

RESPONSE TO IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT: HOLY SPIRIT

Gift Mtukwa, Africa Nazarene University

Dr Svetlana Khobnya has focused on a critical aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, namely the creative role of the Holy Spirit in the world. She proposes going beyond the Christological and soteriological aspects and doing so within “a trinitarian structure and eschatological framework” (p1). Khobnya is aware of the fact that such a task must not be done without paying attention to the “hermeneutical issues” involved in such an undertaking. For Khobnya this must be done by taking into consideration “a variety of experiences and voices” while at the same time asking the necessary “historical and theological questions” for the purpose of a “constructive dialogue” (p.2). Khobnya is particularly concerned about “the role of the Spirit as a source of human togetherness” and she looks at the various New Testament texts to examine how the Spirit accomplishes the work of bringing people together. Togetherness is an aspect that cannot be taken for granted especially in our fragmented world as Khobnya acknowledges. It has been said that “Eleven o’clock on Sunday ‘is the most segregated hour in the week’.”¹ If this is true of the United States, other parts of the world have their versions of the segregated hour, some, especially in the African context the segregation happens along tribal lines or the social classes that separate people. It is not a wonder to find a tribal church in a cosmopolitan city like Nairobi, Lagos or Johannesburg. This has also gone to the diaspora churches where people will gather in the heart of London or Atlanta as a tribal grouping. One then wonders if we have paid close attention to this important aspect that Khobnya is calling us to recognize. Critics might object by saying that in all fairness the church is not the only institution where one finds segregation²—it is a reality in schools and even workplaces. Nevertheless, the church ought to be different because she has the Spirit who works creatively to bring about togetherness.

The evidence of this togetherness, Khobnya sees as part of a “fulfilled prophecy”. What Israel’s prophets saw as future events, for the NT writers the future has come. The coming of the Messiah marks the beginning of the fulfilment of God’s promises.³ The author adopts Richard Hays approach of “figural reading” in which even earlier texts are read from the perspective of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Khobnya notes that “the Spirit reveals not only Jesus’ identity and the holy intimate togetherness between God and Christ, but the Spirit also depicts the end of the exile and an exciting new beginning for Israel and all the nations”. Yes indeed there are ways in which the story of Israel is completed in the story of Christ—however, we also need to uphold the fact that there are discontinuities between the story of Israel and the story of Christ.⁴ There are ways in which Israel failed to be Israel as intended by God⁵ and the advent of the Spirit now makes it possible for people to be truly together in ways that Israel and other nations could never imagine.

¹ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (OUP USA, 2012), 8.

² Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour*, 8.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 241.

⁴ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 14.

⁵ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 14.

In the gospels, particularly in Matthew, Khobnya sees the mission of the disciples as empowered by the Spirit. This mission is to be done beyond Israel. Luke in his gospel picks this up and completes it in the book of Acts where we see people coming together and having received the Spirit begin to understand what being truly together entails. For Khobnya, in Acts, we see visible and tangible glimpses of what life together ought to look like. The people who are together, “Share resources, take care of each other and welcome others” p.7. However, we must understand that this is the ideal of what the Christian community ought to look like but the reality even in Acts did not always match up to this ideal. The sharing of food for instance brought discord in the community of faith. It is very clear that some fail to get the Spirit's desire as seen in the story of Peter and Cornelius a fact that Khobnya recognizes. The prejudice against other groups of people still existed in the church in which the Spirit had been given, this is something we need to recognize. Our scripture reading needs to provide ways of making sense of such anomalies between the ideal and the real. We need to resist the temptation to see the early church as perfect⁶ as is often done on many pulpits around the world. Doing so will create problems that we will find difficult to deal with.⁷ Peter’s response to the uncircumcised “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:12) is important for the church as Khobnya recognises. Togetherness is encapsulated in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* which Kenyan theologian John Mbiti captured in these words “I am because we are and because we are therefore I am”.⁸ The Kiswahili phrase *Tuko Pamoja* (we are together) is an outworking of the *Ubuntu* spirit. Yet Ubuntu does not go far enough in bringing people together, it might be able to bring the clan or the tribe together, however, real togetherness that brings all people from all places together can only be achieved by the Spirit of God. As Khobnya notes “The idea of embracing others under the guidance of the Spirit beyond one’s close and desirable” (p.9). The church of today needs to make every effort to “not make a distinction between them and us”. Togetherness requires that we embrace others as uncomfortable as it might be. In a way, the gospel completes or fulfils the philosophy of Ubuntu.

The apostle Paul’s writings have more to say about togetherness which is brought about by the Spirit. Khobnya notes both the vertical togetherness (God) and horizontal togetherness (people) that the Spirit orchestrates. The implication she draws from Paul is that truly pneumatic experiences have to do with people who would never be together coming together. This is contrary to what one sees as the emphasis of what the evidence of the Holy Spirit is especially in Pentecostal circles a fact which Luis Felipe Nunes Borduam focuses on in his article.⁹ In Revelation, for Khobnya, human togetherness “embraces world diverse peoples” and there we see the future becoming a reality in the present. She writes “The characteristic of this new world, where the Spirit of Christ is active, reflects the idea of inclusive fellowship that embraces differences, crosses boundaries, empowers the powerless and helps the helpless”(p. 12). Where

⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: The Original Call to an Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 32.

⁷ Nijay Gupta, “‘We Should Be More Like the Early Church’: Good Idea or Bad Idea?,” Blog Post, *Crux Sola: Formed by Scripture to Live like Christ*, 8 February 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/cruxsola/2020/02/we-should-be-more-like-the-early-church-good-idea-or-bad-idea/>.

⁸ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Repr. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publ, 2015), 105.

⁹ Luis Felipe Nunes Borduam, “In the Power of the Spirit,” *Didache 22* (n.d.): 1.

the Spirit is truly active one cannot find “the most segregated hour” or tribal enclaves in the form of churches. The change or transformation which is engendered by Spirit has to happen in us¹⁰ if we are to embrace our brothers and sisters who are different from us.

Could it be that in our tradition our understanding of holiness has over-emphasized the vertical togetherness (communion with God) to the detriment of the horizontal togetherness? Are our churches any different from those that are mostly homogeneous or do we reflect the way society is structured? Tribe, race, and economics should not separate people who are formed by the creative work of the Spirit. I commend Khobnya for bringing this to our attention, we need to put what she says here in practice. Once we do that we will have become a truly holy people.

Luis Felipe Nunes Borduan speaks of glossalia as what churches particularly in his South American context emphasize at the expense of the sanctification of the believer. The problem he sees is that of seeing “spiritual ecstasies” which he laments do not lead to the transformation of the lives of the people. (Borduan, 3.) The result is that the Holy Spirit is reduced to an instrument that enables people to prosper, overcome spiritual battles and achieve social justice. (Borduan, 3-6.) He is of the opinion that in the Scriptures the role of the Holy Spirit is the sanctification of the people. He traces this in various passages of scripture demonstrating how the Spirit makes people holy. Indeed, the Holy Spirit makes people holy, after all, he is the Holy Spirit. However, is that his only role? We may not agree with those who see the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit as glossolalia—yet we also need not do the same—reducing the role of the Holy Spirit to sanctification alone. What we need is a nuanced perspective on the role of the Holy Spirit something which Khobnya challenges us to do. The God with the power to sanctify also has the power to deal with the oppressor as seen in the Exodus story and He also provides the power we need to engage in the mission of God. The nexus between social justice and the Holy Spirit is something that scholarship has paid attention to.¹¹ Yet Borduan is to be commended for pushing back, especially in his South American context (the same is needed in the African context) where the pendulum has swung to the other side. We in the holiness tradition have an opportunity to provide a corrective that is needed in the church without swinging the pendulum to the other extreme. May God help us to do exactly that. Amen.

¹⁰ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 244.

¹¹ Antipas L. Harris and Palmer, Michael D., “Introduction,” in *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture*, ed. Michael D. Palmer and Harris, Antipas L. (Lanham: Seymour Press, 2019), 2–25.