

Who Is This Holy Spirit?

Knowing the Trinity's third Person starts with recognizing Him as just that—a Person who wants to be intimately known

As a relatively young Christian, I began to wonder why so many other Christians seemed to know more of the indwelling love of Jesus than I did. Why did their lives display the fruits of His grace and demonstrate His power at work within them in ways that seemed sorely lacking in my life?

I became deeply troubled at the poverty of my spiritual walk with God. So much of what I knew was mere information *about* God without much of a direct relationship *with* Him. My heart longed to have an experience like that described by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, who spoke of what it meant to know God “other than by hearsay.”

It was also hard for me to fathom how some Christians could be so different from others. Some overflowed with love and compassion for their neighbors, while others cloistered themselves away from the world, apparently fearful of contamination. Some seemed to exude a deep sense of inner joy, but others looked as if they had just received a death sentence rather than the blessing of eternal life. Some were on fire with expectancy that God would do great things in their lives; others seemed content to make survival their primary objective.

In all of this, the biggest struggle I faced as a young Christian was determining what I believed about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. I began to encounter Christians for whom this Person was a vibrant reality in their lives—a Person to know and to love, not some vague, generic “force.”

I eventually came to see that all my concerns about my faith and the faith of others had to do with answering this central question about the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Discovering the Spirit

If we want to discover who the Holy Spirit really is, then individual human experience is not the right place to start. When God intended to reveal His nature, will and identity to humankind, He determined to do so supremely in His Son. When He wanted to record His activities with the inhabitants of this planet, He chose to do so in a divinely inspired Book. And so, if we want to know what the Spirit of God is like and how He operates within the lives of the people of God, then it is to the pages of the Bible that we must first turn.

Throughout the pages of the Bible, it is assumed that the Holy Spirit is no more and no less than God Himself. He is called “the Spirit of the Lord” (1 Kin. 18:12, NIV) and “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7). In Luke 11:13, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the gift of the Father. Paul announced that “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17). When Peter rebuked Ananias for attempted deception, he boldly announced, “You have lied to the Holy Spirit ... You have not lied just to human beings but to God” (Acts 5:3-4). On the occasion that Jesus spoke about the unforgivable sin, He described it as blaspheming, which means speaking against or rejecting not the Father or even Jesus Himself but rather the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31-32).

It is because the Holy Spirit is God that Scripture describes Him as possessing all the essential characteristics that are the sole privilege of God Himself. He is:

- **Holy.** God cannot deny His own character; therefore, in the same way that God is completely pure and totally unblemished, so must be the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).
- **Eternal.** If God were limited by time and space, He could not, by definition, be God. The Creator can neither be limited by His creation, nor can He die or face extinction. To be God, He must always have been God and must inhabit eternity. When Scripture says that the Holy

Spirit is eternal (always was and always will be), then it is affirming that He is God (Heb. 9:14).

- **Omnipotent.** The Holy Spirit is all-powerful, an attribute that is the sole province of God Himself (Luke 1:35-37).
- **Omnipresent.** The Holy Spirit exists everywhere simultaneously. There is no place in heaven, on earth or anywhere else in the universe that is not inhabited by the Holy Spirit (Ps. 139:7).
- **Omniscient.** The Holy Spirit knows everything there is to know (1 Cor. 2:10-11).

These supreme qualities of the Holy Spirit are neatly summarized in Isaiah's prophecy of the anticipated Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:2).

God is personal. He neither rules nor communicates by remote control, and He possesses personality. So it is with the Holy Spirit. It would be wrong to view this third Person of the Trinity as an indefinably nebulous force. He is not an "it"! To reinforce this point, the apostle John referred to the Holy Spirit by using a masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*, "He") with a neutral noun (*pneuma*, "Spirit"). This may seem like bad grammar to us, but it is superb theology. He does this to show that the Holy Spirit is a "He," not an "it." (See John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8-14.)

The Holy Spirit is the "breath" or "wind" of God (Is. 40:7). In this sense, it might be easy to picture the Holy Spirit as something broad and vague. Yet this phrase in Scripture often brings into grammatical play a definite article; instead of "a breath" or "a wind," He is called "*the* Spirit" or "*the* Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit's personhood is also affirmed in that He can be grieved, He comes upon individuals at particular times, He

is the means by which God fills His people, and He can even be withdrawn from people under exceptional circumstances (Eph. 4:30; Judg. 14:6; 2 Kin. 2:9; Ex. 35:31; Mic. 3:8; Ps. 51:11).

The Holy Spirit is no mere arm or leg of God. He is a Person in His own right and exists as part of the Godhead. He is not remote but actually dwells in God's people and is therefore personal to each one of us.

The Personality of the Holy Spirit

Let us take this one step further. The vivid imagination of George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, conceived of a vast "force" that could empower us and be used for either good or evil. This force was personal, in that it was available for use by the human personality, but it lacked personhood in itself.

That is precisely how the Holy Spirit differs. He is not here for *us* to use, but we are here for *Him* to use to bring glory to Jesus through our lives. Furthermore, He possesses a unique personality. The three basic characteristics of personality are the capacities for feeling, knowing and doing—and you may be surprised to learn that the Holy Spirit is actively engaged in all three! Scripture affirms that:

- He feels (Eph. 4:30).
- He knows (John 14:26).
- He does things (John 16:8-11).

While the Holy Spirit is like us in that He has a personality, He is also unlike us in that He is holy. The Greek word used to describe this reality is *hagios*, the root meaning of which is "different." In this sense, the Holy Spirit can never be as we are, and yet by the grace and mercy of God, the Holy Spirit dwells in unclean human beings. The very title *Holy Spirit* indicates this Spirit is different from us because He is, in fact, divine.

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John begins his letter to the seven churches in an unusual way, with a greeting that places God the Father first, God the Spirit second and God the Son third (Rev. 1:4-5). While this order might seem unusual to us, the phraseology gives the standard implication that these three are inextricably intertwined and always co-equal.

Furthermore, Jesus revealed this supreme mystery of the Christian faith when He declared the name in which His followers should be baptized. The word used by Jesus for *name* is singular, indicating there is only one God, but this name is also tri-personal because each one of us is baptized in "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

God in Action

Because most Christians find it difficult to visualize and personalize the Holy Spirit, they often overlook the amount of work in which the Holy Spirit is engaged. He is very busy indeed! The Holy Spirit definitely understands the concept of multitasking, for while He is the corporate Holy Spirit of the universal church, He is also the One who dwells in the life of every individual believer (1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 8:9-11).

The Holy Spirit is always busy. He works within us to bring about the conviction of sin, the recognition of the need for righteousness and an awareness of impending judgment long before we come to the point of conversion and surrender our life to Jesus Christ (John 16:8). We may not have realized it, but quietly and invisibly the Holy Spirit was already at work in our lives, preparing us to be confronted with the reality of Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament accounts of the conversions of Zacchaeus, Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch to whom Philip witnessed of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit was actively at work preparing the ground for their moments of truth. In the case of the

Ethiopian eunuch, the Holy Spirit even called Philip away from a revival and into the desert to explain the Scriptures to the eunuch at just the right time.

When we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit makes His home in our lives. He is the giver of new life, and He becomes the seal and evidence of our salvation (John 3:5; 2 Cor. 1:22; Titus 3:5; Rom. 8:9-11). It is the Holy Spirit who then takes on the raw material of a new convert's heart and begins the often lengthy process of transforming it into the image of the Lord Jesus.

This whole idea of an indwelling Holy Spirit who inhabits the life of every believer introduced to the world a concept unknown in other major religions. For the first time, God was not just "out there somewhere," but He could be intimately known, loved and served. Christianity offers not a religion about God but rather a relationship with Him. This is what creates that vibrant, loving, compassionate and fruit-bearing existence in the life of all believers.

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