

The Mystery of the Spirit

The Personhood of the Spirit

Lecture 1

The ancient Apostle's Creed – dating from shortly after the close of the New Testament – briefly defines the Christian belief about God.

The Apostle's Creed

*I believe in God the **Father Almighty**, Maker of heaven and earth,*

*And in Jesus Christ His only **Son** our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the **Holy Ghost**, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.¹*

The Reality of the Trinity

The most distinctive concept in that ancient creed – and the most controversial belief in Christianity – is the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: three distinct persons yet one God. It is incomprehensible.

Why do we believe in the Trinity? It is a good question. We can't explain the Trinity or prove its existence empirically. The atheist finds our belief in the Trinity nonsensical. The Buddhist and Hindu consider our belief in the Trinity to be mystical. The Jew and the Muslim call our belief in the Trinity heretical. The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses think the doctrine of the Trinity is a pagan corruption of true biblical teaching.

Video clip from Mormon Church: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yPQR4UIXqs>

If this Mormon apostle were to ask the average Christian why he or she believes in the Trinity, do you think he would receive a confident answer? Do you know why we believe in the Trinity?

There is a very good reason why. It is because the Bible says there is a Trinity.

Matthew 28:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit**.

¹Youngblood, Ronald F. ; Bruce, F. F. ; Harrison, R. K. ; Thomas Nelson Publishers: *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville : T. Nelson, 1995

Now, it is true that the word 'trinity' is not found in the Bible. But look at this verse. Baptism is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If there were no Trinity, this verse could not be phrased this way. If only the Father were God – a divine person – then baptism could only be legitimately done in His name . . . perhaps with thanksgiving to the human-but-not-divine son and acknowledgement of the mystical, spiritual force of holy God sometimes nicknamed the Spirit.

But that is not how the verse reads. The Father has a name worthy of being baptised into. The Son has a name worthy of being baptised into. And the Spirit has a name worthy of being baptised into.

Only distinctive persons have names that can be placed on another. A wife is married into the name of her husband – each being a distinctive person with specific names yet now unified. Sometimes a building has a name – like the QVB. But we would never think of taking the building's name as our own because it is not a person.

Because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all have distinctive names that can be placed on another, they must be distinctive persons. And because baptism is into the name of each of them, they must all be equally God.

One God, three persons.

Matthew 28.19 is not an isolated verse.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the communion of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all. Amen.

Luke 3:21-22 (NKJV)

²¹When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that **Jesus** also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. ²²And the **Holy Spirit** descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a **voice came from heaven** [Father] which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."

Acts 1:4-8 (NKJV)

⁴And being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the **Father**, "which," *He said*, "you have heard from Me; ⁵for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the **Holy Spirit** not many days from now." ⁶Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "**Lord**, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the **Father** has put in His own authority. ⁸But you shall receive power when the **Holy Spirit** has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Galatians 4:6 (NKJV)

⁶And because you are sons, **God** has sent forth the **Spirit** of His **Son** into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, **Father!**"

Romans 8:3-4 (NKJV)

³For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, **God** *did* by sending His own

Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the **Spirit**.

John 15:26-27 (NKJV)

²⁶ "But when the **Helper** comes, whom I shall send to you from the **Father**, the **Spirit** of truth who proceeds from the **Father**, He will testify of **Me**. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

The whole of the New Testament asserts the existence, the personhood and the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit together with the Father. In fact, "all the . . . New Testament books contain Trinity teaching except James and 3 John."² How revolutionary!

Think of this from the perspective of a person living in Old Testament times – they knew nothing specific about Jesus, because He hadn't been incarnate yet. They knew nothing specific about the Holy Spirit, because He hadn't been sent yet.

The New Testament is 'new' precisely because Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit feature prominently in it. In the Old Testament all that can be found are somewhat cryptic hints of their existence. But we see the Son and the Holy Spirit clearly in the Old Testament – but only because we have met them and know who we are looking for. It wouldn't have been so obvious to the Old Testament believer.

The Third Person of the Trinity

The nature and work of the Holy Spirit is a very important doctrine – yet it is a doctrine we tend to shy away from. Perhaps this is because in the age of the early creeds, the nature and work of Jesus Christ was the flash point. Consequently, the creeds have much more to say about the Son than the Spirit. Another explanation is that the Bible itself says more about the Son than the Spirit, and the Spirit has a role that serves the Father and the Son. Because we preach expositively, we will naturally say more about the Father and the Son.

In our day and age, the Holy Spirit receives a lot of attention – particularly in Charismatic churches. Because of the popularity of Charismatic worship, many non-Charismatic churches have adopted charismatic practices and beliefs as it pertains to the Holy Spirit. There are Charismatic Catholic churches. Charismatic Baptist churches. And, most recently, Charismatic Reformed Churches. It is as if John Calvin himself were speaking in tongues and prophesying miracles.

Perhaps this, too, is a reason why the Holy Spirit is neglected in our circles. We don't want to appear charismatic, so we err on the other extreme.

In truth, this is the age of the Spirit, and we should live in dependence upon the Holy Spirit and with expectancy for the Holy Spirit to work in noticeable ways. I know that dispensationalists call this current age the Age of Grace or the Church Age, but the Age of the Spirit would actually be a more accurate label. The Church was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came. So,

²Youngblood, Ronald F. ; Bruce, F. F. ; Harrison, R. K. ; Thomas Nelson Publishers: *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Nashville : T. Nelson, 1995

without the Spirit, there would be no Church and no Church Age. Likewise, the Age of Grace is an age energised and applied solely by the Spirit.

So the Holy Spirit is here now in a special and unique way – different to the Old Testament times, and He is doing things – supernatural, divine things. The questions then are, ‘how do we recognise the Holy Spirit?’ and ‘what exactly is the Holy Spirit doing?’

These questions deserve a thorough answer, so we will take more than one session on the topic of the Holy Spirit. This session will provide a partial answer to the first question.

How do we recognise the Holy Spirit?

The first part of the answer to the question is that we recognise Him because He is a person. A person is defined by two essential characteristics: self-consciousness and self-determination.

Self-consciousness

Self-consciousness is the ability to be aware of stimuli and the context for those stimuli. My dog is aware of stimuli – she knows to come when I say ‘come’ – but she has no concept of context. She doesn’t know the history of dogs being run over by cars because they failed to ‘come’. She doesn’t know that the one who is giving her the command is nearly 50 years old and has had numerous dogs before. She doesn’t know that by coming she will make my life easier because I will be able to get on with the work I want to be doing.

Stimuli, but no context. My dog is not a person. But the Holy Spirit is. In fact, He is more self-conscious than we are. He knows all things. He feels all things. He has a perfect sense of stimuli and context. No wonder He can be trusted for guidance, and is so well-equipped to give comfort.

Self-determination

Self-determination is the other half of what it means to be a person. It is the ability to choose. My dog acts on impulse not reason. If I say to her, “Here is a doggie biscuit. It is your decision: eat this now, or, if you leave it alone, I will give you a fresh, juicy steak in ten minutes.” A person would use self-determination and choose to wait ten minutes for the steak. But my dog is not a person, so she grabs the biscuit every time.

The Holy Spirit, because He is a person, chooses. He is not controlled by us or anything else. He determines what He will do – and He does so in perfect freedom because, as God, no-one can stop Him. And so, the person of the Holy Spirit chooses to draw this one to salvation, but not that one. The person of the Holy Spirit chooses to give the gift of teaching to this one, but not that one. The person of the Holy Spirit chooses to open our understanding of the Bible, but not the Koran.

Controversy

In spite of the historic Christian belief in the personality of the Holy Spirit as part of the trinity, many people either outright disagree (for example, Muslims, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses), or act as if the Holy Spirit is impersonal.

What evidence is there for the personhood of the Holy Spirit? There is much.

Pronouns

Whenever the Holy Spirit is spoken about in the Bible, the pronouns are always masculine, not neuter. To put it simply, the Holy Spirit is a ‘he’ not an ‘it’.

Notice the pronouns in the following verses about the Holy Spirit:

John 14:16-17 (NKJV)

¹⁶And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another **Helper**, that **He** may abide with you forever— ¹⁷the **Spirit** of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees **Him** nor knows **Him**; but you know **Him**, for **He** dwells with you and will be in you.

Not only do we have personal pronouns, but the description of Him in these same verses would not be appropriate if He were an impersonal force. Can a 'force' be known? Does a 'force' dwell or live somewhere?

When we look at other passages of Scripture, we quickly discover that the Holy Spirit possesses all the attributes of personality.³

Intellect

A person thinks. He or she is able to know things. What does the Holy Spirit know?

1 Corinthians 2:11 (NKJV)

¹¹For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one **knows the things of God** except the **Spirit of God**.

No-one likes a know-it-all. There are few things more irritating than someone who thinks he knows something and is very vocal about it, but in fact he doesn't know what he is talking about. The Greeks thought they had everything figured out. The context of 1 Corinthians 2.11 is about the Greek grasp on knowledge – hidden wisdom expressed in eloquent speech. But the Greeks were wrong.

Likewise, the Judaisers thought they knew it all – holding control over people with the power of their knowledge. They demanded a sign from Jesus. They vilified Jesus . . . and anyone who dared follow Him. But like the Greeks, they were wrong.

There is a lesson here. Sometimes the experts do not have it right, so we shouldn't believe everything we hear. Remember, it was the experts who said the world was flat. But then Christopher Columbus sailed across the ocean and discovered it was not. The theories of the experts were comprehensively discredited by firsthand knowledge.

The Holy Spirit has firsthand knowledge of the things of God. How? By being God Himself.

1 Corinthians 2:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the **Spirit searches all things**, yes, the **deep things of God**.

Have you ever had someone react to you on the basis of what they assume you are thinking? Maybe you were beginning to tell them something, but they cut you off and launched into an argument. It is annoying when that happens – no-one knows our thoughts except we who think them.

That is what the Spirit knows. The thoughts of God. He knows them because He thinks them.

³ John MacArthur, **Fundamentals of the Faith**.

The Mormon apostle that we heard from earlier in this session cannot account for the Spirit's knowledge. If the Spirit is a distinct person – and I agree with the Mormon on that point – but not the same essence – which the Mormon denies – then the Spirit could not know the deep things of God. By definition, there must be something God knows that the Spirit does not.

But the Bible says the opposite. The Spirit knows all that God knows, which means the Spirit must be God – the same essence.

Romans 8:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ Now He who searches the hearts knows what the **mind of the Spirit is**, because He makes intercession for the saints according to *the will of God*.

In this instance, we find that the Spirit not only knows the deep things of God, but He knows the deep things of humans, too. In fact, He actually knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our thoughts – even before we think them.

Romans 8:26 (NKJV)

²⁶ Likewise the **Spirit** also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the **Spirit** Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

Only a person can know something and then process that knowledge into something useful. The Holy Spirit does that with God and humans – He is a person.

Emotion

A natural part of personality is emotion. Some people try to suppress their emotions, but no-one can be rid of them – unless he or she ceases to be a person.

Even the Holy Spirit has emotions.

Ephesians 4:30 (NKJV)

³⁰ And do not **grieve** the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Isn't it interesting that the Holy Spirit is grieved when people make the wrong decisions – especially as it pertains to eternity. In actual fact, the Holy Spirit is not personally affected, but He cares for us so deeply that when we refuse to know what He knows, He feels it.

Volition

As mentioned earlier, self-determination is an essential characteristic of personhood. Another way you can say self-determination is a person has a will. Or, the word often used in theological circles is volition.

Volition simply means the capacity to make choices. There are a lot of choices that are made by the Holy Spirit.

He chooses the spiritual gift(s) that believers receive.

1 Corinthians 12:7 (NKJV)

⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*:

1 Corinthians 12:11 (NKJV)

¹¹But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

He chooses the people who will be called into special ministry functions.

Acts 13:2 (NKJV)

²As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

He chooses to guide church leaders to make wise decisions and settle disputes.

Acts 15:28-29 (NKJV)

²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

Beyond this, the Holy Spirit is active in fulfilling the predestination of God regarding who will be saved. In His Sovereignty, the Holy Spirit gifts those who are chosen with faith and draws them irresistibly to receive Christ.

Summary

The personhood of the Holy Spirit is a critical doctrine. Many people – even within Christianity – conceive of the Holy Spirit more as a force or a ghost than as a person. This is wrong. Many others within Christianity elevate the Holy Spirit to be the primary God for this age – praying to Him, seeking Him, commanding power from Him. This, too, is wrong . . . as we will learn as this study continues.

Of this we can be sure and make confession: That God exists eternally in three persons, yet as one God. A trinity. It doesn't matter that we cannot fully explain or even conceptualise the trinity. The Bible clearly teaches it.

Like the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is a person. In our next session, we will learn more about His Divinity. How do we know that He is God? We will discover that not only is the Holy Spirit a 'he' and not an 'it', He is a He with a capital H.