



Research article



A SHORT ASSESSMENT OF THE TRINITARIAN PNEUMATOLOGY OF ROMANS 8:26-27

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2025.7301>

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT



Article history:

Received: 18-7-2025

Accepted: 28-8-2025

Available online 30-9-2025

This study examines the theological implications of Romans 8:26-27, focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit's intercession as described by Paul. The paper critiques David K. Bernard's Oneness Pentecostal interpretation, which denies personal distinctions within the Godhead, arguing that it conflates the Spirit with God's essence and overlooks the distinct economic roles of the Son and Spirit in intercession. Bernard's analogy of the Spirit to a human spirit is challenged as an oversimplification that neglects God's unique metaphysical nature. Additionally, the study addresses subordinationist interpretations, such as those by Buzzard and Hunting, which reduce the Spirit to an impersonal force or an extension of Christ, highlighting inconsistencies in their appeal to literary personification and the logical necessity of intercession. Drawing on biblical texts (e.g., Isaiah 48:12-16) and historical theological insights, the paper argues that the Spirit's intercession implies personal distinction from the Father and the Son, supporting a conventional trinitarian pneumatology.

Keywords:

Pneumatology, Romans, Trinitarianism, Non-Trinitarianism, Pauline Studies



Introduction

Romans 8:26-27 presents an underappreciated conception of Pauline pneumatology, in which the Spirit is depicted as playing a mediatorial role by intervening in the prayers of the church. Paul's depiction requires a hypostatic distinction between the Spirit who helps the church through intercession and the Father who is the primary object of the prayers of his people. This study provides a concise examination of Romans 8:26-27 and evaluates several non-trinitarian interpretations, demonstrating the consistency of trinitarian pneumatology with the biblical text.

A Concise Analysis of Romans 8:26-27

Paul wrote, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).¹ God has helped His people by instilling the hope of the resurrection in their hearts (vv. 18-25); the Spirit complements His help through prayer. The lengthy verb συναντιλαμβάνεται, translated "helps" in the first clause of v. 26, connotes the Spirit's joining together with God's people to help them: "The Spirit joins with us in bearing the burdens imposed by our weakness."² Because the people of God "do not know what to pray,"³ the Spirit provides direction to the prayers of God's people, compensating for their deficiencies in prayer: The Spirit

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¹ All biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 545.

³ There is an inherent difficulty in interpreting προσευξόμεθα in v. 26b, whether referring to persons or things prayed for (cf. Jas. 4:3; 1 John 5:14), or the approach to prayer ("We do not know how to pray as we ought," NASB). The ESV indicates the former, but perhaps the ambiguity of the phrase τὸ γὰρ τί προσευξόμεθα καθὼ δὲ οὐκ οἶδαμεν may be intended to encompass both the content and approach to prayer as Ferguson implies: "The grace of the Spirit's ministry is that even when Christians are too weak to formulate prayer, he effects the Father's determination to gather his children in his arms and engage them in his purposes. On such occasions, the inexpressible groans of intercession are akin to the grunts or groans of those whose cerebral abilities have been impaired, yet which are marvelously interpreted by their loved ones." Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 189.



“translates...foolish and inadequate prayers to the Father, in the Son.”⁴ The means through which this intercession occurs is through “groanings too deep for words.”⁵ While the Israelites groaned under the burden of Egyptian slavery (Exod. 2:23) and the children of God groan as they persist in the post-fall creation (Rom. 8:23), the Spirit’s deep groans come to the aid of God’s people.⁶

Two related verbs are translated as “intercede” within vv. 26-27, namely, ὑπερεντυγχάνω and ἐντυγχάνω. The first is a distinctly Pauline hapax (cf. 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Cor. 10:14; Rom. 8:37) that, owing to the inclusion of ὑπερ, indicates that the intercession is on behalf of God’s people.⁷ The second verb is defined as “to make an earnest request through contact with the person approached.”⁸ While the verb can take the sense of encountering literature (e.g., 2 Macc. 15:39), it is most commonly used to describe one person petitioning another. This is always the sense in which the verb is used in the NT (Acts 25:24; Rom. 8:34; 11:2; Heb. 7:25) and frequently in the Septuagint (Wis. 8:21; 16:28; 1 Macc. 8:32; 10:61).

⁴ Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God’s Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 209.

⁵ In seeking to protect the doctrine of divine impassability, Lloyd-Jones argues that the “groanings” of v. 26 reflect the activity of the church and not the Spirit. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 135-36; cf. Augustine, *Letters of Saint Augustine*, 130.15.28 (NPNF¹ 1:468); Brenda Joy Boddy, Dan Lioy “The Intercession of the Holy Spirit: Revisiting Romans 8:26–27,” *Conspectus* 21 (2020): 4-8. However, it is apparent that “The groanings of v. 26 are not those of believers, but are expressly referenced to their advocate, the Spirit. He is the One whom Paul specifically says ‘intercedes with groanings.’” James E. Rosscup, “The Spirit’s Intercession,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 1 (1999): 153. It is evident that these unspoken groans refer to the Spirit, given the adversative and intensive pronoun ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ, and given that the Spirit is the subject of the verb ὑπερεντυγχάνει.

⁶ Wilckens wrote: The groaning of the Spirit, however, is not simply parallel to that of Christians: the Spirit intercedes for us with inexpressible groanings, thus coming to the aid of our weakness.” Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer 6-11*, Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zürich and Neukirchen-Vluyn, DE: Benziger and Neukirchener, 1978), 160. Cf. Frank S. Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 407.

⁷ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1033. Several MSS have ὑπερεντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν in v. 26, including an early corrector of κ as well as C, Ψ , and 33. Support for the omission of the phrase is compelling: \mathfrak{P}^{27} , \mathfrak{P}^{46} , the original hand of κ , as well as A, B, and D. Given that the inclusion of ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν creates a redundancy, the shorter text is to be preferred.

⁸ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ³⁴¹.



Romans 8:26-27 presupposes a personal distinction between the Holy Spirit and the Father and Son, as Christopher Holmes explains:

One best explains the hypostatic particularity and uniqueness of the Spirit by highlighting Romans 8:26–27. Only then can one appreciate the extent to which the eternal, ontological life of the Trinity is articulated on the basis of its impingement in relation to the life of the believer.⁹

The Holy Spirit “is not only an *action* but also an *actor*, that is, a principle endowed with will and intelligence who acts consciously and freely.¹⁰ Verse 27 depicts the economic harmony of the Father and Spirit, as the Father knows the Spirit’s mind as he intercedes according to the will of God. Whereas the Son intercedes for the elect at the right hand of God (v. 34), the Spirit intercedes from the hearts of his people.¹¹

Romans 8:26-27 and Oneness Pentecostalism

Oneness Pentecostalism universally conflates the Holy Spirit with the Father. David Bernard, the most prolific representative of Oneness theology, wrote, “The Father is the Holy Spirit.”¹² Robert Graves similarly argues: “The Scriptures reveal that God the Father Himself is the Holy Spirit...”¹³ Paul’s claim that the Spirit intercedes to God according to the will of God would seem to confound such assertions, and, therefore, Oneness interpreters have sought to explain how Romans 8:26-27 accords with modalistic unitarianism. David Bernard wrote,

Verse 27 does not separate the Godhead into two persons, with one person interceding and another person hearing the prayer. If it did, who is the intercessor—the Holy Spirit (verse 26) or Christ (verse 34)? Who is the searcher of hearts—God (verse 27)

⁹ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Holy Spirit*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 35–6.

¹⁰ Greg R. Allison, Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, Theology for the People of God (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 251.

¹¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 549.

¹² David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, Pentecostal Theology (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2011), 129.

¹³ R. Brent Graves, *The God of Two Testaments*, Rev. ed. (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2000), 290; cf. 169-200.



or the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10)? The Spirit is simply God in activity. The Spirit is no more a separate person from God than a man's spirit is a separate person from that man. Just as a man's spirit knows his own thoughts, so God's Spirit knows the mind and will of God (1 Corinthians 2:11).¹⁴

Bernard's appeal to Romans 8:34 and the intercession of the Son assumes that both the Spirit and the Son cannot simultaneously intercede before God. Given the economic roles of the Son and Spirit in the salvation of God's people, such an assumption is entirely invalid. Christ's intercession is a significant aspect of his priestly ministry wherein he intercedes from the presence of God (Heb. 7:25). By contrast, the Spirit's intercession occurs while he indwells his people and is an aspect of his sanctifying work. While the Son and Spirit mutually intercede on behalf of the people of God, they intercede in distinct ways. Similarly, Bernard's appeal to 1 Corinthians 2:10 erroneously assumes that God and his Spirit cannot know the hearts of the elect. These assumptions are unsupported and evidently seek to obscure the problem Romans 8:26-27 poses for Oneness theology.

The statement, "The Spirit is no more a separate person from God than a man's spirit is a separate person from that man," implies that God's metaphysical nature corresponds directly to mankind.¹⁵ This indefensible line of reasoning overlooks the numerous ways God is distinct from his image bearers. Numerous biblical passages depict economic distinctions between the Father and the Spirit, indicating personal distinction. For example, in Isaiah 48:12-13, Yahweh claimed, "I am the first, and I am the last. My right hand laid the foundation of the earth..." In v. 14, God speaks of Yahweh in the third person: "Yahweh loves him; he shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans." In v. 16, he said, "Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning, I have not

¹⁴ David K. Bernard, *The Message of Romans* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 2008), 188-89. See also the argumentation of Hayes, who merely asserts that Rom. 8:26-27 and v. 34 "are not demonstrating two individuals, but, rather, two attributes of one God-person at work during two stages of a believer's life." Jerry Hayes, *Godhead Theology: Modalism, the Original Orthodoxy* (Texas City, TX: Seventh Millennium Pub., 2015), 458. Hayes never substantiates this claim exegetically but instead depends on modalistic interpretations of other passages in the NT. A similar unsupported harmonization occurs in Glen K. Johnson, *What Trinitarian Doctrine Misses: The Humility of God as a Man* (Hazelwood, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, 2007), 199.

¹⁵ See also the argumentation of Kegan A. Chandler, *The God of Jesus in Light of Christian Dogma; The Recovery of New Testament Theology* (McDonough, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2016), Kindle, loc. 11056-11077. Although a unitarian, Chandler argues in the same vein.



spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.” The Son is sent by both the Father and the Spirit to defeat the enemies of God’s people. Ambrose, writing in the fourth century, observed, “He who made the heaven and the earth himself said that he is sent by the Lord and his Spirit.”¹⁶ John Owen notes the distinct ways in which the Father and Spirit work to send the Son:

The same work in sending of Christ is ascribed unto the “Lord GOD,” that is, the Father, and to the “Spirit,” but in a different manner. He was sent by the Father authoritatively; and the furniture he received by the Spirit, of gifts for his work and office, is called his sending of him; as the same work is assigned unto different persons in the Trinity on different accounts.¹⁷

Romans 8:26-27 and Unitarian Interpretations

Ironically, some unitarian writers have taken a similar tack to explain the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit. Anthony Buzzard and Charles Hunting argue:

We have seen that Paul understood the Spirit as the self-awareness and mind of God. When he speaks of the Spirit as a heavenly power distinct from the Father and helping Christians with prayer, he refers in the same passage to Christ himself “pleading for us” (Rom. 8:26, 34). The Spirit is Christ himself extending his influence to the believers.¹⁸

This is a curious argument for three reasons. First, elsewhere, Buzzard insists that the Holy Spirit is impersonal, and he explains texts that would seem to contradict this assertion as instances of literary personification.¹⁹ On this view, the many biblical descriptions of the personal activities of the Spirit, such as testifying (John 15:26; Rom. 8:16), teaching (John

¹⁶ *Fid.* 9.75 (NPNF² 10:233). Cf. Origen, *Comm. ser. Matt.* 13.18 (ANF 9:486); Cyril of Jer., *Cat.* 16:30 (NPNF² 7:123); Augustine, *Trin.* 15.8-9 (NPNF¹ 3:203).

¹⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, W. H. Goold ed., vol. 3 (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 171.

¹⁸ Anthony F. Buzzard, Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham, MD: International Scholars Pub., 1998), 233.

¹⁹ Anthony Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian: A Call to Return to the Creed of Jesus* (Morrow, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2007), 362-63.



14:26), leading (Rom. 8:14), and speaking (Ezek. 2:2; Matt. 10:20; Mark 13:11; Acts 1:16; 4:25; 8:29) constitute a vast personification motif which the historic church has mistakenly taken as indicative of actual personhood. However, in the above quotation, Buzzard and Hunting identify the Spirit as “Christ himself.” Such an inconsistent interpretive strategy is surely special pleading.²⁰

Second, if Paul understood the Spirit as the “mind of God,” there would be little reason for the Spirit to intercede on behalf of God’s people unto God. Third, if Paul intended to communicate that “Christ himself [was] extending his influence to the believers,” it is doubtful he would describe such an activity as intercession by the Spirit on account of the prayers of the elect.

Conclusion

Romans 8:26-27 presents a profound depiction of the Holy Spirit’s intercessory role, which affirms the personal distinction of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The Spirit’s active petitioning on behalf of believers, is both complementary and distinct from Christ’s priestly intercession (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). Contrary to Oneness theology, which conflates the Spirit with God’s singular essence and draws an inadequate analogy to human nature, biblical texts like Isaiah 48:12-16 reveal distinct roles among the Father, Son, and Spirit, particularly in the sending of the Son. Similarly, subordinationist interpretations, such as those of Buzzard and Hunting, falter by reducing the Spirit to an impersonal force or an extension of Christ, undermining the text’s clear portrayal of the Spirit’s personal agency. Romans 8:26-27 exemplifies trinitarian pneumatology, as the text depicts the harmony and distinction of the Father and the Spirit to accomplish the salvation and sanctification of God’s people.

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²⁰ Cf. Allfree, who claims, “Scripture seems to present a consistent description of the Holy Spirit as the power of God, not a person” but who goes on to identify the Spirit in various passages as both God and angelic agents. Mark Allfree, “The Holy Spirit,” in Thomas E. Gaston, ed., *One God the Father* (Tyne and Wear, UK: Willow Pub., 2013), 110-18.



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