

What is the Holy Spirit?

Rod Reynolds

One of the important questions that we must face in order to understand God's nature, and our own nature, is, "What is the Holy Spirit?"

In answering this question let's first ask, *what is spirit?* In any good dictionary you'll find several distinct but related definitions. And it's important to understand that in the Bible, too, you'll find the word "spirit" used in different senses.

Spirit is defined as:

(1) "The vital essence or animating force in living organisms, especially man, often considered divine in origin" (all definitions from the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1966). The Bible teaches that when one dies, that animating force -- the spirit in man -- returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7; 3:21). Physical life cannot exist apart from the spirit -- the essence which imparts life to what otherwise is simply a collection of chemicals (Job 34:14-15; Revelation 11:11). A living creature at one moment, and it's corpse at the next moment, may look the same, and all the same materials and even bodily structure may be present, but what goes missing when death occurs is the animating force -- the *spirit* -- vital to life.

(2) "The part of a human being that is incorporeal and invisible, and is characterized by intelligence, personality, self-consciousness, and will; the mind." In his statement, "God is my witness, whom **I serve with my spirit** in the gospel of His Son" (Romans 1:9), Paul is implying that his will, his mind, his inner being is actively engaged in serving God. Christians are instructed, "be renewed in the **spirit of your mind**" (Ephesians 4:23). The link between the spirit and will is also illustrated in Jesus' statement concerning his disciples, "The **spirit indeed is willing**, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

From this we can conclude that one's spirit is expressed through his personality, will and mind. The indication is that the spirit in man working through the brain and related sensory faculties produces personality, mind and will.

(3) "In the Bible, the creative, animating power or divine influence of God." "You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30). The creative, animating power of God was at work in the renewing of the face of the earth and the restoration of life upon it as recounted in Genesis 1 (cf. Genesis 1:1).

"But [there] [is] a spirit in man, And the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding" (Job 32:8). In this verse "spirit" is from the Hebrew *ruach*; while "breath" is a translation of the Hebrew word *neshamah*. But, in this instance *neshamah* should also be translated spirit, because it is through God's spirit that he imparts to us spiritual understanding (1 Corinthians 2:11-14).

It is through the spirit in man that God is able to know the very thoughts and intents of our hearts (Proverbs 20:27). It's through God's Holy Spirit dwelling in us that God is able to impress within us his character as we submit to his will (Romans 8:4, 13-14; Galatians 5:22-23). Through his Spirit we are able to have fellowship with God, and become one with him (2 Corinthians 13:14, Greek: *koinonia*, communion, fellowship, communication). Through that same Holy Spirit God imparts to those who have it not mere temporary, physical life, but *his life*, eternal life! (Romans 8:11, 23; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5; Galatians 6:8).

The Holy Spirit is promised to those who obey God (Proverbs 1:23; John 14:15-16; Acts 5:32). To have the gift of eternal life imparted through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit requires believing the gospel, repentance and baptism (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:13-14). Expressing God's nature in all its power, vitality, perfection and purity, Holy Spirit is distinct from other categories of spirit, such as human spirit, animal spirit, angelic spirits, or evil spirits.

(5) "A supernatural or immaterial being, as an angel, demon..., etc." "God is Spirit" (John 4:24; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 15:45). Angels are also spirits (Hebrews 1:13-14). Satan, an archangel who rebelled against God, is now a spirit who is evil (Ephesians 2:2). Other demons are also spirits who are fallen angels (Matthew 8:16; Revelation 12:3-4, 7-9). God is eternal (Romans 1:20). But Satan and the other angels are spirit beings who were created by God (Ezekiel 28:13-15; Colossians 1:16).

(6) "A state of mind; mood; temper: Success raised his *spirits*." Paul wrote of the presence and actions of certain individuals refreshing the spirits of others (1 Corinthians 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 7:13).

(7) "True intent or meaning...: the *spirit* of the law." Paul wrote of being circumcised in spirit, representing the true meaning of circumcision (Romans 2:28-29). He wrote of serving God in the spirit of the law, its true intent, and not the mere letter (Romans 7:6). The New Covenant incorporates the law of God applied in the spirit, and not merely the letter, according to its full intent and meaning (2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:10).

(8) "The emotional faculty of man; the heart: Great poetry stirs the *spirit*." After a disturbing dream Pharaoh's "spirit was troubled," implying he was emotionally upset (Genesis 41:8; cf. Daniel 2:1). A psalmist wrote of his being "troubled" in a time of adversity to the point that his "spirit was overwhelmed" (Psalm 77:3). Daniel wrote of being "grieved in my spirit" due to visions he'd been given (Daniel 7:15). As Jesus testified to his closest disciples that one of them was about to betray him, "He was troubled in spirit" (John 13:21).

God created mankind in his own image (Genesis 1:26-27). Man has a body and, as we have seen, a spirit. Is the spirit of a man a different person from the man? Paul wrote to Timothy, "The Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." (2 Timothy 4:22). Was Timothy's spirit a *separate person* from Timothy -- or within Timothy? The notion is absurd! Why then would we think God's spirit is a separate person from or within God? Paul said he was absent in body but present in spirit (1 Corinthians 5:3). Was Paul's spirit a separate person? Of course not!

Paul, a mere human being, had the capacity to be present bodily in one location, but present in spirit elsewhere. Is God less capable?

In many places the Bible reveals that God has a body-- despite what philosophers have speculated. "...there is a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). Jesus Christ was resurrected with such a body. The disciples saw Jesus bodily after his resurrection (John 20:29-21:1).

John later had a vision of how Jesus appears bodily in his glorified state (Revelation 1:12-16).

Although the description in John's vision is partly figurative, it nonetheless gives us an idea of how the glorified Jesus appears. We're told that in the resurrection Jesus "will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

In Christ "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). Before he became flesh and blood Jesus existed "in the form of God" (Philippians 2:6). "Form" is translated from the Greek *morphe*, which signifies the essential attributes as shown in the form. "...the form by which a person or thing strikes the vision; external appearance" (*Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*). This implies that God -- both the Father and Jesus Christ -- has form.

Jesus' statement concerning the Father, that no one had "seen His form" (John 5:37), also implies that the Father has form, and hence a body. The Greek in this case is *eidōs* (the external or outward appearance, form figure, shape), derived from *eidō*, meaning to perceive with the eyes, to see (*Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*).

Jesus sits bodily now in the third heaven at the Father's right hand (Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33-34; Hebrews 10:12). But in spirit God is capable of being everywhere at once (1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 139:7-10; Jeremiah 23:24). However, it is not a separate person from or within God who is everywhere in spirit, and who specifically dwells in those who have received his spirit, but God himself, in the persons of Jesus Christ and the Father (John 14:23; 15:26; Acts 2:33; Romans 8:9-11; Galatians 2:20; 4:6).

Some have been misled by English translations of John 14:16-17, 26, where the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is referred to by the English pronouns he, him and whom. In the Greek each noun is assigned a gender, which does not necessarily imply sex or personhood. *Hamartia*, for example, is a feminine noun meaning sin, though sin is neither male nor female. *Hamartolos*, on the other hand, is a masculine noun that means sinner, though a sinner can be either male or female.

The Greek word for "Comforter" or "Helper" is *parakletos*, a masculine noun. Where a pronoun is used in the Greek text referring back to *parakletos*, it follows the gender of its antecedent which is masculine. The Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*, a neuter noun. Pronouns in the Greek text referring back to *pneuma* are neuter. Most of the pronouns referring to the Holy Spirit in the original Greek in the verses in question are neuter, since most of them refer to *pneuma* as the antecedent. These pronouns would be literally translated into English as which or it. Translators have chosen to use he, him and whom, however, in English, because of their preconceived idea that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person within a Trinity.

It's also true that in John 16:5-15 masculine pronouns are used several times in reference to the *parakletos* -- Comforter or Helper -- as would be expected since it's a masculine word. Elsewhere neuter pronouns are used in reference to the Holy Spirit. Nothing definitive about the nature of the Holy Spirit can be determined by the gender of pronouns.

If we read carefully what Jesus said, and compare other Scriptures, the truth becomes clear. Jesus said that the Spirit that would be sent was already with them (John 14:17), because his presence was with them bodily. Moreover, the Father himself was already at work granting them understanding through his Spirit (Matthew 16:17).

But after Jesus' departure, the same Spirit, Christ's Spirit, would be in them (verse 16). The promise of the Spirit dwelling in them was to be sent from the Father through Jesus Christ (John 14:16, 26; Acts 1:4-5; 2:33). "I will come to you," Jesus said (John 14:17). He would come to them, and dwell in them, through his Spirit (verses 17-18, 23; cf. Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19). It's the Father and Christ who dwell in converted Christians through the Holy Spirit that they share, and that we share with them [John 14:23; Revelation 3:20; 1 John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 2 Corinthians 13:14]. It is Jesus Christ himself, and the Father, who comfort us through the Scriptures and through the Spirit they have given (Romans 15:4-5; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

The question arises, why, if the Holy Spirit is not a person, is it referred to as speaking, being lied to, etc.? (See Acts 1:16; 5:3; Hebrews 3:7). It's noteworthy that the Jews often wrote of the Holy Spirit in such terms, without conceiving of the Spirit as a person separate from or within God. "The mention of the 'Holy Spirit,' as speaking to individuals, is frequent in Rabbinic writings. This, of course, does not imply their belief in the Personality of the Holy Spirit..." (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Edersheim, p. 139 n.). If the Rabbis could write of the Spirit in such a way, without implying that the Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and Christ, so could the authors of the New Testament. "The 'Spirit of God,'...is not distinct from God, nor does the phrase imply a distinction in the Godhead. The Spirit of God is God Himself, breathing, living, active, energizing in the world — 'God at work.' The Spirit is personal because God is personal..." (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. VI, p. 255). The Holy Spirit is found in Scripture to be the instrumentality through which God expresses and accomplishes His will. It is an essential part of what he is, not a separate person.

The conception of the Holy Spirit as God's divine power in action is reflected in symbols of the Spirit used in Scripture. The primary word for spirit in the Old Testament is *ruach*, of which the primary meaning is wind. The primary word for spirit in the New Testament is *pneuma*, with a similar meaning. Like the wind, the Holy Spirit is ubiquitous, invisible and powerful (Luke 4:14; Acts 1:8). And like the air we breathe the Spirit is essential to life (John 6:63). Oil as a source of light giving energy is another symbol of the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 16:13; Zechariah 4:1-6, 11-14; Luke 4:18-19). Water, as a source of power and life, also symbolizes the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). Another token of God's Spirit is the dove, denoting not only the power of communication and action from a distance, and fluid movement, but also love, peace and purity (Genesis 8:8-12; Psalm 55:6, 68:13; Song of Solomon 2:14; Matthew 3:16; Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 Peter 1:22).

The Holy Spirit is not the "third person" of an imaginary Trinity, but rather is an attribute of God's nature. It is his divine power in action. Through it God creates, animates and influences. Through it God can dwell in us and transform us. Through it we have communion with God and can know him and his mind. The Bible does not teach that the Holy Spirit is a separate person from God any more than our spirit is from us.