promised presence look like in the life of the community that is ostensibly inhabited by the Spirit? More pointedly, what do we make of a divided church and by continued and hotly debated

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<sup>98</sup> Childs, “Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” 380. Childs’ use of the word “inspiration” is an topic that I do not have the time to address here. His use of the word is nuanced and deserves a far greater treatment than a footnote can offer. For more on its use, see Stephen Chapman, “Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz, and Al Wolters; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>99</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 358.

<sup>100</sup> Childs, “Speech-Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” 379.

discussions on biblical interpretation in the wake of such a pneumatological claim? The question is immensely complicated and requires an analysis beyond the scope of the current work. Indeed, it requires attention beyond that given by Childs. The issue is ecclesiological, sociological, historical, and, of course, exegetical. But by my estimation, Childs makes clear that the presence of the Spirit is completely free, and yet, still promised. To question this presence is to question God's very action in the resurrected Christ.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, the way Childs outlines the work of important theologians in the history of the church, suggests that the tumult of the church in history is not at all a direct mark against the presence of the Spirit.<sup>102</sup> In terms of defining this activity in the visible, structural existence of the church, Childs is largely unclear in specifically defining such a "structural" presence.<sup>103</sup> Again, what is clear is how Childs insists on the promise of the Spirit as a presence in a variety of communities and thinkers throughout the history of the church.

The other question pertaining to Childs' understanding of the promise of the Spirit concerns interpretation of scripture. Taken what we have outlined about this Spirit, how does a "method" of interpretation take direction? And more germane to our task,

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<sup>101</sup> Currently this is an important topic of debate for scholars such as Ephraim Radner, Russell Reno, Bruce Marshall, and others. This is not the proper place to enter into the complex details of each case.

<sup>102</sup> Childs writes, "The history of interpretation serves as a continual reminder that biblical interpretation involves far more than 'explanation' (erklären), but demands a serious wrestling with the content of scripture. The history of interpretation demonstrates clearly that when occasionally scholarship calls this into question, it rightly evokes a theological explosion from the side of the church (Kierkegaard, Kahler, Barth, etc.)... This observation should not lead to a cultural relativism, but to a profounder grasp of the dynamic function of the Bible as the vehicle of an ever fresh word of God to each new generation." *BTONT*, 88. Such a statement would suggest that the church has seen periods of crisis in which the word of scripture maintains its divine voice throughout generations. Simply stated, there are correctives in theological discourse that must be understood as faithful, and thus Spirit guided, witnesses to the God of the scriptures.

<sup>103</sup> In my estimation this is simply because he does not hold to a Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Thus he has no demand for a stringent visibility regarding the people of God.

what could such a “method” tell us about Childs’ doctrine of the Spirit? As for method, Childs gives a succinct answer: “The true expositor of the Christian scriptures is the one who awaits in anticipation toward becoming the interpreted rather than the interpreter.”<sup>104</sup> Anticipation is foundational to interpretation. Childs certainly has more to say about interpretation and methodology, but the Spirit’s freedom is foundational to his position. This is why Childs affirms basic Christian practice as of central importance to interpretation; “Prayer is an integral part in the study of Scripture because it anticipates the Spirit’s carrying its reader through the written page to God himself.”<sup>105</sup> His understanding of the Spirit as God’s promised activity in the text and community requires a confessional anticipation, a stance or posture in which to ready oneself for the Spirit’s activity. There is no amount of proper imagining or reconstructing or dissection that the reader can perform on the text in order for the *viva vox* of scripture to speak. And in this way, when we come to synthesize Childs’ doctrine of the Holy Spirit, we must identify the Spirit as the promised presence of God, existing in absolute freedom from humanity’s control. This does not mean that the Spirit is unknown, but that the Spirit performs the work of presenting the Trinitarian God to the community of faith.

To summarize the current section on synthesizing Childs’ pneumatology, we came into the topic of the rule of faith by first describing the canon as an active vessel or “vehicle”<sup>106</sup> for God’s presence as Spirit in the biblical text. I argued that Childs’ understanding of the canon is one that is unmistakably theological, and that this canon

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<sup>104</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 86.

<sup>105</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 219.

<sup>106</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 9. We also see this language occur in, Childs, *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 26.



exerts a certain pressure on readers to formulate an understanding of the economic and immanent Trinity. Furthermore, I articulated how this pressure both provokes theological reflection on the nature of the Trinity and thus the place of the person of the Spirit within this Trinitarian vision, and also how this pressure is a way the Spirit confronts readers within the biblical text. On the other side of the canon's relationship with the church, I described how one should understand the rule of faith as the inhabiting presence of the Spirit establishing a Christological referent in the discernment and conviction of the Christian community. That is, the Spirit is active in the community of believers establishing a conviction or rule within the community that necessarily has to do with Christ. In this way, the Holy Spirit for Childs is the dynamic Spirit who guides the community of faith into Christological discernment through the reading of the scriptures and in the activity of the church as it exists in a continuously changing world. Furthermore, I have shown that this Spirit is promised to the community as the Spirit of the resurrected Christ. What I hope to show in this synthesizing of Childs' thought is how the Spirit is the dynamic presence who exists both in the canon that witnesses to Christ, and in the community that professes him as Lord, by confronting this community as the Spirit of the resurrected Christ.

What I hope is clear at this point is Childs' understanding of the Spirit as the divine presence in the scriptures and in the community of faith, pulling the people of God to its own Trinitarian reality. The Spirit is thus rightly understood through the Christian canon and within the continued apostolic confession of Christ. Childs himself might

articulate this identity best as he succinctly paraphrases Irenaeus' naming of the Spirit:

“Holy Spirit, instructor of the prophets and renewer of the world.”<sup>107</sup>

### **Defending the Centrality of the Spirit in Childs' Work**

At this point, the amount of space given to the topic of the Holy Spirit in Childs' work should be more than apparent, and furthermore, his nuanced positions on the topic should be fully evident. The task of this final section will be to defend the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as not simply important to Childs' project, but requisite to it. The great bulk of our task has been completed in constructing a clear vision of Childs' doctrine of the Spirit, and now this section will draw out the implications of Childs' position. In short, I will show why a focus on the topic *must be* highlighted in order to correctly understand Childs' theology.

To adequately express the centrality of Childs' work on the Spirit, I believe a return to the old Bultmannian topic of *Sachkritik* could be immensely helpful here. Scholars writing on Childs often overlook the term, and I will show how the issues brought up by the topic are of fundamental importance for Childs' theology. Furthermore I will show how his doctrine of the Spirit establishes his position in such a discussion. The term, *Sachkritik*, is most readily associated with Rudolph Bultmann, and though Childs' work is not directly indebted to Bultmannian thought, Barth's work certainly is, and Childs frequently uses Barth in his own work. *Sachkritik* can, for our purposes, be defined “as a criticism ‘which distinguishes between what is said and what is meant and measures what is

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<sup>107</sup> Brevard Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 48. Childs is citing, Irenaeus, *The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* (ed. J. A. Robinson; London: SPCK, 1920), 3b-16.

said by what is meant.”<sup>108</sup> Whatever one might say about Childs’ own relationship with the term (he uses it infrequently), one must concede that the issues brought up by *Sachkritik* touch into the heart of Childs project.

In the conclusion of *BTONT*, Childs includes a short reference to *Sachkritik* that is particularly revealing. He writes,

It [the Bible] is not the construal of a symbol system in which fictive world the reader is invited to participate, but the entrance of God’s word into our world of time and space. The task of Biblical Theology is therefore not just descriptive, but involves a *Sachkritik* which is called forth by the witness of this reality. Of course, how this *Sachkritik* is executed determines its success or failure. If Jesus Christ is not the norm, but various cultural criteria are, the result for Biblical Theology is an unmitigated disaster.<sup>109</sup>

In my estimation, this is a foundational aspect of Childs’ entire work, and he would seem to agree. If this *Sachkritik* is performed incorrectly, without a founding Christology, then the project fails. God does not speak in the same way, and the Trinitarian identity is distorted, thus disrupting the entire exegetical endeavor. This is the problem Childs assigns to scholars such as David Kelsey and George Lindbeck; to side with these methods that privilege the descriptive task is to replace a Christological foundation with an ecclesial one—one that is no doubt available for examination, but one which assumes that practice “constitutes theological construction.”<sup>110</sup> In a similar way, Childs would maintain that Walter Brueggemann misses the mark as well, but by positioning himself into a complex scenario where a “behind the text” reconstruction must occur.<sup>111</sup> Childs is certainly

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<sup>108</sup> Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 166. Soulen and Soulen are citing, James M. Robinson and Jurgen Moltmann, “The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology* (ed. J. M. Robinson; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968).

<sup>109</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 721.

<sup>110</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 723.

<sup>111</sup> Christopher Seitz makes an excellent and balanced critique of Brueggemann’s work in *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 65, 66.

sympathetic to all of these Postcritical modes of reading, but would argue that a fundamental failure will necessarily occur if *Sachkritic* is not performed “out of the witness” of the Christological reality. Of course, he means here the full canonical witness where the ontological presence of the Triune God is gripping or pulling the one experiencing this witness to the very same reality. This witness is operative “by means of the final form of the text, whose words point to a fleshly and spiritual realm both... Because its subject matter is Christ... it disrupts and reorders our place in the world and the world itself.”<sup>112</sup> In this way, Childs is suggesting a *Sachkritic* founded in the incarnational reality of Christ, one where what the words of the text *mean* is grounded not only in the presence of the Spirit, but also in the Spirit’s activity within the canon, pulling the reader into the Christological direction of its witness. Simply stated, what is *meant* in the text and what is *written* is unified through the active presence of Christ’s Spirit.<sup>113</sup> This resituates the scenarios in such a way that Childs make statements such as, “Much of the success of an exegesis depends on how well God’s presence has been understood.”<sup>114</sup> Thus *Sachkritik*, in Childs’ vision, is not a discerning of what is or should be meant by the text, but a being taken by God’s own activity.

At this point it will be helpful to emphasize the fact that when Childs speaks of the presence of the Spirit, he understands this presence to be of the same ontological substance as God and Christ. This may seem basic, but it is important because when the presence of

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<sup>112</sup> Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture*, 69.

<sup>113</sup> This is drastically different than the position of Bultmann, who would argue that, at best, *Sachkritik* can get to the direction or pointing of the witness, but not at all to its subject. Childs’ dramatic position is, as we have extensively outlined, that this subject, God, is actually present in the text and in the community of faith. And this, of course, is central to the debate between Bultmann and Barth. Barth would argue that the end of these critical efforts leaves us with nothing but anthropocentric exegesis.

<sup>114</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 382.

the Spirit pulls the reader into a confrontation with God, she is confronting the actual God of the scriptures. Thus *Sachkritik*, for Childs, is about being gripped by God through the Spirit within the church's engagement with scripture. In other words, what is meant by the text, or the direction of their pointing, is apprehended by their subject.<sup>115</sup> Childs writes, "If the church confesses that the spirit of God opens up the text to a perception of its true reality, it also follows that the Spirit also works in applying the reality of God in its fullness to an understanding of the text."<sup>116</sup> The Spirit, known by the reader, applies its reality in such a way that the reader confronts the subject of the scriptures in their final form, the canon. The takeaway point is this: Childs' understanding of *Sachkritik* is not a rehashing of his position on the rule of faith or another expression of the Trinitarian "pressure" of the canon; it is the foundational reality for these positions. Furthermore, this position on *Sachkritik* operates through the Spirit. It establishes this ultimate reality of God through the dynamic activity of the Spirit. Without this particular doctrine of the Spirit, Childs' claims about the reality of God reordering the reality in which humanity finds itself cannot be made. Without the Spirit of Christ, the church, which exists in a changing world, cannot know the reality of God as subject of its scriptures.

To be more exacting, every claim I have made in defining Childs' doctrine of the Holy Spirit exists out of Childs' treatment of *Sachkritik*. Humanity can know God through the presence of God's own Spirit in the dialectical relationship between the witness of

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<sup>115</sup> We could easily bring into the discussion an understanding of interpretation as "event" and all the scholarship that follows such a term, but it will be easiest to utilize Childs' own terminology here. Childs' own reading of Gadamer, Dilthey, and others is certainly extensive, and he notes the helpfulness of "postmodern" interpretation theory. See, "Two Letters to James Barr" included in, Daniel Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 291.

<sup>116</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 382.

scripture and the continued apostolic witness of the community. Because of this basic claim, it is possible for Childs to construct his complex and sophisticated theology. When we outlined the Trinitarian and pneumatic pressure of the canon, it was sourced in the reality that God is known by a divine presence in the scriptures; the issue simply dealt with location. When I analyzed the rule of faith, we affirmed the presence of the Spirit's reality in the community of faith—in its ability to discern with Christological conviction. And finally, when we dealt with the promise of the Spirit, we described the ability of the Spirit to speak in fresh ways to every context. All of these aspects of Childs' theology of the Spirit emerge out of Childs' confession that the Trinitarian God of the scriptures is the one who confronts humanity in the reality of the Spirit, bringing humanity into the foundational reality of the divine Trinity.

It should be clear at this point, that Childs' project is, in fact, dependent on the claim that God's presence can be known through the Spirit. Of course, Childs is very cautious (and particular) in describing how, where, and when this presence can be known; that is why I have made a carefully synthesized account of his theology of the Spirit.<sup>117</sup> But what we must confront now is the brute fact that none of the nuances of his positions have any foundation outside of this confession. In order for the canon to have any unified voice (and any discrete voice, for that matter), the Spirit must present the subject of the text's witness.<sup>118</sup> In order for the rule of faith to operate in the community as rule of faith, God's

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<sup>117</sup> This caution, or awareness of the complexity of this task, is represented well by his continued use of the term "struggle." This struggle is not about an incomprehensibly messy Bible, but about the struggle to know God in each new age and in the two-testament witness. Christopher Seitz describes the issue well in, *The Character of Christian Scripture*, 65, 66.

<sup>118</sup> Kavin Rowe describes the situation, "This tension [between the economic and immanent Trinity], therefore is not a final one, as if God were consigned to appear ever as economic or immanent and not simply as himself; indeed the unity of the economic/immanent distinction is nothing less than the

ultimate reality must come into the world of the church by the dynamic power of the Spirit of Christ.<sup>119</sup> And if the church is to continue its gospel witness in the world, she must anticipate the redemptive activity of the Spirit of Christ. God's presence must be known—even if in struggle—or Childs has an essentially different vision of theology, canon, and the church.

The importance of God's ability to be known in Childs' schema is maybe best illustrated in how he distinguishes his own work from others by utilizing his particular stance on this position. As we noted earlier, his disagreements with Brueggemann, Lindbeck, and Kelsey all stem from the problem of re-assigning an interpretive authority outside of the final form of the text. For example, he will even part ways with Hans Frei, an interlocutor he consistently values and utilizes as an aid, on this same issue. Frei writes, "Established... readings are warranted by their agreement with a religious community's rules for reading its sacred text... The plausibility structure in this case is a literary imitation of a religious community's authority structure."<sup>120</sup> The way Childs maneuvers around or through this issue is telling, and it is summed up well in a statement from one of his earlier publications: "I belong to a community of faith which has received a sacred tradition in the form of an authoritative canon of scripture. There is a rule of faith and practice which has

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reality of God himself." Rowe, "The Doctrine of God is a Hermeneutic," 168. And this unification of the economic and immanent Trinitarian reality occurs in the oneness of the canonical witness.

<sup>119</sup> Leonard Finn, puts it this way, "To understand the rule of faith... is ultimately to put faith in the one to whom the rule points: the providence of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." Finn, "Reflections on the Rule of Faith," 242.

<sup>120</sup> Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 144. Frei's position here is ironic because by establishing the community's rules as the authoritative warrant for reading scripture eventually results in an "eclipse" of the narrative structure that he esteems.

been formed because God is known.”<sup>121</sup> We have already outlined much of how this works. Because the Spirit makes God known in the relationship between the church and its scriptures, indeed by and under its scriptures, any interpretive navigation will be made in an engagement with the scriptures and under the convictions given in that engagement. In this way, the Spirit actively substantiates a situation where the reader becomes the “interpreted rather than the interpreter.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, Childs establishes a Christological authority in the activity of the Spirit presenting God in the text and the community that belongs to this canonical witness. God is known, and thus the reality of the divine presence as Spirit founds Childs’ theology of canon, rule, and promise.

In this section, I have hopefully made clear the central position of the Spirit in Childs’ theology. Without Childs’ theology of the Holy Spirit, God’s Trinitarian reality is not known in a way that the canon can speak in its two-testament form, nor is the community of faith empowered by an encounter to discern this reality in a continued and living way. In other words, this doctrine of the Holy Spirit grounds the ontological reality of God in the witness of the canon in such a way that Childs’ dialectical vision of the relationship between church and scripture can continually move from witness to subject. Specifically, in Childs’ work, the doctrine makes possible the ability for the church to encounter God in each new generation, ‘world without end.’

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued first that Childs does h, in fact, have a definitive theology of the Holy Spirit. To argue this, I gave close readings of the most important

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<sup>121</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 29.

<sup>122</sup> Childs, *BTONT*, 86.



sections of his work regarding the work of the Spirit. In following, I synthesized the relevant details of my outline to piece together the specific doctrine of the Spirit that exists in Childs' *oeuvre* and made clear the distinctive features of this theology. Specifically, I argued that, by Childs' understanding, this Spirit is present in the text of the biblical canon's two-testament witness. This theology of the Spirit emerges from the tensions and pressure that such a diverse witness offers. Also, the presence of the Spirit, for Childs, is active in the church's continued relationship with these scriptures. Childs sets this up as a dialogic relationship where the community grows to know the subject of these scriptures—Christ—and thus comes to the scriptures with the discerning knowledge of this confrontation. Furthermore, I argued that Childs' understanding of this dialogic movement is a continued and promised confrontation with the subject of these scriptures, requiring constant theological construction or confession in each new moment and age.

In my final section, I gave a defense of the centrality of this particular theology of the Spirit in making Childs' work a coherent theological system. I argued that this Spirit, in its Trinitarian identity, is the actual presence of the divine, heralding in the foundational reality for all of Childs' major claims—specifically ones regarding his theological concept of canon and the rule of faith. For Childs, because God is known, the church is able to discern the witnessing motion of the two-testament canon and act out the redemptive motion of Christ's action in the world through its own actions within the world. I then illustrated the foundational importance of Childs' claim that God is known through the operative power of the Spirit by outlining where he departs from current theological/exegetical theories. In this way, I have made clear that the basis of Childs'

larger project is not only a coherent system of thought, but also that this system is indeed dependent on his particular, robust theology of the Holy Spirit.

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