

Sermon - What is the Holy Spirit?

Exactly what is the Holy Spirit? Many assume that the Holy Spirit, along with God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, form what is commonly known as the Trinity. This doctrine expresses a belief in one God who exists in three distinct but equal persons. Is the Holy Spirit a third divine person, along with God the Father and Jesus Christ?

The word Trinity doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible. It didn't come into common use as a religious term until after the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), several centuries after the last books of the Bible were completed.

In *A Handbook of Christian Truth* by Harold Lindsell and Charles J. Woodbridge, we read "The mind of man cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. He who would try to understand the mystery fully will loose his mind. But he who would deny the Trinity will loose his soul."

Unger's Bible Dictionary, in its article on the Trinity, concedes that the Trinitarian concept is humanly incomprehensible: "It is admitted by all who thoughtfully deal with this subject that the Scripture revelation here leads us into the presence of a deep mystery; and that all human attempts at expression are of necessity imperfect" (Moody Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 1118).

Yet *the Catholic Encyclopedia* in the article Trinity calls it "the CENTRAL doctrine of the Christian religion."

Why is the concept of the Holy Spirit as a third person of a supposedly triune Godhead, along with God the Father and Jesus Christ, so difficult to grasp? Because the Bible does not teach it! You cannot prove something from the Bible that is not biblical. The Bible is our only reliable source of divine revelation and truth, and the Trinity concept is not part of God's revelation to humankind.

What, then, does the Bible teach about the Holy Spirit? Today we are going to find out!

Concepts of 'spirit'

We must first consider the word spirit as it is used in the Bible. Just what is spirit, and what does that word mean?

Four words—two Hebrew and two Greek—are translated "spirit" in the Bible. Of these four, two are used only twice: the Hebrew word *neshamah*, which means "breath," and the Greek word *phantasma*, which means "phantom" or "apparition." The other two words are the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*, each used several hundred times. Understanding these words is crucial to understanding the Holy Spirit.

Ruach means "breath, air; strength; wind; breeze; spirit; courage; temper; Spirit" (Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1985, p. 240). Of the 378 times it is used in the King James Version, it is translated

"Spirit" or "spirit" 272 times, "wind" 92 times, "breath" 27 times and in other ways 27 times. Ruach is used similarly in most other Bible versions.

The concepts of "wind," "breath" and "spirit" were all related in biblical thought and language. We see these intertwined in the use of ruach in Ezekiel 37, which describes a great multitude of people being resurrected and restored to physical life to understand God's truth. In this fascinating account, what is even more extraordinary is the way ruach expresses the connection of these ideas. To illustrate, ruach is inserted wherever it appears in this passage.

Ezekiel 37:1, 4-5, 7-10, 14, *"¹The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit [ruach] of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones...⁴Again He said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: 'Surely I will cause breath [ruach] to enter into you, and you shall live'...⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath [ruach] in them. ⁹Then He said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath [ruach], prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath [ruach], "Thus says the Lord God: 'Come from the four winds [ruach], O breath [ruach], and breathe on these slain, that they may live.' ¹⁰So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath [ruach] came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army... ¹⁴I will put My Spirit [ruach] in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it,' says the Lord."*

Here we see ruach translated three ways in one chapter: Spirit (referring to God's Spirit), breath and wind.

'Spirit' in Greek

What is the meaning of pneuma? This word "primarily denotes 'the wind' (akin to pneo, 'to breathe, blow'); also 'breath'; then, especially 'the spirit,' which, like the wind, is invisible, immaterial and powerful" (ibid., p. 593). It is used 385 times in the King James Version and is usually translated "Spirit" or "spirit."

Look at pneuma. We can see that Greek root in several modern English words such as pneumonia, which is an acute infection of the human respiratory system; pneumatic, referring to something powered by air pressure; and the science of pneumatics, which studies the properties of air and other gases. All of these have to do with air, breathing, wind or being powered by air. When you breathe, what is your body doing? It is creating wind going into and out of the body; breathing is simply creating wind on a small scale.

Pneuma is the equivalent of the Hebrew ruach. In **Luke 4:18**, where Christ read from Isaiah 61:1, the account substitutes pneuma for the Hebrew ruach in referring to "the Spirit [ruach/pneuma] of the Lord." The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (known commonly as the Old Testament) prepared in the third and second century B.C. and used

in the time of the early Church, translated ruach as pneuma (Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, 1992, p. 1185).

Connected concepts

We see the same connection between spirit, breath and wind continued in the New Testament. Although the Greek (unlike the Hebrew) has a different word for wind (anemos), pneuma and its related verb pneo are translated "breath" (**2 Thessalonians 2:8; Revelation 11:11**), "wind" (**John 3:8; Acts 27:40**) and "blow" (**Luke 12:55**).

Jesus Christ made this connection Himself. Without the understanding of this background, details of the incident in which Jesus appeared to His followers after His resurrection are puzzling. After Jesus showed them the wounds in His hands and side, verifying that He had indeed been raised from the dead, John records that Jesus said:

John 20:21-22, "*Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.* ' And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit [pneuma]' "

Earlier He had told them He would send them a "helper" and a "comforter," the Holy Spirit. Here He repeats that promise. He also demonstrates the nature of the Spirit that He would send: It would be like a breath, like a wind, something they couldn't see, but they would be influenced by its power.

The Holy Spirit-the power of God

In Acts 2 we read of the fulfillment of the promise that the Holy Spirit would come to them.

Acts 2:1-4, "*When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance*".

The sound that accompanied the giving of the Holy Spirit was that of a rushing, mighty wind—not the sound of a trumpet or a shout, sounds used elsewhere in the Bible in describing miraculous events (**1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16**). The sound was of wind, again demonstrating the connection between wind and spirit.

Why does this account describe the sound of wind, but not the wind itself? Apparently they heard a powerful sound akin to a tornado, typhoon or hurricane but didn't experience the force of the wind; there was no debris flying through the air, no roofs being blown off. Why wasn't there an actual wind? Because the wind needed to make that sound would have been incredibly destructive, demolishing buildings and injuring people. God's Spirit isn't destructive. That would have distracted from or overshadowed the positive miracles that took place there that day. Thus

there was sound loud enough to be heard throughout Jerusalem (**verses 5-6**), but not a wind of corresponding force in the house in which they had gathered.

These are some of the concepts involved in the words translated "spirit" in the Bible. They do revolve around wind, breath and spirit, but not around the Holy Spirit as a specific person. This becomes more clear as we examine what this Spirit would do in the lives of those who received it.

The Holy Spirit, rather than being a distinct person, is spoken of in the Bible as being God's divine power. The Anchor Bible Dictionary, in its article on the Holy Spirit, describes it as "[t]he manifestation of divine presence and power perceptible especially in prophetic inspiration" (Vol. 3, Doubleday, New York, 1992, p. 260).

Scripture refers to the Holy Spirit as the power of God (**Zechariah 4:6; Micah 3:8**). Paul told Timothy that it is the "spirit of ... power and of love and of a sound mind" (**2 Timothy 1:7**, emphasis added throughout).

Luke 4:14 records that Jesus Christ began His ministry "in the power of the Spirit." Speaking of the Holy Spirit, which would be given to His followers after His death, Jesus told them, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ..." (**Acts 1:8**).

Peter relates how "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, [and Jesus] went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him" (**Acts 10:38**). The Holy Spirit is here associated with the power by which God was with Him-the power through which Jesus Christ performed mighty miracles during His earthly, physical ministry. The Holy Spirit is the very presence of God's power actively working in His servants.

The apostle Paul's desire was that the members of the church in Rome would "abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit," in the same way that Jesus Christ had worked through him "in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" (**Romans 15:13, 19**).

Divine inspiration by the Spirit

Repeatedly the Scriptures reveal that God imparts His divine inspiration to His prophets and servants through the Holy Spirit. Peter noted that "prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (**2 Peter 1:21**).

Paul stated that God's plan had been "revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets" (**Ephesians 3:5**), and that his own teachings were inspired by the spirit (**1 Corinthians 2:13**). Paul, in **1 Corinthians 2:9, 10**, explains that God through His Spirit has revealed to us the things which He has prepared for those who love Him. God the Father is the Revealer, working through His Spirit in those who serve Him.

Jesus Christ told His followers that the Holy Spirit, which the Father would send to them, "will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (**John 14:26**).

It is through God's Spirit within us that we can gain spiritual understanding and insight. "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save [through] the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but [through] the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (**1 Corinthians 2:11, 12**).

Jesus Christ had this spiritual understanding in abundance. As the Messiah, He was prophesied to have "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD"; (**Isaiah 11:2**).

Other attributes of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is spoken of in many ways that demonstrate that it is not a divine person. For example, the Holy Spirit is referred to as a gift (**Acts 10:45; 1 Timothy 4:14**). We are told that it can be quenched (**1 Thessalonians 5:19**), that it can be poured out (**Acts 2:17; 10:45**), and that we are baptized with it (**Matthew 3:11**). It must be stirred up within us (**2 Timothy 1:6**), and it also renews us (**Titus 3:5**). These are certainly not attributes of a person.

This Spirit is also called "the Holy Spirit of promise ... the guarantee of our inheritance ... the spirit of wisdom and revelation ..." (**Ephesians 1:13, 14, 17**).

This Spirit is not only the Spirit of God the Father; it is also "the Spirit of Christ" (**Romans 8:9; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11**). It dwells within Christians, leading and enabling us to be children of God (**Romans 8:14**).

In contrast to God the Father and Jesus Christ, who are consistently compared to human beings in their form and shape, the Holy Spirit is just as consistently represented in a completely different manner. It is described as appearing as a dove (**Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32**) and as "tongues of fire" (**Acts 2:3**). Jesus Christ compared it with "living water" (**John 7:37-39**).

There is further evidence that the Holy Spirit is not a person, but is the divine power of God. In **Matthew 1:20**, we read that Jesus was begotten by the Holy Spirit (Moffatt translation). Yet Jesus Christ continually prayed to and addressed the Father, not the Holy Spirit, as His father (**Matthew 10:32, 33; 11:25-27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17, 27; 18:10, 35**). He never represented the Holy Spirit as His Father.

Paul didn't acknowledge the Trinity

If God were a Trinity, surely the apostle Paul, who recorded much of the theological underpinnings of the early Church, would have understood and taught this understanding. Yet we find no such concept in his writings.

Paul's standard greeting in his letters to churches, as well as individuals to whom he wrote, is, "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." There is no mention of the Holy Spirit.

This same greeting, with only minor variations, appears in every epistle that bears Paul's name: **Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; and Philemon 3.**

The Holy Spirit is always left out of these greetings-an unbelievable oversight if the Holy Spirit were indeed a person coequal with God and Jesus Christ.

This is even more surprising when we consider that the churches to which Paul wrote had many gentile members from polytheistic backgrounds who had formerly worshiped numerous gods. Paul's epistles record no attempt on his part to explain the Trinity or Holy Spirit as a divine person equal with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

In Paul's writings, only in **2 Corinthians 13:14** is the Holy Spirit mentioned along with God the Father and Jesus Christ, and there only about our "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (New International Version) with God and Christ.

The apostle Paul states clearly that "there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things ... and one Lord Jesus Christ ..." (**1 Corinthians 8:6**). He makes no mention of the Holy Spirit as a divine person.

Other perspectives

Jesus Christ did not speak of the Holy Spirit as a third divine person; instead He only spoke of the relationship between Him and God the Father (**Matthew 26:39; Mark 13:32; 15:34; John 5:18, 22; 8:16, 18; 10:30; 13:3; 17:11**). Some passages, like Christ's reference to the "Helper" or "Comforter" in John 14, 15 and 16, could easily be read as referring to a person. However, there is no reason to do so from the original language (see "Grammar Inset").

GRAMMER INSET

Much of the confusion among English-speaking peoples (and in English translations of the Bible) regarding the nature of the Holy Spirit centers on the Greek language's use of gender pronouns. Greek, like the Romance languages (Spanish, French, Italian and others), uses a specific gender for every noun. Every object, animate or inanimate, is referred to as being either masculine, feminine or neuter.

A noun's gender is usually arbitrary and has nothing to do with whether it in reality refers to something masculine or feminine. For example, in French a book, *livre*, is referred to in the masculine sense, as a "he." In German, a girl, *mädchen*, is referred to in the neuter sense, as an "it." By contrast, in English, nouns that aren't specifically masculine or feminine are referred to as "it."

In the New Testament, the words used most often in reference to the Holy Spirit are a mixture of masculine and neuter. The Greek word *parakletos* is translated "Comforter" or "Helper." The comforter that Christ promised He would send to the disciples in the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of John is a masculine word and thus would be referred to by the pronouns "he," "him," "his" and "himself" throughout those chapters. However, this is strictly a grammatical tool and not a statement on the nature of the Holy Spirit.

The other word used most often of the Holy Spirit is the Greek word *pneuma*. It is translated as "breath" or "spirit" and means breath, breeze, wind or spirit. It is the root of our modern word *pneumatic*, meaning pertaining to or operated by air or wind. *Pneuma* is a grammatically neuter word and thus should be referred to in English by such neuter terms as "it," "its" or "itself."

The translators of the King James Version, influenced by the Trinity doctrine, generally mistranslated pronouns referring to *pneuma* as masculine rather than neuter. There are a few exceptions in the KJV in which the translation was properly handled, such as **Romans 8:16**: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

Later English translations of the Bible, following the lead of the King James Version, translated references to the Holy Spirit as masculine, thus it is almost always referred to as "he" or "him" in modern versions.

Most Bible scholars, as pointed out in many translation notes, agree that the one biblical passage that most obviously supports a Trinity-the latter portion of **1 John 5:7** and the beginning of the following verse-is readily acknowledged by Bible scholars as a spurious addition made long after John's epistle was written. The Expositor's Bible Commentary dismisses this passage as "obviously a late gloss with no merit" (Vol. 12, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 353).

In the final book of the Bible (and the last to be written), the Holy Spirit is conspicuously absent. The book describes "a new heaven and a new earth" (**Revelation 21:1**) wherein "the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them" (verse 3). Jesus Christ, "the Lamb," is also there (verse 22). The Holy Spirit, however, is completely missing-an incredible oversight if this Spirit is the third person of a Trinity.