Van Ruler on the Holy Spirit
and the Salvation of the Earth

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"Today I would speak more of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps I was too cautious."

These words were spoken by Karl Barth in response to a question put to him concerning the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*. Twenty years after the writing of the volume in question, Barth was willing to acknowledge a pneumatological "caution" in his theology. Wishing to lay emphasis on the objective revelation of God in Christ he had feared that a focus on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit might allow his theology to slip into the theological subjectivism he so earnestly battled. This pneumatological reserve, as Barth came to realize, raised serious problems for a theology which attempted to employ a trinitarian methodology. His later writing demonstrated a growing sensitivity to the role of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in constructive theology.

A sharp critic of Barth's pneumatological reserve was the Dutch theologian A. A. Van Ruler. Van Ruler was no less concerned than Barth with maintaining an objective christology, built on the christological foundation stones provided by Nicea, Chalcedon, Anselm, and the Reformed confessions. Van Ruler contended, however, that Christian theology could not demonstrate an imbalanced preoccupation with christology and at the same time be a truly trinitarian theology. The Christian faith is concerned with far more than Christ and the salvation won by him. It is as much concerned with God the Father, "creator of heaven and earth"—with man and his world and with everything that happens to man and the world. But there is also the Holy Spirit, "the Holy Catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins"—the *Gestalten* through which messianic salvation enters history and finds expression in human existence. The third article, the third person, becomes crucial for the relationship of the first to the second in Van Ruler's thought. Pneumatological reserve, from the perspective of this Dutch theologian, threatens both creation and the reality of its salvation.

The crucial question explored in Van Ruler's theology is the relationship of the historical particularity of the incarnation to the salvation of *this* world, a world fallen and yet real and good in its own right because it is a world created by God. Any mode of relationship which would deny, eclipse, or supersede God's creation Van Ruler emphatically rejects, whether that mode be a contemporary form of gnosticism depicting salvation as the rescue of the individual from this world or the eschatological enthusiasm for the *novo creatio* positing a new creation problematic in its relationship to the original creation. With equal emphasis Van Ruler refuses every interpretation of the world which would limit it to individuals,
as if individuals were some kind of discrete entities existing in isolation. Certainly, the *applicatio salutis* is an individual matter but it is far more, for individuals always stand in a nexus of relationships. Persons exist in community and are social, political, economic, historical beings. Any question of the *applicatio salutis* consequently reaches far beyond the justification of the sinful individual and the forgiveness of his sins. The question of the salvation of the earth carries the theologian into the realms of history, politics, art, economics, education, as well as the hidden chambers of the inner life. In Van Ruler’s extensive list of publications an incredible mixture of topics is explored, from vivisection to colonization, from the place of radio in society to capital punishment. But the investigations are never conducted from the perspective of the psychologist, sociologist, or economist. Van Ruler speaks as a theologian believing that the theologian speaks appropriately when he discusses the affairs of creation. It is God’s creation. And God is concerned with what happens to it—he enters it to bring it its redemption.

This redemption is messianic. Van Ruler stands adamantly on the first article of the creed. But no less on the second article. The salvation of the earth is not accomplished through a power imminent in creation. The Kingdom of God does not develop through some evolutionary process hidden in nature or history which gradually works itself out, generation by generation, century by century. Salvation does not reside in the universal orders of creation, but in the historical particularity of an event registered at a definite point in time and in space. Salvation, indeed, is from the Jews. The incarnation is an “once for all” occurrence which may not, need not, be repeated. The redemption of man can not be discovered in creation, for it comes *extra nos*—it is not potentiality but gift—not horizontal but vertical. Man did not discover the divine within him and thus the potentiality for deification, but the divinity assumed flesh to dwell among us, and men discovered the possibility of *humanity*. This *assumptio carnis*, this enhypostatic union into which God entered closes the door to every theology, oriental or occidental, which would see the salvatory power hidden within the processes of history or the inner being of man. Van Ruler stands at the center of Reformed theology in anchoring salvation in the incomparable, unrepeatable atoning work of Jesus Christ. There is no other way.

Van Ruler’s trinitarian theology, then, insists that not only the messianic work of the son, but the creative work of the father be taken with utmost seriousness. When this is done, when creation is not subsumed under christology in one way or another, an extraordinarily important theological problem comes into focus. How are the two categories—creation and messianic salvation—brought together? How can something which happened two thousand years ago benefit me and my world? How does redemption penetrate and permeate history? How is grace mediated *Christus pars pro toto*? When the Apostle’s Creed speaks of “the holy catholic church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins” in the third (not the second!) article as an expansion of the affirmation “I believe in the Holy
Spirit," it points toward the area Reformed theology has traditionally investigated as it sought to answer this question. Christ's salvation enters into created reality through the work of the Holy Spirit—grace is mediated and applied through God's pneuma. Van Ruler's contribution to Reformed theology does not reside in the fact that the Holy Spirit is given attention in his theology (S. vander Linde calls Calvin the theologian of the Spirit par excellence), but that he refines and develops the doctrine of the Spirit in a manner unique to modern theology. When one's theology is truly trinitarian, e.g., when it is constructed from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, then, according to Van Ruler, one must not only speak of the Holy Spirit, but understand the pneumatological "expansion" by which messianic salvation fills the earth. The trinitarian theologian traces the structure of God's salvation of the earth; he relates God's multifaceted revelation to the myriad forms of existence.

Such theology can only be called scholastic. During his lectures Van Ruler often praised scholastic theology and said during a discussion of his theology that he was complimented to be called a scholastic theologian. His praise of scholasticism did not constitute a call to seek answers to contemporary theological questions in seventh century theology. Van Ruler's theological labor was not anachronistic. He wrestled with the deepest problems of modern theology and the twentieth century Geist. He found in scholasticism the "ripest form of thinking," for the scholastic attempts to explore every problem and to bring all aspects of reality into a configuration. Thus Van Ruler calls the theologian to a methodology which refuses to allow him to end his labors until all the lines proceeding from revelation to existence, from creation to redemption, from God to the world, from the eschaton to history have been identified and explored. This is the task of the scholastic.

For Van Ruler the lines are drawn and intersect through the pneuma of God. The Spirit fills existence with messianic redemption, the eschaton arches into the present, existence becomes historical, the law of God takes form in the affairs of men, creation is restored—in short, God brings his messianic salvation to the earth through the Holy Spirit. The activity of God's Spirit is not to be seen as a deus ex machina for the Spirit enters into human existences, even "mixing" with creation to fill the earth with the Christic configuration—with salvation. Not only kerygma, sacrament, and office are seen as instruments of the Spirit, but also tradition and history, civil law and state, individual and community, etc., are taken up in the currents of the pneumatic expansion of the messianic salvation—in giving earthly expression to the eschatological kingdom. Pneumatologically the quest of the scholastic thinker can be properly pursued—and all things can be gathered into one configuration.

Van Ruler's trinitarian theology, then, turns on the doctrine of the Spirit. However we judge his pneumatology, there is no doubt that Van Ruler's theological genius is nowhere more apparent than in this area. With Calvin, he may
be described as the theologian of the Holy Spirit *par excellence*. A closer examination of several aspects of his pneumatology will give evidence of the appropriateness of this description.

*A Relatively Independent Pneumatology*

Before the place of the doctrine of the Spirit in Van Ruler’s methodology is examined more closely, it must be noted that when Van Ruler speaks of an independent pneumatology he modifies the phrase with the word “relatively.”8 Although developing the doctrine of the third person of the trinity far more extensively than Barth, he too exhibits a certain “pneumatological reserve.” The doctrine of the Spirit is never independent for the function of *pneuma* never stands in isolation from the total trinitarian work. The salvation accomplished through Christ provides both the background and goal of the work of the Spirit.9 The *pneuma* participates in the *regnum Christi* which is a mode of the *regnum Dei*, the eschatological kingdom in which God shall be all in all. While acknowledging his great indebtedness to the Dutch theological master, O. Noordmans, Van Ruler parts company with him over the question of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the historic Christ.10 Van Ruler rejects a doctrine of the Spirit which would break the link between biblical *Heilsgeschichte* and the operation of the *pneuma*. The same point is made in Van Ruler’s refusal to speak of a “pneumatological theology” or of a “christological theology.” Only a trinitarian theology—a kingdom theology—is possible.11

Having placed a christological fence around his pneumatology,12 Van Ruler is free to develop a case for the “relative” independence of this doctrine. While a discussion of this matter is developed at a number of places in his writings, the first section of the yet unpublished *Hoofdlijnen van een Pneumatologie* provides an adequate summary of Van Ruler’s position. The nub of the problem can be expressed in this question: “How do I, as a single man living in the present, participate in the salvation of God in Christ?”13 In dealing with this question, Van Ruler introduces eight points for discussion which, to his thinking, establish the need for a (relatively) independent pneumatology.

The first line of thought Van Ruler pursues holds that the gospel is the good news proclaiming that a real salvation has come to a world locked in the darkness of a real perdition. The greatness of the *beneficia Christi* led to the dogma of the divinity and *homoousia* of the son. But the greatness of Christ’s redemptive work is only part of the picture. I, in the present, must participate in the *beneficia Christi*. The great reality of human participation in the salvatory work of Christ led to the dogma of the divinity and *homoousia* of the Holy Spirit.14

The second point Van Ruler makes centers in the Augustinian insight that man does not choose to participate in the *beneficia Christi*; not only these benefits, but our appropriation of them are divine gifts. They are appropriated through the gift of faith which is not a christological but a pneumatological reality.25

The third consideration rejects the contention that faith is an “empty” cat-
category—simply a response to the objective salvation accomplished in Christ. Such a view, while containing an important element of truth, holds the threat of docetism within it. Faith is a quality of my existence, for the redemption won by Christ must enter the particularity of my individual life and my particular time if pneumatological docetism is to be avoided. The individualization and temporalization of salvation in history demand a grasp of the work of the Spirit.¹⁰

Van Ruler's fourth point focuses on the reconciliation of guilt as the crucial concept in the Anselmic and Reformation understanding of Christ's salvatory work. This reconciliation of guilt, however, occurs before God's eyes—it is hidden from us. Not Christ, but the Holy Spirit reveals to us what happens in Christ before the Father. The "uncovering" of reconciliation thus demands the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the office of the apostle, and the confessing congregation.¹⁷

This has, in the fifth place, consequences for the doctrine of justification. When reconciliation is seen as something taking place on Golgotha and before God, justification is something taking place in the present to me. Reconciliation properly falls within the sphere of christology; justification comes under the heading of pneumatology. Imputation is a work of the Holy Spirit. Pneumatologically, righteousness is imputed to me in the Gestalten of the conscience, the heart, and the consciousness.¹⁸

Van Ruler insists in his sixth point that it is not enough to concentrate on the real salvation accomplished through Christ; as important is the fact that it is real men who participate in this redemption. This is never clear in a strictly christological context because representation plays a dominant role in this area. Christ represents man, stands in man's place, offers himself as a substitute for mankind. The central category for pneumatology is not representation but indwelling. In our real existence, in our particularity God the Spirit dwells within us, witnessing not only to but also with our spirit. This "with" means that we are not simply acted upon, but that we act along with the Holy Spirit. There is a full reciprocity between God and man; on the one hand, the Spirit is given only in and to faith; on the other, faith itself is the gift of the Spirit.¹⁹ This can only mean, according to Van Ruler, that there is an identity of content (inhoudelijke identiteit) in the judgment (oordelen) of men with the judgments of God; "men know and will and do in the Spirit the same that God knows, wills and does."²⁰

In his seventh point, Van Ruler focuses on the "I" who in his particularity and temporality participates in messianic salvation through the work of the Spirit. Man cannot be understood only as an individual; he must be seen in his societal, cultural, historical context. Man's salvation comes to him through the church as institution and community. And when the question of the nature and meaning of the proclamation of the word, the sacrament, the office, the synod are raised, the answer cannot be established christologically. The error of Roman Catholicism has been to step directly from christology to ecclesiology without the connection of pneumatology. The Reformation saw the gift of salvation in Christ to be a gift of the Holy Spirit mediated through the reality of history, of community, and of...
tradition. For this reason the Reformed reformation made so much of the covenant of grace. Reformed theology has thus been able to give careful attention to the fulness and reality of salvation, and to the "... presence of salvation in all moments of human existence and with the plurality of forms (gestalten) this presence calls into being and thus with the synthesis of the particularity of God in Christ with the universality of creation. This means that men's confessions and actions are taken up in the now present Kingdom of God." 21 This raises the question of the catholicity of the church, but even more the issue of the catholicity of the Kingdom of God. And this in turn points to the question of evangelization and mission. A theology of the apostolate is impossible without a relatively independent doctrine of the Holy Spirit. 22

Van Ruler concludes his discussion by suggesting that everything considered in the first seven points are concerned with the *unio mystica cum Christo*. The heart of Christianity rests in the fact that we have fellowship with Christ himself, in his historical and heavenly existence—in his human and divine natures. But this is not the goal. The goal is the Kingdom of God and living this earthly life as participants in the Kingdom which cannot occur without Christ who through his work once and for all established the kingdom in this world. The *unio mystica cum Christo* is the means by which that kingdom penetrates existence. The *unio* is not possible in any other way except through the *inhabitatio Spiritus Sancti*. 23 The Spirit enters into the forms of human existence, uniting creation with Christ and stamping reality with *imago Christi* which is the image of God's own kingdom.

This summary of Van Ruler's argument for a relatively independent pneumatology gives some indication of the direction in which the Dutch theologian develops his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Van Ruler raises several other methodological questions concerning the function of pneumatology in dogmatic theology which can only be mentioned here. One of these is dealt with in detail in his *magnum opus*, Van Ruler's dissertation entitled *De Vervulling van de Wet* (*The Fulfilling of the Law*). One of the many concerns that he wrestles with in this book displaying his incredible theological virtuosity is the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Messiah. 24 Sketching the complex interrelationship between Christ and the Spirit, Van Ruler suggests that from the eschatological perspective (the perspective of the Kingdom of God) it is as true to say that the Spirit places the Messiah as it is to make the customary assertion that the Messiah sends the Spirit. On the one hand, Christ sends the Spirit to bring messianic salvation into the *Gestalten* of world history; on the other, it is through the Spirit that God places the messiah in history as the "once and for all" redeemer. Eschatologically viewed, God's purpose is not to bring Christ to the world, but to transform fallen existence into the Kingdom of God. Christ and his work is the foundation, paradigm, and reality of the kingdom; 25 there can be no kingdom, no redemption without him. It is the Spirit, however, that moves in every corridor and corner of history to fill creation with Christic salvation and thus brings the kingdom to

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fallen creation. Thus the messiah becomes, eschatologically speaking, an "emergency measure," a means by which sin and corruption are overcome—an absolutely necessary and unique means used by the Spirit in his work of bringing the reality of the "now" and "yet to come" kingdom into the configurations of human existence. Christologically and soteriologically Christ precedes Spirit. Eschatologically (and protologically), pneumatology precedes christology.26 There is biblical and dogmatic evidence to justify both orders. In his dissertation Van Ruler employs the traditional arrangement because in the light of the inconclusiveness of the arguments for either order, he prefers to continue with the traditional one.

A final consideration dealing with the place of pneumatology in Van Ruler's theological methodology needs also to be mentioned. In one of his most brilliant essays, "Structuurverschillen tussen het Christologische en het Pneumatologische Gezichtspunt," ("Structural Differences between the Christological and the Pneumatological Viewpoint")27 Van Ruler attempts to draw the boundaries between christology and pneumatology so that the differences in the work of the second and third persons of the trinity might become clear. One example of these structural differences must suffice to indicate what Van Ruler is attempting to accomplish through his methodology. Christologically theologians have spoken of an enhypostatic union of the human and divine natures in the theanthropic person. The two natures combine in one person without the possibility of mixing or separation. Moreover, in the incarnation the divine nature did not come upon a human person, but the divine nature assumed humanity. Christologically there is no human "I" apart from or prior to the assumpto carnis. Pneumatologically speaking this is not the case. Here also we can speak of the relationship between man and God. But not of the divine assumption, but of man as a person in his own right—as man as an "I" apart from the indwelling of the Spirit. The relationship of God to man is not to be expressed wholly in terms of christological dogma because Jesus Christ is unique. He alone may be called God; Mary alone is theotokos. The Holy Spirit also enters into human existence—but this relationship between God and man or church or scripture cannot be called incarnational. The "humaness" of these things is not assumed but indwelt, used, united with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.28 Created reality remains created reality. The salvation of creation does not transform it into something essentially different from what it already is. It is forgiven, reconciled, ordered, healed. But it remains creation.

With this example of the manner in which Van Ruler develops the structural differences between a christological and pneumatological perspective and thus differentiates between that which is accomplished and given paradigmic expression through Christ, and the communication of that christocentric salvation to created reality, the discussion of the place of pneumatology in Van Ruler's trinitarian methodology must be concluded. A glimpse at Van Ruler's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit will demonstrate how his methodology forms his overall theological vision. Our investigation of Van Ruler's pneumatology will conclude
with an examination of the operation of the Spirit in the theology of the Utrecht theologian.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

In the discussion of Van Ruler's methodology it was pointed out that the Dutch theologian distinguishes between the messianic and pneumatic mode of relationship with created reality. The mode of the messianic relationship is the *assumptio carnis*, an once and for all event which is the *sine qua non* factor for, but not the prototype of man's relationship with God. There is only one messiah, one incarnation, one theanthropic person. The mode of pneumatic relationship is indwelling rather than assumption; human nature is not taken on by the Holy Spirit but indwelt by it. Christ represents us; the Spirit dwells within us, linking us to our representative. God himself lives in us! This fact constitutes the basis for all of the Holy Spirit's activity in the present. Pentecost is as important a moment of *Heilsgeschichte* as Christmas! Without the *inhabitio* creation could not know the reality of salvation until the eschaton.

The identification of the mode of the operation of the Holy Spirit raises another important theological question: who or what is indwelt by the Spirit? Van Ruler's answer is threefold. In the first place, the Spirit dwells in the individual Christian. This means in the spirit of man—but also the heart, soul, feelings, body, mind—the whole man, the whole life of man, is a temple for the Holy Spirit. But this cannot be properly understood without the second area of indwelling, the church. The church is the body of Christ, the people of God, the new Israel, a gathering of men—in these and all their expressions God the Spirit lives. In pope, bishop, and presbyter, synodical gathering and sacrament, in the elder's visitation and the sewing circle—the Spirit inhabits all the forms, aspects, and activities of his church. The church is community called by the Spirit, but it is also a traditional reality. Without tradition there is no church. Tradition is the tradition of the Spirit. And this points us to the breadth of the indwelling and thus to the third point: the dwelling places of God the Spirit are "... the people of the earth who are, through the course of the apostolic word, incorporated in the covenant with Israel." The relation of peoples, the structures of their society, their culture, the political formation of their lives—all this belongs essentially to God's living in the world. The indwelling Spirit fills creation with salvation.

The indwelling Spirit not only fills the forms of creation with God's salvation, but he also uses what he fills in the transmission of grace from age to age, from nation to nation, from culture to culture. The question of indwelling and tradition is locked into another central concern for pneumatology: the mediation of God's redemption. The problem can be focused in the question "How do I, first as man, second as an individual man, and third as present day man, participate in the salvation of God?" The answer to this question resides in the complementary work of Messiah and Holy Spirit. Christ's salvation must be transmitted to
creation. As has been indicated, Van Ruler demands that the uniqueness, the "once and for all" character of Christ and his work be maintained. The question of mediation, then, is the question of the outspreading, the expansion of messianic salvation into the world. While reaffirming the Reformation's solo Christo, Van Ruler points out that the Reformation also saw the importance of Scripture, and thus the apostolate and proclamation as means of communicating grace. A doctrine of Scripture simply cannot be developed out of pure christology. The mediation of salvation demands a doctrine of the Spirit.35

Scripture, apostles, proclamation express the work of the Holy Spirit. But they themselves stand in the historical, dynamic covenant of God, a covenant made with Israel, grounded in Jesus Christ, and through the apostolic word, continually involving new peoples. The covenant is the most comprehensive work of the Spirit.36

Tradition also stands in pneuma (see above). Tradition is the "handing over" from the one to the other. This is a "jump" rather than continuity. The Holy Spirit works in tradition to "pass on" something between God and man, from Scripture and church, office and congregation, past and future, people and people. Man participates in salvation not only through baptism, but through such things as birth in a Christian home and the common life of the congregation in which he is raised.37 We do not receive grace in a vacuum; the word, the sacraments, the instruction of parents and minister, the freedom for worship, etc.—all these things have been "passed on" in the great work of the Spirit. And interwoven with covenant and tradition are other forms of mediation. The church, the Christian culture, the corpus Christianum stand as Gestalten of the Holy Spirit in his mediating work. The means of grace identified by classical Reformed theology occupy a central position in Van Ruler's theology, but they do not stand alone in the mediation of salvation. There is a striking pluriformity in the work of the Holy Spirit.

These forms of mediation provide the channels through which salvation flows into the created order. Van Ruler attempts to give focus to these "salvation-realities" (beile-realiteiten) through four observations. In the first place, he suggests that pneumatological docetism presents as great a danger as christological docetism. The forms employed by the Holy Spirit are factual, tangible, historic realities. Through his indwelling the Spirit receives "earthly form" and "creaturely reality."38 Van Ruler suggests, in the second place, that these "salvation-realities" through which God's redemption is mediated can only be understood and participated in pneumatologically. Scripture, the sacraments, the church mean little if not seen as lying in the hands of God the Spirit to be used by him. But this is also true of all of life and the world. All existence becomes "gripped" by the Holy Spirit—sanctified and glorified through him.39 There is a third observation to be made in this context. It provides the reverse of the second point. If the Spirit is essential for earthly reality, so is the earth essential for the work of the Spirit. Men could never bring the Holy Spirit into their line of vision if it were
not for the reality of the instruments and Gestalten employed by the Spirit. The activity of the pneuma through the plurality of forms is most transparent when something happens (geschieden)—in history (geschiedenis). The Spirit may be comprehended, in the final analysis, only in a philosophy of history. Finally, Van Ruler observes that pneumatologically the idea of plurality is extremely important. There are numerous “salvation realities” and many manners in which salvation is mediated. The Spirit is antithetical to every monism and hierarchy. The unity of the Spirit is not the unity of being, but of love. Consequently the plurality of the Gestalten of the Spirit relativizes them and prevents the absolutizing of any one of them and at the same time the illicit anticipation of the eschaton.

In addition to the indwelling and mediating work of the Holy Spirit in Van Ruler’s theology, attention must be given to the appropriation of salvation as an activity falling within the theological category of pneuma. Van Ruler gives focus to this activity of the Spirit when he says, “In the mediation of salvation God the Holy Spirit brings salvation to me in a pluriform manner. In the appropriation of salvation it is I who in and through the Spirit receive salvation so that it becomes fully my salvation.” This means that the concern of God becomes my concern; the Word of God spoken to me becomes my word; my mind mirrors the mind of Christ. That this should happen is the essence, in any case, the objective of the work of the Spirit.

Does this mean that salvation is only appropriated by individual men? No, Van Ruler answers, for the single individual is an abstraction. Man’s corporate, institutional life, his historical existence is called to sing a hymn of praise to God—not only the individual human being. And there is a reciprocity between the individual and the communal. On the one hand I as an individual must be integrated into the church and history. I am only a moment in the gloria dei. On the other hand, I must make specific in my life the whole of the church and history. I become a specific form of the one great hymn of praise to God. My participation in God’s church and God’s history in the specificity of my own life finds expression in heart, deed, and thought.

The key question in the appropriation, however, is the question of autonomy. “The truth and salvation (heil), God as the truth and the saviour, must become evident to me, in such a way that I am not so much overwhelmed...but convinced and of free will, on the basis of my own insight, give God my approval and deem him true.” Man is not an object to be acted upon, but a subject who thinks, decides, and himself acts. He must freely “think after” God—accept God’s judgments and redemptive activities as true and vital out of his own freedom. At the same time, to man in his sinfulness God in Christ is alien and strange. The autonomy cannot therefore be the creative autonomy of man’s spirit. It is rather an autonomy of judgment; a receptive autonomy. There is a reciprocity between God and man, but this reciprocity is theonomic in character—with a continual “back and forth” between authority and autonomy. This reciprocity is pre-emin-
ently a work of the Holy Spirit. God’s redemption is appropriated when in all aspects of salvation—including the Kingdom of God and thus the world—man knows with, wills with, and acts with God. In a word, man judges with God.¹⁴⁶

Finally, the application of salvation happens in a dynamic process. The absolute moment, whether the conversion of the born-again or baptism for regeneration, must, according to Van Ruler, be rejected. The call of God extends over the total life-time of a man and over the history of the church and the human family as well. Once again the plurality of forms in the mediation of salvation and the corporate character of the application must be reaffirmed. “In every moment God mediates his salvation to a man, to men, and to the human family while in every moment man himself appropriates salvation with God—not so much again and again, but anew. In every moment salvation receives a new form.”¹⁴⁷

The appropriation of salvation thus stands linked in Van Ruler’s theology to the indwelling and mediatorial work of the Spirit. In short compass, it can be said that for Van Ruler the Holy Spirit brings the Kingdom of God—grounded in and expressed by the regnum Christi—into the historical reality of human existence without threatening to eclipse the significance and “givenness” of creation. Van Ruler is concerned with the salvation of the earth! This salvation is accomplished by God the Father in God the Son through God the Holy Spirit. Once again the trinitarian formula is for Van Ruler, as we have seen, far more than an expression of ancient orthodoxy. Both in methodology and in the content of his theology and ethics, Van Ruler finds in the economic and immanent trinity the key to unlocking the riddle of God and man, good and evil, individual and community, religion and politics, Christianity and culture, etc. All of reality falls within the purview of the trinitarian theologian; as Van Ruler said to me on several occasions, theology and philosophy are not antithetical; the theologian is the most far-searching philosopher. The link between theology and philosophy, between creation and redemption, between first and second persons of the trinity (both economically and immanently) is the Holy Spirit.

Van Ruler’s trinitarian theology with its focus on pneumatology makes him a theologian “for all seasons.” Sharing with modernism a profound interest in creation, he wrestled with the central questions raised by the modern Geist. The problems of knowledge, reason, consciousness, decision, autonomy, reality, history, culture, experience, etc., were his concerns. Schleiermacher’s questions were in large measure his. At the same time, again and again Van Ruler demonstrated that the Christian church, and especially Reformed theology, could make important contributions to the definition and solution of such problems. The answers were not sought, as with modernism, within the category of creation (the inner man, reason, evolution, revolution, etc.) but within the sphere of trinitarian theology. Creation is as important to Van Ruler as it was for the Enlightenment, but creation is never allowed to over-shadow messianic salvation in his theology. And with the reformation that salvation is extra nos—a gift from the Lord standing
above and beyond creation. In the pneumatological “mix” of creation and salvation Van Ruler points to the resolution of a number of theological problems vexing the contemporary church. There is surely something of the “social gospel” in Van Ruler’s thought, although he never entertained the notion that the Kingdom of God was in the first place a work of man. There is a deep pietistic strain in Van Ruler’s writing, although he carried on a lover’s quarrel with the group within the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk which, in his opinion, substituted religious experience for social, cultural concerns. It is simply impossible to label Van Ruler as an orthodox, a neo-orthodox, modernist, or pietistic theologian. Elements of each of these viewpoints may be found in his theology. His thought cannot be encompassed by any one of them. We noted above that Van Ruler saw the characterization of his theology as scholastic to be a compliment. Perhaps neo-scholasticism might be the most appropriate title given to his thought. But then in the same sense as modern physics might be called “neo-scholastic.”

However we characterize his theology, it could not be maintained without his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Few critical questions have been raised here concerning that doctrine because the primary task of this essay is to provide an introduction to his pneumatology rather than to offer a critical assessment. Obviously this does not mean that Van Ruler’s pneumatology is free from theological problems. When Barth expressed a willingness to give the Holy Spirit greater place in his thought, he also articulated the danger of a relatively independent pneumatology. His words provide a critical question to be raised concerning Van Ruler’s pneumatology:

I personally think that a theology of the Spirit might be all right after A.D. 2000, but now we are still too close to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is still too difficult to distinguish between God’s Spirit and man’s spirit.\(^4\)

Van Ruler attempts to maintain this distinction while bringing the Spirit of God and the spirit of man in the closest relationship. Whether he succeeds is a question demanding a far more detailed discussion than can be provided in a single introductory essay.

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\(^1\)“Earth” and “earthly” are favored terms in Van Ruler’s theology. They connote far more than the physical reality on which human existence is posited; the whole scope of “this worldly” existence falls within their purview.

\(^2\)Karl Barth, *Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, ed. John Godsey (Richmond, John Knox Press, no date), p. 27.

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)A. A. Van Ruler, “Hoofdlijnen van een Pneumatologie,” unpublished article, p. 39. Although Van Ruler’s eschatological focus seems to single him out as an early proponent of the “theology of hope,” there are profound differences between his theology and that of those theologians usually identified with this “school.” Jürgen Moltmann, for example, has acknowledged his indebtedness to Van Ruler, but differs from the Dutchman in that for him eschatology means *nova creatio* while for Van Ruler it signifies *recreatio*.


\(^7\)Ibid.

\(^8\)“Hoofdlijnen,” p. 1.

Van Ruler can also speak of a pneumatological "fence" around Christology.

I am responsible for translating the quotations from Van Ruler's works which appear in this article.

A. A. Van Ruler, De vervulling van de wet (Nijkerk, G. F. Callenbach, 1947), pp. 165ff.


See Vervulling, pp. 182-183; Spiritu, pp. 205ff.