

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 13

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God at work—creating, speaking, transforming us, living within us, working in us. Although the Holy Spirit can do this work without our knowledge, it is helpful for us to know more.

The Holy Spirit is God

The Holy Spirit has the attributes of God, is equated with God and does work that only God does. Like God, the Spirit is holy—so holy that insulting the Spirit is just as sinful as trampling the Son of God under foot (Hebrews 10:29).

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:32). This indicates that the Spirit is holy by nature rather than having an assigned holiness such as the temple had.

Like God, the Holy Spirit is eternal (Hebrews 9:14). Like God, the Holy Spirit is everywhere present (Psalm 139:7-9). Like God, the Holy Spirit knows everything (1 Corinthians 2:10-11; John 14:26). The Spirit creates (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30) and empowers miracles (Matthew 12:28; Romans 15:18-19), doing the work or ministry of God.

Several passages discuss the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as equally divine. In a discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul puts the Spirit, the Lord, and God in parallel constructions (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). He closes a letter with a three-part prayer (2 Corinthians 13:14). Peter begins a letter with a different three-part formula (1 Peter 1:2). These are not proof of unity, but they support it.

The baptismal formula has a stronger indication of unity—“in the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). The three have one name, indicating one essence and being.

When the Holy Spirit does something, God is

doing it. When the Holy Spirit speaks, God is speaking. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God (Acts 5:3-4). As Peter said, Ananias did not lie to God’s representative, but to God himself. People do not “lie” to an impersonal power.

In one passage, Paul says that Christians are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19); in another he says that we are God’s temple (1 Corinthians 3:16). A temple is for the worship of a divine being, not an impersonal power. When Paul writes “temple of the Holy Spirit,” he implies that the Holy Spirit is God.

The Holy Spirit and God are also equated in Acts 13:2: “The Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for *me* Barnabas and Saul for the work to which *I* have called them.’” In this verse, the Holy Spirit speaks with personal pronouns, speaking as God. Similarly, the Holy Spirit says that the Israelites “tested and tried me”; the Holy Spirit says that “I was angry.... They shall never enter my rest” (Hebrews 3:7-11).

But the Holy Spirit is not just another name for God. The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, as shown in Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). The three are distinct, but one.

The Holy Spirit does the work of God in our lives. We are born of God (John 1:12), which is the same as being born of the Spirit (John 3:5). The Holy Spirit is the means by which God lives in us (Ephesians 2:22; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). The Holy Spirit lives in us (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16)—and because the Spirit lives in us, we can say that *God* lives in us.

The Spirit is personal

Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as having personal characteristics.

- The Spirit lives (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16).

- The Spirit speaks (Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 21:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:7; etc.).

- The Spirit sometimes uses the personal pronoun “I” (Acts 10:20; 13:2).

- The Spirit may be spoken to, tested, grieved, insulted or blasphemed (Acts 5:3, 9; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 10:29; Matthew 12:31).

- The Spirit guides, intercedes, calls and commissions (Romans 8:14, 26; Acts 13:2; 20:28).

Romans 8:27 refers to the “mind” of the Spirit. He makes judgments—a decision “seemed good” to the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The Spirit “knows” and “determines” (1 Corinthians 2:11; 12:11). This is not an impersonal power.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit the *parakletos*—translated as the Comforter, the Advocate or the Counselor. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another Counselor* to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-17). Like Jesus, who was the disciples’ first Counselor, the Holy Spirit teaches, testifies, convicts, guides and reveals truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13-14). These are personal roles.

John uses the masculine form of the Greek word *parakletos*; it was not necessary to use a neuter word. In John 16:14, masculine pronouns (he) are used even after the neuter word “Spirit” is mentioned. It would have been easy to switch to neuter pronouns (it), but John does not. The Spirit may be called *he*. However, grammar is relatively unimportant; what is important is that the Holy Spirit has personal characteristics. He is not an impersonal power, but the intelligent and divine Helper who lives within us.

The Spirit in the Old Testament

The Bible does not have a section titled “The Holy Spirit.” We learn about the Spirit a little here and a little there, as Scripture happens to mention what the Spirit does. The Old Testament gives us only a few glimpses.

The Spirit was involved in creating and sustaining all life (Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4; 34:14).

The Spirit of God filled Bezalel with skill to build the tabernacle (Exodus 31:3-5). He filled Moses and came upon the 70 elders (Numbers 11:25). He filled Joshua with wisdom and filled leaders such as Samson with strength or ability to fight (Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 6:34; 14:6). God’s Spirit was given to Saul and later taken away (1 Samuel 10:6; 16:14). The Spirit gave David plans for the temple (1 Chronicles 28:12). The Spirit inspired prophets to speak (Numbers 24:2; 2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Chronicles 12:18; 2 Chronicles 15:1; 20:14; Ezekiel 11:9; Zechariah 7:12; 2 Peter 1:21).

In the New Testament, too, the Spirit caused people to speak, including Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon (Luke 1:41, 67; 2:25-32). John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit even from birth (Luke 1:15). His most important work was announcing the arrival of Jesus, who would baptize people not only with water, but with “the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16).

The Spirit and Jesus

The Holy Spirit was involved throughout Jesus’ life. The Spirit caused his conception (Matthew 1:20), descended on him at his baptism (Matthew 3:16), led him into the desert (Luke 4:1) and anointed him to preach the gospel (Luke 4:18). Jesus drove out demons by the Spirit of God (Matthew 12:28). It was through the Spirit that he offered himself as a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:14) and by that same Spirit was raised from the dead (Romans 8:11).

Jesus taught that the Spirit would speak through his disciples in times of persecution (Matthew 10:19-20). He told them to baptize followers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). He said that God was certain to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13).

Jesus’ most important teachings about the Holy Spirit come in the Gospel of John. First, people must be “born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). People need a spiritual renewal, and this does not come from inside themselves: it is a gift of God. Although spirit can’t be seen, the Holy Spirit does make a difference in our lives (verse 8).

Jesus also taught, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as

the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:37-38). John adds this explanation: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive” (verse 39). The Holy Spirit satisfies an internal thirst. He gives us the relationship with God that we were created for. We receive the Spirit by coming to Jesus, and the Spirit can fill our lives.

John also tells us, “Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified” (verse 39). The Spirit had already filled various men and women before Jesus, but the Spirit would soon come in a new and more powerful way—on Pentecost. The Spirit is now given on a far larger scale: to all who call on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:38-39).

Jesus promised that his disciples would be given the Spirit of truth, who would live in them (John 14:16-18). This is equivalent to Jesus himself coming to his disciples (verse 18), because he is the Spirit of Christ as well as the Spirit of the Father—sent by Jesus as well as the Father (John 15:26). The Spirit makes Jesus available to everyone and continues his work.

Jesus promised that the Spirit would teach the disciples and remind them of what Jesus had taught (John 14:26). The Spirit taught them things that they could not understand before Jesus’ resurrection (John 16:12-13).

The Spirit testifies about Jesus (John 15:26; 16:14). He does not promote himself, but leads people to Jesus Christ and the Father. He does not speak on his own, but only as the Father wants (John 16:13). And because the Spirit can live in millions of people, it is for our good that Jesus left and sent the Spirit to us (John 16:7).

The Spirit works in evangelism, convicting the world of their sin, their guilt, their need for righteousness, and the certainty of judgment (verses 8-10). The Holy Spirit points people to Jesus as the solution to guilt and the source of righteousness.

The Spirit and the church

John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize people in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). This happened on the day of Pentecost after his resurrection, when the Spirit dramatically gave new power to the

disciples (Acts 2). This included speaking that was understood by people from other nations (verse 6). Similar miracles happened on a few other occasions as the church grew (Acts 10:44-46; 19:1-6). As a historian, Luke reports the unusual as well as the more typical events. There is no indication that these miracles happened to all new believers.

Paul says that all believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit into one body—the church (1 Corinthians 12:13). Everyone who has faith is given the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:13; Galatians 3:14). Whether miracles happen to them or not, all believers have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is not necessary to seek any particular miracle as proof of this.

The Bible does not command any believer to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Instead, every believer is encouraged to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)—to be fully responsive to the Spirit’s lead. This is a continuing duty, not a one-time event.

Rather than seeking a miracle, we are to seek God, and leave it to God’s decision as to whether miracles happen. Paul often describes the power of God not in terms of miracles, but in inner strength—hope, love, patience, serving, understanding, suffering and preaching boldly (Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 3:7, 16-18; Colossians 1:11, 28-29; 2 Timothy 1:7-8). That is the power of God at work in human lives.

The book of Acts shows that the Spirit is the power behind the church’s growth. The Spirit gave the disciples power to testify about Jesus (verse 8). He gave the disciples great boldness in preaching Christ (Acts 4:8, 31; 6:10). He gave instructions to Philip and later transported him (Acts 8:29, 39).

The Spirit encouraged the church and set leaders in it (Acts 9:31; 20:28). He spoke to Peter and to the church at Antioch (10:19; 11:12; 13:2). He inspired Agabus to predict a famine and Paul to pronounce a curse (11:28; 13:9). He led Paul and Barnabas on their journeys (13:4; 16:6-7) and helped the Jerusalem council come to a decision (15:28). He sent Paul to Jerusalem and warned him what would happen (20:22-23; 21:11). The church existed and grew only through the Spirit working in the believers.

The Spirit and believers today

God the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the life of believers today.

- He leads us to repentance and gives us new life (John 16:8; 3:5-6).
- He lives in us, teaches us and leads us (1 Corinthians 2:10-13; John 14:16-17, 26; Romans 8:14). He leads us through Scripture, prayer and other Christians.
- He is the Spirit of wisdom, helping us look at choices with confidence, love and self-control (Ephesians 1:17; 2 Timothy 1:7).
- The Spirit circumcises our hearts, seals us and sanctifies us, setting us apart for God's purpose (Romans 2:29; Ephesians 1:14).
- He produces in us love and the fruit of righteousness (Romans 5:5; Ephesians 5:9; Galatians 5:22-23).
- He puts us into the church and helps us know that we are God's children (1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:14-16).

We are to worship God "by the Spirit," with our minds set on what the Spirit wants (Philippians 3:3; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Romans 7:6; 8:4-5). We strive to please him (Galatians 6:8). If we are controlled by the Spirit, he gives us life and peace (Romans 8:6). He gives us access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). He helps us in our weakness, interceding for us (Romans 8:26-27).

The Holy Spirit also gives spiritual gifts, including leaders for the church (Ephesians 4:11), basic functions within the church (Romans 12:6-8), and some abilities for extraordinary purposes (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). No one has every gift, nor is any gift given to everyone (verses 28-30). All gifts, whether spiritual or "natural," are to be used for the common good, to help the entire church (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12). Every gift is important (12:22-26).

Now, we have only the firstfruits of the Spirit, only a deposit that guarantees much more in our future (Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14).

The Trinity

1+1+1

It Just Doesn't Add Up

The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but there is only one God. "Wait a minute," some people say. "One plus one plus one equals one? This can't be right. It just doesn't add up."

True, it doesn't add up—and it's not supposed to. God isn't a thing that can be added. There can be only one all-powerful, all-wise, everywhere-present being, so there can be only one God. In the world of spirit, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God, unified in a way that material objects cannot be. Our math is based on material things; it does not always work in the infinite, spiritual realm.

The Father is God and the Son is God, but there is only one God being. This is not a family or committee of divine beings—a group cannot say, "There is none like me" (Isa. 43:10; 44:6; 45:5). God is only one divine being—more than one Person, but only one God. The early Christians did not get this idea from paganism or philosophy—they were forced into it by Scripture.

Just as Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ is divine, it also teaches that the Holy Spirit is divine and personal. Whatever the Holy Spirit does, God does. The Holy Spirit, like the Son and the Father, is God—three Persons perfectly united in one God: the Trinity.

In summary, the Holy Spirit is God at work in our lives. Everything God does is done through his Spirit. Paul therefore encourages us: "Let us keep in step with the Spirit.... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.... Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Be attentive to what the Spirit says. When he speaks, God is speaking.

Michael Morrison

For further reading:

- Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. Eerdmans, 1975.
- J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit*. Revell, 1984.
- Max Anders, *What You Need to Know About the Holy Spirit*. Nelson, 1995.
- Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker, 1992. Chapters 28-29.