

## The Holy Spirit

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### I. The Holy Spirit Is a Person

One of the distinguishing marks of a Christian is his belief in the Holy Spirit as a Person. From the early days of the church to present-day Modernism, there have been those who have denied the personality of the Spirit in one form or another. Many so-called Christian preachers and theologians refer to the Spirit as an "it," and not as a "he." They consider him to be an impersonal influence or power or energy, and not the third Person of the Trinity. Such a view would rob us of some of the great blessings of our salvation. Furthermore, it is not Biblical.

In several ways the Bible reveals to us that the Spirit is a Person. First of all, it attributes to him a mind, will, and emotions, which are exclusively characteristics of a person. Impersonal objects do not have these qualities, but the Spirit of God does. Paul presupposes that the Spirit has a mind when he writes that "the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (I Cor. 2:10, 11). Here Paul ascribes to the Holy Spirit knowledge, which an influence or a power does not have, but a person does. The Bible also pictures the Spirit as possessing the personal quality of a will. We read that when Paul, Silas, and Timothy wanted to go to Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to" (Acts 16:7). And in I Corinthians 12:11 Paul tells us that the Spirit gives many gifts to Christians, "just as he determines." As far as emotions are concerned, Ephesians 4:30 assumes that the Spirit can have grief, for it commands us, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God."

A second way in which the Bible reveals that the Spirit is a Person is by placing him in juxtaposition with other persons. For instance, we know that the Father and Son are Persons, and so when Jesus speaks of baptizing disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), he indicates thereby that the Holy Spirit is a Person, too, just as the Father and the Son are. James, in authorizing certain

instructions to the early church, wrote, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements" (Acts 15:28). He very clearly considers the Holy Spirit a Person capable of the same thoughts and ideas as he and the apostles had.

Furthermore, it would be a meaningless redundancy to say that Jesus returned from the wilderness "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14) if the Spirit were simply an impersonal power. Read the phrase again, substituting the word *power* for *Spirit*.

How thankful we must be that the Spirit is a Person! For it is just because he is a Person that he can convict us of sin and thereby lead us to God, dwell within us and give us power over sin, inspire the Bible and illuminate our minds so that we can understand it, guide us so that we know what the will of God is for us, lead us in prayer, and call ministers, elders, and deacons as office-bearers of the church.

Just because the Holy Spirit is a Person we may also react unfavorably toward him. We may resist, grieve, despise, and blaspheme him. This is displeasing to him, and it will surely work harm for ourselves. May we never deny the personality of the Spirit, but believe in him and experience the blessings that can come to us because of this fact.

## **II. The Holy Spirit Is a Divine Person**

Some have believed that the Holy Spirit is a Person, but they have considered him to be a created personality, and not God himself. They have realized that the Spirit is not an impersonal "it," but they have considered him to be inferior to the Father. The Bible, however, attributes to the Holy Spirit not only personal characteristics, but also divine qualities. These divine attributes mark the Holy Spirit as being God.

According to the Scriptures, the Spirit of God is omnipotent, for he has his role in creation (Gen. 1:2), in providence (Ps. 104:30), in the supernatural conception of Jesus (Luke 1:35), in regeneration, and in the equipping of each Christian with spiritual gifts.

He is also omniscient, as Isaiah intimates when he asks: "Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counselor has taught him? With whom did he take counsel, and who instructed him and taught him in the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?" (40:13, 14). Paul would have us believe the same thing when he writes that "the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God" (I Cor. 2:10).

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit may be characterized as being omnipresent. The psalmist eloquently asks: "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?" (Ps. 139:7). He says that he can never escape the Spirit's presence, not even if he ascends to heaven, or descends to Sheol, or flees to the seas, or hides in the blackness of the night. The Spirit is everywhere. In the New Testament we read that the Spirit dwells in believers, and the great number of Christians does not hinder him from being present in each one.

Hebrews 9:14 tells us that Christ “through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God” thus ascribing to the Holy Spirit the divine quality of eternity.

Another proof of the deity of the Spirit is to be found, in the fact that both the Old and New Testaments at times interchange the phrase “the Spirit said” and the phrase “the LORD said.”

Lastly, the mere coupling of the name of the Holy Spirit with the names of the Father and the Son, as in the great commission (Matt. 28:19) or in the apostolic benediction (II Cor. 13:14), shows that the Spirit is put on the same level as, the other two Persons and, therefore, is considered to be divine. It would be most incongruous to couple the name of a created being with that of the Godhead in such tightly knit expressions.

The fact of the deity of the Holy Spirit is important for us. If he were not God, he could not perform his beautiful work in creation, nor his authoritative work in inspiration, nor his illuminating work in men’s minds. Neither could he have overcome our depravity to regenerate, indwell, and sanctify us. We may well be grateful that he is not a finite being but a divine Person.

### **III. The Holy Spirit Is a Divine Person Distinct from the Father and the Son**

In the history of the church there have been those who have believed in the personality of the Holy Spirit and in his deity, but who have so stressed the unity of the Trinity that they have denied that there were three distinct Persons in the Godhead. There were those in the third’ century who pictured God as appearing in creation as the Father, later on in history as the Son, and finally making his appearance as the Holy Spirit. According to their views there were not simultaneously three Persons in the Godhead. But the one Godhead was called the Father at one time, the Son at another, and the Spirit at a third time. Or the Father first changed into the Son, and later into the Holy Spirit.

These theories, too, are a departure from the revelation of Scripture. Certain Biblical texts are clear in pointing out that there are three distinct Persons and not merely different manifestations of the same God. When Jesus was baptized, for example, the voice of the Father sounded from heaven, saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.” At the same time, the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. The simultaneous appearance of these three Persons makes it impossible to interpret the Godhead simply as a unity. The same may be said of Jesus’ statement, “*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor*” (John 14:16). Similarly, Acts 2:33 draws a clear distinction among three Persons of the Godhead: “Exalted to the right hand of God, *he* [i.e., Christ] has received from *the Father* the promised *Holy Spirit*.”

It is a definite blessing to have a God that is not just one Person but three. It makes a rich Trinity. For not only is there a Father who loves us and cares for us, but also a Christ who obtained our salvation and intercedes for us and a Holy Spirit who dwells within us and applies salvation to our lives.

#### IV. The Holy Spirit Proceeds from the Father and the Son

There is among the three Persons of the Trinity a definite relationship and order. Because the three Persons are equally God, it must not be thought that they are all the same. Each one has distinctive properties and relationships to the others. Between the first and the second Persons, for example, there is the relationship of Father and Son. From all eternity the Father begat the Son. The Holy Spirit did not beget the Son, only the Father did.

In a similar fashion, there is an unchangeable relationship between the Holy Spirit and the other Persons of the Godhead: the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. It is difficult to describe what is meant by the procession of the Spirit of God; we can do little more than repeat the words of Scripture, since the Scriptures do not explain this term. But it is remarkable that the Bible does not say that the Holy Spirit was begotten by the Father, as was Christ, nor that he was begotten by Christ. If that were true, then, as the Church Fathers intimated, the Spirit would have been either a brother to Christ or a grandson to the Father. But the Bible carefully avoids the term *begotten* in relation to the Holy Spirit. As the Athanasian Creed correctly puts it, he was “neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.” This word *proceed* is used by Jesus in John 15:26, where he says, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me.”

The name of the Spirit also gives another hint as to this intra-trinitarian relationship. For as the name *Father* shows his relationship to the Son, and the name *Son* describes his relationship to the Father, so also the name *Spirit* points to the relationship of the Spirit to the other two Persons: it is one in which he is *spirated* or breathed, for that is the very meaning of the name *Spirit*.

It must be remembered, however, that although the Spirit proceeds from or is spirated by the Father and the Son, he is still full God. His procession does not mean that he is inferior to the Father or the Son, any more than the generation of the Son means that he is not on an equality with the Father. The secret lies in the fact that the Spirit was *eternally* spirated, just as the Son was *eternally* begotten. There never was a time when the Spirit was not being spirated. He was eternally coexistent with the Father and the Son. To say that he proceeded from or was breathed out by the Father and the Son does not imply that he is less God, but it only indicates the relation that he eternally sustains to the other two Persons of the Trinity.

It should also be noted that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, and not only from the Father. That he proceeds from the Father is obvious from John 15:26, but it is not so clear that he also proceeds from the Son. Yet this may be deduced from those passages that tell us that Jesus sends out the Spirit into the world and breathes him onto the disciples (John 15:16; 16:7; 20:22). For the temporal spiration implies an eternal spiration. It reflects a certain authority that the Son has even in the intra-trinitarian relationships. Moreover, the Spirit is not only called the “Spirit of the Father,”

but also the “Spirit of the Son” (Gal. 4:6), the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9), and the “Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19).

This relationship of the Spirit to the other two Persons explains why the Holy Spirit is considered the third Person of the Trinity and not the first or second. The Father is first because he begets the Son. The Son is the second Person because he is begotten. The Holy Spirit is third because he proceeds from both the Father and the Son.

It is remarkable that this same order of the Trinity is revealed in history, so that it is not until after the first two Persons have appeared in the foreground in succession that the Holy Spirit comes into prominence. From the time of creation to the time of Christ, it was the Father who was more prominent in the world. He was the one who received the chief glory in creation and with whom Israel in the Old Testament dealt chiefly. When Christ came, the Father did not appear as conspicuously, the Holy Spirit had not yet appeared in his fullness, and Christ played a more prominent role. After the incarnation, however, Christ ascended into heaven, and the third Person of the Trinity appeared on the scene more than the others. Thus because the three Persons have a definite order in the Trinity, that order reveals itself in history, so that each Person appears in history in the same order as he is found in the Trinity itself.

It may also be observed that it was exactly because the Holy Spirit is breathed out by the Father and the Son in the Trinity that it was the Holy Spirit, and not the Father or the Son, who was breathed out on the church at Pentecost. This corresponds to the fact that because the second Person of the Trinity is a Son in the Trinity, he should be the incarnate Son on earth. Similarly, because the first Person of the Trinity is the Father in the Trinity, he is also the Father of believers.

These then are some of the aspects of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the other two Persons of the Trinity. Although we do not understand very much about this relationship, we should not ignore what the Spirit has revealed but, on the contrary, should rejoice that he has guided his church into a definition of himself and his relationship to the other two Persons, however limited the definition may be. For all of his revelation has a purpose and is not to be disregarded.

As far as the practical results of the doctrine of the spiration of the Spirit of God are concerned, they have been far-reaching. In the year 1054 Christendom was split into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Although there were many underlying factors, a stone of stumbling was that the Eastern Christians believed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, whereas the Western churches confessed with the Council of Toledo (589) that the Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son” (*filioque*; that is, *and from the son*, the term that symbolized the difference). As a result of these differences, the East separated from the West and today the Eastern church has a membership of over 160 million. Thus this doctrine does have enormous practical effects, and if it had not been formulated by the Church Fathers fifteen hundred years ago, it could be a burning issue today, affecting our church lives. Therefore, we must be grateful for the knowledge that the Holy Spirit has given us on this matter.

Moreover, as Abraham Kuyper has incisively pointed out, a denial of the *filioque* leads to an unhealthy mysticism. It tends to isolate the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives from the work of Jesus. Redemption by Christ is put in the background, while the sanctifying work of the Spirit is brought to the fore. The emphasis is more and more on the work of the Spirit in our lives, which tends to lead to an independence from Christ, the church, and the Bible. Sanctification can loom larger than justification, the subjective communion with the Spirit larger than the objective church life, and illumination by the Spirit larger than the Word. Kuyper believes that this has actually been the case to some extent in the Eastern church, as a result of the denial that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father.

Thus we see that the lengthy theological deliberations that take place at church councils and synods do at times have a great influence. Their decisions seep down from the top to the rank and file, even though the debates do run the risk of being charged with quibbling. We must be grateful for the precious revelation that the Holy Spirit has given of his place in the Trinity, but we should not be satisfied with mere intellectual knowledge. Rather, building upon that, we must strive to know experientially the Spirit and his workings.

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