

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

Dear Friend,

The Bible contains a supernaturally inspired revelation of God. But God is so much “other” than we are that at times it becomes necessary to adjust, or expand, our usual forms of speech in order to communicate the Bible’s revelation of God.

In God both oneness and plurality are eternally combined. This mystery confronts us in the opening verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹ In the original Hebrew, *elohim* (the word for “God”) is plural in form, but the verb *bara* (created) is singular. In other words, both oneness and plurality are combined.

Further on, in Genesis 1:26, we are again confronted with the combination of singular and plural in reference to God: “Then God **said**, ‘Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness. . . .’” The verb “said” is singular in form, but the pronouns “Us” and “Our” are plural.

This combination of singular and plural in reference to God recurs in other passages of Scripture. The prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord on His throne and then heard Him say, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for **Us**?”² The pronoun “I” implies that one Person is speaking, but the pronoun “Us” indicates that He is speaking on behalf of more than one Person.

In the ongoing revelation of Scripture three distinct Persons emerge, each of whom is God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. The first of the three divine Persons referred to individually in Scripture is the Spirit: “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”³

The “Parable” of Light

We can never “explain” God, but in the world He has created He has provided us with various “parables” that reveal Himself. One of these is **light**. Light is a part of everyday life, to which we do not normally give much thought. Yet in this single phenomenon we discern plurality in at least two forms.

Light is regularly refracted into the **three** primary colors: blue, yellow and red. Again, in the rainbow, light appears in **seven** colors: violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, red. Thus within the unity of light, there is the **trinity** of the primary colors and the **sevenfold** diversity of the rainbow.

Throughout Scripture seven is the number particularly associated with the Holy Spirit. Revelation 4:5 speaks of “the **seven** Spirits of God.” In Isaiah 11:1–2 the prophet foreshows how the Holy Spirit will set apart Jesus as the Messiah (the Anointed One). He lists seven distinct aspects of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of **the LORD** (the Spirit that speaks in the first person as God); the Spirit of **wisdom**; the Spirit of **understanding**; the Spirit of **counsel**; the Spirit of **might**; the Spirit of **knowledge**; the Spirit of **the fear of the Lord**.

It is significant that—even in Jesus Himself—knowledge needs to be balanced by the fear of the Lord. Otherwise, knowledge on its own can become a source of pride. “Knowledge puffs up [makes arrogant].”⁴

In Acts 13:2 the Holy Spirit is plainly presented as being Himself God. Speaking to the leaders of the church in Antioch, “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to



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which I have called them.” Clearly the Holy Spirit is speaking here in the first person as God.

God’s Total Involvement in Man’s Redemption

Perhaps the supreme revelation of God’s grace is His plan to provide redemption for the fallen human race through the sacrifice of Jesus. As I studied the details of this divine plan, I made an exciting discovery: in every stage of redemption each Person of the Godhead played a unique and distinctive part, as indicated by the following outline:

1. **The conception of Jesus.** God the Father caused Jesus to be conceived in the womb of Mary by the Holy Spirit. See Luke 1:35.
2. **The beginning of the ministry of Jesus.** When Jesus submitted Himself to the baptism of John, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the Father acknowledged Him as His Son. See Luke 3:21–22.
3. **The ongoing ministry of Jesus.** Peter sums this up in Acts 10:38: “God [the Father] anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. . . .”
4. **The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.** “Christ . . . through the eternal Spirit [i.e. the Holy Spirit] offered Himself without spot to God [the Father]. . . .” See Hebrews 9:14.
5. **The resurrection of Jesus.** God the Father resurrected Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. See Romans 1:4; 8:11.
6. **Pentecost.** Exalted to the right hand of God the Father, Jesus received from Him the gift of the Holy Spirit and poured it out on the waiting disciples. See Acts 2:33.

In each stage of redemption, the Holy Spirit played His own vital and distinctive role. He is rightly called both “the Spirit of grace” and “the Spirit of glory”—grace, that is, that leads to glory. See Hebrews 10:29; 1 Peter 4:14.

Both Personal and Non-personal

There is another unique fact about the Holy Spirit that stretches our powers of comprehension. The Spirit is both personal and non-personal—both a “He” and an “it.”

The language in which the New Testament has come to us is Greek. Greek has three genders: masculine (he), feminine (she), neuter (it). Grammatically, the Greek word for “spirit,” *pneuma*, is neuter. The appropriate pronoun would therefore be neuter, i.e. “it.” However, both “He” and “it” are applied to the Holy Spirit (but never “she”). For example, in John 16:13 the rules of Greek grammar are deliberately set aside to emphasize that the Holy Spirit is a “He” as well as an “it”: “However, when **He**, the Spirit of truth, has come. . . .”

Like English, Greek uses the definite article—corresponding to our English “the.” (On the other hand, some other languages—e.g. Latin or Russian—do not have any corresponding word.) In the Greek New Testament the phrase “Holy Spirit” is sometimes preceded by the definite article—corresponding to “the”—and sometimes it occurs without it. In English this would correspond to the difference between “the Holy Spirit” and “Holy Spirit.”

To English ears, however, the phrase “Holy Spirit” on its own sounds incomplete. Therefore all English translations invariably insert “the” before “Holy Spirit,” even when it is not there in the original Greek. Only by consulting the Greek text is it possible to determine whether “the” is actually there.

Through my study of the Greek New Testament, I have come to the conclusion that the presence or absence of “the” in conjunction with the Holy Spirit marks an important distinction. When “Holy

Spirit" is not preceded by "the," it denotes something non-personal: life, or a power, a force, a presence, an influence. On the other hand, when "Holy Spirit" is preceded by "the," He is being depicted as a Person.

A very distinctive mark of personality is the ability to speak. At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended from heaven, **He spoke** in other tongues through the disciples. By this He signified that He had come, as a Person, to take up His dwelling on earth. He is now the permanent, personal representative of the Godhead residing on earth.

From then on, each time the Holy Spirit comes to take up His residence as a Person in the body of a believer, it is appropriate that He should manifest His presence by speaking out of that believer in a new language supernaturally imparted. In effect, He is saying, "Now you know that I am here as a Person to indwell your body."

For this reason, in 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul prefixes the definite article: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of **the** Holy Spirit?" He is emphasizing that speaking in tongues is not merely a brief supernatural experience. Beyond that, it is a divinely given sign that the Holy Spirit, as a Person, has taken up His dwelling in the believer's body, thereby making it a sacred temple. This places a solemn obligation upon each believer to keep his body in a condition of holiness that is appropriate for God's temple.

The definite article is also prefixed when the Holy Spirit is depicted as exercising authority in the Church, e.g. by sending out apostles, by appointing elders, or by directing apostolic ministries.

On the other hand, when people are being baptized in, or filled with, the Holy Spirit, the definite article is usually omitted. This would indicate that the Holy Spirit is here seen as something non-personal—as life, or power, or an influence.

I give below two lists: the first of passages in which "the" is prefixed to "Holy Spirit"; the second in which "Holy Spirit" occurs without "the."

With "The" Prefixed

The following are some of the passages where "the" is prefixed to "Holy Spirit."

Matt. 12:31 ". . . but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him."
(Compare Mark 3:29.)

Mark 13:11 ". . . it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit."

Luke 3:22 "And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him [Jesus] . . ."

Luke 12:12 "For the Holy Spirit will teach you . . . what you ought to say."

John 14:26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit . . . He will teach you all things . . ."

Acts 2:38 ". . . and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 5:3 "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit . . . ?"

Acts 13:2 ". . . the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"

Acts 13:4 "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went . . ."

Acts 15:28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us . . ."

Acts 16:6 ". . . they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word . . ."

Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed . . . to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers . . ."

Acts 21:11 "Thus says the Holy Spirit . . ."

1 Cor. 6:19 "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you . . . ?"

Without "The" Prefixed

Here are some passages where "the" is omitted.

Matt. 1:18 "... she [Mary] was found with child of [or pregnant by] Holy Spirit."

Matt. 3:11 "He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire." (Compare Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5.)

Luke 1:15 "He [John the Baptist] will also be filled with Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." (Compare Luke 1:41, 67; 4:1; Acts 2:4; 6:3, 5; 9:17; 13:9, 52.)

Luke 1:35 "Holy Spirit will come upon you [Mary] . . . therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

John 20:22 "He [Jesus] breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive Holy Spirit [or holy breath].'"

Acts 10:38 "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with Holy Spirit and with power . . ."

Rom. 14:17 "... for the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in Holy Spirit."

Rom. 15:13 "... that you may abound in hope by the power of Holy Spirit."

Rom. 15:16 "... the offering of the Gentiles . . . sanctified by Holy Spirit."

1 Cor. 12:3 "... no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by Holy Spirit."

Titus 3:5 "... washing of regeneration and renewing of Holy Spirit . . ."

Heb. 2:4 "... various miracles, and gifts [literally, distributions] of Holy Spirit . . ."

Heb. 6:4 "... and have become partakers of Holy Spirit . . ."

2 Pet. 1:21 [margin] "... holy men . . . spoke as they were moved [borne along] by Holy Spirit."

Jude 20 "... praying in Holy Spirit . . ."

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Finally, here are just a few of the many titles given in Scripture to the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of **grace**; the Spirit of **glory**; the Spirit of **wisdom**; the Spirit of **truth**; the Spirit of **self-discipline**.

Meditate on the significance of each and search out some others for yourself. Then take time to thank Jesus that He has fulfilled His promise to send us the Holy Spirit.

In my next letter, I will have more to say about the Holy Spirit.

Yours in the Master's service,



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¹Genesis 1:1

²Isaiah 6:8

³Genesis 1:2

⁴1 Corinthians 8:1