

Who Is The Holy Spirit?

Before we begin, note the question – “Who” is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is not a force or a power – he is a person! We cannot consider the Holy Spirit without first looking at the trinity, since we believe our God is three in one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As you can imagine this is a huge topic so I will only be scratching the surface. It also involves some difficult concepts, so let us “gird our loins” as we consider this issue together.

Other speakers in this series will be looking at the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the church, so my aim is to introduce the topic and set the scene.

I’m going to consider this under 2 headings:

1. What do we mean when we talk about the trinity?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the trinity?

1. What do we mean when we talk about the trinity.

If you’ve had anything to do with Jehovah’s Witnesses, you will know they say Christians have made up the idea of the trinity, because the word isn’t mentioned in the Bible. So, are they right? Definitely not – the word “trinity” isn’t found in the Bible, but it is clearly taught there. In The Westminster Confession of Faith, (one of the best summaries of Christian doctrine and beliefs there is) we read: *“The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture”*. So this is one example of a deduction by good and necessary consequence.

So what does the Bible teach us about the trinity? The first verse in Genesis tells us, “In the beginning God” and it then goes on to say that God created the world. We don’t know anything else about God at this stage, but in Gen 1:26 God says “Let us make man in our image”, which is the first hint we have about a plurality in the Godhead. There are some references in the Old Testament to the Son and the Spirit, but the doctrine is developed much more fully in the NT.

The Bible is silent on how the persons of the trinity relate to each other (what theologians call their “ad intra” operation) – indeed it is impossible for us to understand the relationship within the Godhead. However, the Bible does reveal how the triune God is at work in the world – choosing, redeeming, sanctifying and judging sinners – the “ad extra” operation of the trinity. This is the aspect we will be considering in our studies of the work of the Holy Spirit. Before time existed, before the world came into being, God (ie the triune God) made a plan to create the whole world including mankind; he chose people that he would set his covenant love upon and in time he sent Jesus, to die in their place to save them from their sins. The Holy Spirit (the third person in the trinity) was sent to convict of sin and apply the work of Jesus to these sinners and preserve them until Jesus returns in glory.

Christians assert strongly that there is only one God (eg Deut 6:4 “*Hear O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord is one*”), but we also assert that that God is triune, or “three

in one". This concept is very hard to get our mind around and it's all too easy to venture into heresy, or wrong thinking. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way, "*There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.*" The Holy Spirit is no less God than the Father or the Son, but he has a distinct role which we will be looking at further over the next few weeks.

Even the word "person" is problematic as we immediately think of a human person who is separate and different from another human person, but this of course, is not what is meant here. There are not 3 distinct, separate persons, 3 divine beings – there is only 1 God. The Bible never uses the word "person" when it talks of the Godhead, however this is the word theologians have decided best expresses the idea. There really is no adequate word to express this concept, so we use "persons" which is OK as long as we realise this does not imply 3 separate wills or 3 centres of self-consciousness. The 3 divine persons have the same will, and are self consciously the same unique being - Almighty God! All God's attributes are true of all 3 persons. Thus God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are equally eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, infinitely wise, infinitely holy, infinitely loving and so on. The subject of the trinity is a great mystery as we would expect, and any explanation will fall short. God is unique! God is not "like" anything so no wonder we have trouble getting our heads around the fact that God is 3 in 1.

So let's look more closely at what the Bible tells us about the Holy Spirit, the 3rd person in the trinity?

a. In the Old Testament

As I mentioned earlier, the Old Testament often alludes to a "plurality" in the Godhead, but this is not really developed until the coming of Jesus (the second person of the trinity) in the New Testament.

There are also specific references to the Spirit of God – eg in Gen 1:2, "*Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*" So, quite obviously the Spirit was an agent of creation. Isaiah has several passages which talk about the Spirit, and we read some of these in our Bible readings.

Is 48:16 – "*And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me with His Spirit, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*"

Is 61:1 – "*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*"

Is 63:10 & 11 & 14 – "*Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them. Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people....Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them, who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand, who divided the waters before them...like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord. This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name*".

It's interesting to note that when the Old Testament refers to the Spirit of God it typically refers to God's covenantal activities in and on behalf of Israel. The Spirit's work for and in the covenant people of God, is still one of his primary functions, as we shall see.

b. In The New Testament

I'm sure you're all familiar with the references to the triune God in the NT, so I'll just mention a few before we move on to look briefly at the unique role of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus the Son of God, comes into the world to begin his earthly work of saving sinners, the Holy Spirit is involved at every key moment. (Of course this was neither the beginning of the Son of God nor his covenant to save sinners – Ephesians 1: 4 tells us “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”)

In Matt 1:18f we see Mary is *“with child through the Holy Spirit”, “she will give birth to a son and ... He will save his people from their sins.” “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him ‘Immanuel’ - which means God with us’.*

And at Jesus' baptism, Matt 3:16 - *“As soon as Jesus was baptised he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*

These, and many other verses, show that the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught in the Bible. The Holy Spirit is in essence God and by nature God. He does not have the same role as the Son or the Father, but He is equally divine. We must be careful not to emphasise one 'person' above the others, and yet in many churches the Holy Spirit hardly gets a mention. And sadly, in other churches there is too much emphasis on 'the gifts of the Spirit' and not enough on repentance and obeying the whole Bible. So as we consider the special work of the Spirit, never lose sight of the triune God – as the WCF so ably says, *“There is but one only, living, and true God.....In the unity of the Godhead there are 3 persons, of one substance, power and eternity”.*

A cautionary word is necessary here. In our desire to understand or explain the trinity to children or new Christians, we can misrepresent the trinity. For example, a common explanation is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different names for the same person – like a man can be a husband/father/boss. However, this is just 1 person who acts differently at certain times. Another common one is to liken the trinity to a 3 leaf clover – 1 clover but 3 leaves. However, this also falls short as each leaf is not the clover, it's only part of the clover, whereas each person in the trinity is fully God not just a part of God. There are other illustrations you might think of, but none will come close to the truth because there is no adequate way to explain the trinity or simplify it. The Bible never uses an analogy to explain the godhead, and nor should we. We can safely say, *“there are distinctions in the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), these are represented to us as persons, and each of the persons is God.”*

So let's move on to consider what the unique role of the Spirit is in the world. This will only be brief as the other speakers will develop it at greater length.

2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the trinity?

Just a reminder we are considering the work of the Spirit "ad extra" – as He operates in the world with regard to creation and redemption. We can summarise the work of the Spirit in the world in these ways:

- **In creation and the new creation.** Just as the Spirit was active at creation in Gen 1, so He is active in the new creation – applying the saving work of Jesus to His people and causing them to be born again. The Spirit breathed life into the "dark and formless void" and he does the same when he breathes life into a sinner. When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus (in John 3:1-15), he says *"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."* Titus 3:5 & 6 tell us, *"He (the triune God) saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour."*
- **By his sustaining power and as the invisible activity of God through and amongst his covenant people.** The Holy Spirit not only causes us to be born again (to become new creatures), but he also sustains us and enables us to live daily for God's glory. This is called "sanctification", and there are many verses which tell us about this role of the Spirit, for example – Romans 8:11f, *"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who indwells you. So then brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."* How amazing are those words, "through his Spirit who indwells you". Christians are indwelt by God the Holy Spirit!
- **In revelation.** 2 Peter 1:20,21 tells us, *"But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."* The Bible we have (in its original manuscripts) was revealed by the Holy Spirit to those who wrote it down – to Moses, Isaiah, Matthew, Paul and so on. The revelations that came to people like Samson, Deborah and John were given by the Holy Spirit. We now have no need of new revelations, as we have the Bible which is all we need for our salvation and sanctification.

There are other roles of the Holy Spirit of course, for example, Jesus gives an example of the Spirit's work in John 16:8 *"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness and judgement."* In John 14:16, the Holy Spirit is called "another Helper", one called alongside to help, an intercessor. No doubt these and more will be dealt with by Susan and Ruth.

The Holy Spirit empowers, purifies, reveals and unifies, but none of these are automatic – we are responsible to not resist and grieve him, but to obey and live faithful lives to his glory. May we be challenged by Paul's words in Ephesians 4:1f, *"I entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling."*

To conclude. Who is the Holy Spirit? He is God. He has all of God's attributes: he is eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, all wise, all loving and so on. He is equal in all ways to the Father and Son, but with distinct roles. His primary role is applying to us the saving work of Jesus and making us more godly (sanctifying us) and more like Christ. He does this by opening up the Scriptures (who better to do this than their author!) to us, enabling us to understand them and apply them, and live to his glory.