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The Holy Spirit is God

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The apostle Peter made an important announcement that is recorded in the book of Acts. Describing the miracle that was happening in Jerusalem on Pentecost, he declared the beginning of the special advent of the Holy Spirit. This had been promised by the Old Testament prophets as a sign of the last days before the final, glorious advent of Christ.

. . . this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, . . . before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."¹

You and I are among those servants of God who are prophesying, thanks to the Holy Spirit. Using Scripture as his tool, the Holy Spirit is moving us to proclaim "the mystery hidden for long ages"² that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, is the Savior of all. He is the Savior everyone needs to know and trust in order to escape God's coming judgment. The Holy Spirit is God, who creates our faith in Jesus, guides our lives as believers, and powers the proclaiming that we do. It is fitting therefore that we are giving honor to the Holy Spirit through the study that we are undertaking here.

The Holy Spirit is revealed in the Bible

We believe that the Bible testifies about our Savior Jesus Christ only because the writers were "carried along"³ this route by the Holy Spirit, like boats driven by the wind. The Holy Spirit taught the prophets and apostles what to say.⁴ As the influential, invisible author of the Bible, the Holy Spirit also reveals himself in the Bible that he produced.

The Holy Spirit is revealed in the Old Testament

The opening sentences of Genesis provide a dramatic introduction to the Holy Spirit. Against a cold, dark background, empty of all life, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."⁵ Again and again, the Pentateuch reveals the power of the Holy Spirit⁶ saying that he gave exceptional skill, ability and knowledge to certain chosen people. Sometimes he gifted them in physical ways⁷, but more often he blessed them spiritually in matters of faith. Joshua,⁸ Gideon,⁹ Samson,¹⁰ and Saul¹¹ became outstanding leaders of Israel under the influence of the Spirit of God. David, the royal psalm writer, explained his lyrical gift by saying "The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue."¹² The Spirit also receives credit for putting into David's mind the plans for the future Temple.¹³ The Old Testament says repeatedly that the Spirit of God, or the Spirit of the Lord, came upon the prophets, guiding their thoughts, words and actions. The third person of the Trinity receives praise and bestows blessings throughout the Old Testament period.

The Holy Spirit is revealed in the New Testament

Just as the Holy Spirit was "hovering over the waters" of the world before there was life in the beginning, so also, when the time had fully come, he powerfully "overshadowed"¹⁴ the womb of the virgin Mary causing her to conceive the baby Jesus. Soon after that great event began, the Holy Spirit moved one person after another to testify about Jesus. He started with Elizabeth, Mary and Zechariah¹⁵ and continued with the shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and the wise men. Later he anointed Jesus himself to preach the good news.¹⁶ After he was glorified, Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to his disciples¹⁷ so they would understand the Scriptures¹⁸ and forgive sins in his

name.¹⁹ Then at last the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit came upon the entire church. The Spirit blew away language barriers, dissolved fears, and equipped believers to bear witness to Jesus as the promised Savior.²⁰ What he began to do on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit will continue to do “as he determines”²¹ until Christ returns.

The Holy Spirit has Divine Attributes

The Holy Spirit has Divine Names

The scriptures reveal that the Holy Spirit is God by accrediting him with divine names, divine works and divine attributes. The word spirit literally means “breath” or “wind” in Hebrew (ruach) and in Greek (pneuma). By itself the word “spirit” does not imply divinity any more than the words “father” and “son,” by themselves, imply divinity. But the fact that this Spirit repeatedly is called the Holy Spirit clearly indicates he is God.²² Translations of the Bible usually recognize this by capitalizing the word Spirit when the context reveals that the Holy Spirit is meant.

The divine identity of the Holy Spirit is also brought out by the following familiar passages of scripture. The apostle Peter warned Ananias, “You have lied to the Holy Spirit . . . you have not lied to men, but to God”.²³ The apostle Paul gave the names “Lord” and “God” to the Holy Spirit when he wrote about spiritual gifts, “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. . . . All these are the work of one and the same Spirit. . . .”²⁴ Saint Paul also said that the body of a Christian is a temple of God because the Holy Spirit is there.²⁵ Added to these are many other examples of divine names and titles given to the Spirit. He is called “God’s Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of the Lord,” “the Spirit of Christ,” the Spirit of “truth,” of “life,” of “glory,” and “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead.”²⁶

The Holy Spirit does Divine Works

The Nicene creed praises the Holy Spirit as “the giver of life.” That is a fitting description of the divine activity of the Holy Spirit during the creation of the world.²⁷ He also deserves this praise because the gift of life can be transmitted from one generation to the next. As Job said, “The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”²⁸ But even more important than his gift of physical life is the new birth, the spiritual life, that the Holy Spirit works through the gospel in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and through the gospel by itself. “God . . . saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ “From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel.”³⁰

What is more, the Holy Spirit also preserves the life of God’s people by praying for them, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us. . . .”³¹ These creative and preserving activities affirm that the Holy Spirit is God. As God, the Holy Spirit also convicts us of sin, testifies of Christ, leads us to faith in our Savior, and preserves our faith.

It should be noted that all of these divine works are common to all three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three persons have the same divine nature and together are active in all divine works that are done outside of God, to or for his creation (the opera ad extra).

The Holy Spirit has the Divine Nature of the Triune God

In his institution of baptism, Jesus named the Holy Spirit as one of the three persons of the Triune God.³²

The fact that the Holy Spirit was named last does not indicate that he has a lower status or that he originated at a different time. Nor does the fact that each of the three persons is named separately mean that each one has his own divine nature. The divine nature of the Holy Spirit is not separate from the divine nature of the Father and the Son. Scripture teaches that there is one God³³ with one divine nature.³⁴ There are not three gods with three divine natures. “Each of the three Persons possesses this one undivided and indivisible divine essence in its entirety.”³⁵

Consistent with this, the Bible shows that the attributes of the Holy Spirit are the same as the attributes of the Father and of the Son. For example, the Holy Spirit is present everywhere, "Where can I go from your Spirit?"³⁶ He is eternal.³⁷ He is all-knowing: "The Spirit searches all things."³⁸ He is all powerful³⁹ and holy.⁴⁰ He is the "Spirit of grace"⁴¹ and of love.⁴² If the Holy Spirit were merely a force or a power proceeding from God, he would not be described as speaking,⁴³ being grieved,⁴⁴ or having a will of his own.⁴⁵

Occasionally we read a plural reference to the Holy Spirit in the Bible.⁴⁶ This may refer to the sevenfold characteristics of the Holy Spirit that were given to Christ as foretold by the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD"⁴⁷

The Holy Spirit was given to the human nature of Jesus "without limit."⁴⁸ For this reason, and also because Jesus and the Holy Spirit have the same divine nature, Jesus can be called "the Lord, who is the Spirit."⁴⁹ The perfect cooperation and divine unity of the second and third persons of the Trinity does not change the fact that the two persons are distinct and separate. The Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Son.⁵⁰

The Honor Due the Holy Spirit

Scripture warns against offending the Holy Spirit. When King Saul turned away from God, "the Spirit of the LORD" departed from him.⁵¹ When King David recognized that his sin and failure to repent grieved the Holy Spirit, he repented with all of his heart.⁵² God warned unrepentant Israel that they had "rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit," and that therefore he "became their enemy and he himself fought against them"⁵³ A terrible judgment fell upon Ananias and his wife Sapphira when they refused to repent, or even to admit that they had lied to the Holy Spirit. The writer to the Hebrews warned,

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.⁵⁴

The Holy Spirit deserves the worship and respect of God's people. Sin grieves him.⁵⁵ Sanctified living honors him.

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.⁵⁶

Since the Holy Spirit provides the power for sanctified living only through the gospel in word and sacrament, we honor him by staying in contact with these means of grace so that we do not put out the Spirit's fire by neglecting the gospel. We also give him the honor that he deserves when our church festivals, liturgical forms, prayers and hymns call on his name and praise his life-giving work.

The Holy Spirit has been the Subject □ of Theological Controversy

Eastern and Western Theologians Differed □ in their Views of the Trinity

In the first centuries of the Christian church certain theologians thought a great deal about the Trinity, but the East and the West had different points of view. The one side strongly proclaimed the distinctness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The other side was strong in proclaiming that

God is One. Both the East and the West struggled to avoid the error of tritheism, the false teaching that there are three (Greek, treis) gods (Greek, theos).

Toward the end of the second century, as a result of this struggle to find the truth, a teaching known as "Monarchianism" began in the East and spread to the West. It was an attempt to proclaim the unity of God. Unfortunately, it destroyed the Trinity.

One form of this heresy sought to preserve the unity of God, the deity of Christ, and the deity of the Holy Spirit by teaching that the Son and Holy Spirit were simply modes or manifestations of God the Father. It was labeled "Modalistic Monarchianism" (Modal: appearing in different roles; Monarch: one principle being). Another name for it was "Patripassianism," because it claimed that the Father (Latin, pater) suffered (Latin, passus) in his role as the Son.

A second and distinctly different monarchian teaching, "Dynamistic Monarchianism," also tried to preserve the unity of God, but did it by denying the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. It speculated that God, the sole ruler, lifted Jesus up to a nearly divine level by filling him with powers called "the Logos" and "the Spirit."

In addition, a third destructive conclusion about the Trinity speculated that the only true God is the Father, and that the other two divine persons are only temporary, somewhat inferior displays that flow from the Father. This heresy became known as "Subordinationism."

At the time of these controversies, there were a great many differing opinions about the Holy Spirit, who was identified by some theologians as an energy, a creature, or an angel.⁵⁷ Yet, we can be sure from the simple statements of the Apostles Creed that the ancient church believed in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. "But it was not until the fourth century . . . that the . . . personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit were made prominent."⁵⁸

Subordinationism in the Eastern Church

Around 150 A.D. certain people in the Greek part of the church who wanted to avoid the heresy of tritheism, declared that Jesus Christ is not God, but is almost God. They said that the Logos, who became flesh in Jesus Christ, was one step down from the Father.

Origen of Alexandria, Egypt, polished some of the rough edges of this heresy, known as Subordinationism (Latin: having a lower or inferior nature). Struggling against the Monarchians, he insisted that the Father, Son, and Spirit were three eternally distinct persons, but he felt that they were not equal. He pictured the Trinity with three concentric circles forming an inverted triangle reaching from God to man. Origen reasoned that "Since all things have come into existence through the Logos, it follows that the Holy Spirit is the first of the spirits begotten of the Father through the Son."⁵⁹ He taught that all three persons have the same essence, but not the same existence.⁶⁰ Jesus and the Holy Spirit were part of a descending bridge between heaven and earth. The role of the Holy Spirit was to proceed from the Father through the Son in order to sanctify man.

Thus, according to Origen, the Son and the Holy Spirit were subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit was also subordinate to the Son. This widely-believed distortion was not clearly corrected until the Council of Nicea in 325.

Dynamistic Monarchianism in the Eastern Church

Theodotus, who seems to have come from Byzantium about 190 A.D., attempted to preserve the unity of God in a different way. He too said that Christ and the Holy Spirit are not equal with God the Father, but according to his theory, the man Jesus was elevated to a godlike level when he received a dynamis, a power that came from God. Toward the end of the second century Theodotus moved to Rome bringing along with him this heresy which became known as Dynamistic Monarchianism or Adoptionism.⁶¹

In the third century a bishop in Antioch, Paul of Samosata, championed the same theory. He taught that the man Jesus Christ was moved up to the level of godliness through a dynamis, a power, consisting of the Logos and the Holy Spirit, given to him by God. He taught that "it is permissible to speak of a Logos or Son and a Wisdom or Spirit in God; but these are nothing more than attributes of God . . . impersonal influences."⁶²

The Augsburg Confession, in the Chief Articles of Faith, Article One, Of God, condemns the teaching of the Samosatenes for denying the personality and deity of the Logos and of the Holy Spirit.⁶³

Arius, a teacher in the church of Alexandria, also disagreed with the Samosatenes, but he based his disagreement on an extreme subordinationist argument. He concluded that Jesus was more than a man who was adopted by God; Jesus was the Logos, the Son of God, who existed before the creation of the world. However, he was not eternal. According to Arius, Jesus was a supremely important first creature who helped God create everything else. If he was a creature, as Arius insisted, he could not be God. Nor could the Holy Spirit be true God, from his point of view. Arius taught that the Holy Spirit was the first creature made by the Son.⁶⁴ Today this is taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses; however, they consider the Holy Spirit to be merely a force coming from God.

The leader in correcting the Arian heresy was Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, at the general council of Eastern bishops at Nicea, 325 A.D. With the word homoousios he declared that the Father and Son are one God having the same substance or nature. He also defended the homoousia of the Holy Spirit at the synod of Alexandria, 362 A.D., teaching that the Holy Spirit is God, for only a divine Spirit could make people "partakers of the divine nature."⁶⁵ Athanasius was convinced that the formula for Baptism reveals the divine nature of the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit merely were a creature, he would not be included under the same name with the Father and the Son.

Until then, not much had been said about the third person of the Trinity, but in the following years a great deal more attention was given to the Holy Spirit's identity. Bishop Macedonius of Constantinople opposed the position of Athanasius and insisted that the Holy Spirit is a creature subordinate to the Son.

But the Alexandrine synod of 362, spurred on by Basil of Caesarea's treatise on the Holy Spirit, condemned both Arianism and the similar teaching of the Pneumatomachians (Greek, "fighters against the Holy Spirit"), who were also called the Macedonians. Basil was the first to formalize the accepted terminology for the Trinity: one substance (ousia) and three persons or beings (hypostaseis).

Basil's friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, noted the biblical distinction between the three persons of the Trinity, namely that the Father is "unbegotten," the Son is "begotten," and the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father through the Son.⁶⁶ This helpful distinction was accepted by the church at a synod held in Rome (380 A.D.).

In the year 381 A.D. in Constantinople, the church went a step further by affirming the full deity of the Holy Spirit, declaring him to be "the Lord and Giver of life, proceeding from the Father, worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son." In 451 at Chalcedon both the Eastern and Western branches of the church formally adopted this wording of the Nicene Creed.

Modalistic Monarchianism in the Western Church

Modalistic Monarchianism, the heretical idea that God the Father temporarily assumed the roles of the Son and Spirit, also began in the eastern church. Praxeas (190 A.D.) was among the first to bring this form of modalism from the East, where some years later the heresy would be opposed by Origen, to the West, where he met the opposition of Tertullian in Carthage, north Africa.

Tertullian said that Praxeas did two works for the Devil in Rome: he put to flight the Paraclete and crucified the Father.⁶⁷ The false doctrine of Praxeas destroyed the Triune identity of God.

The most significant example of Modalistic Monarchianism in Rome appeared a few years later, around 215 A.D. Sabellius of Lybia elaborated the error of Praxeas by teaching that the one true God revealed himself chronologically in three different, temporary roles: as Creator-Father in the Old Testament, as Redeemer-Son in the life of Jesus, and finally as Sanctifier-Spirit in the church. In other words, he was saying that God is a single person, a unity.

Tertullian labored against the modalistic heresy by correctly teaching that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct, eternal, coexisting persons who together are the one Triune God. To express his thought he used the word trinitas (Trinity).⁶⁸ Tertullian, however, was not without error himself. He held to a "subordination of the Son and of the Spirit to the Father."⁶⁹ To illustrate this he drew analogies from nature: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are to each other like a fountain, stream, and river. The Father is the whole substance. The Son and Spirit descend from the Father.

Augustine added a new emphasis to the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity two hundred years later when he made it customary to say that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father "and the Son" (Latin, filioque). When he spoke about the procession of the Spirit, he meant the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, not simply the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Augustine reasoned that if the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, he must also proceed from the Son, because they have the same divine nature.

But Augustine also contributed to the confusing muddle of modern theology when he tried to explain the unexplainable. In order to make a distinction between the "generation" of the Son from the Father and the "procession" of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, he expressed the theory that the Holy Spirit is a mysterious, eternal substance common to both the Father and the Son that could also be called "friendship", or a "bond of love".⁷⁰ In his great work, *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity), he wrote, "Therefore the Holy Spirit, whatever it is, is something common to both the Father and the Son. But that communion itself is consubstantial and co-eternal; and if it may fitly be called friendship, let it so be called; but it is more aptly called love. And this is also a substance, since God is a substance, and 'God is love,' as it is written." [6,5:7]

In 589 A.D. at the Third Council of Toledo, in Spain, the first evidence can be seen that the filioque found its way into a western version of the Nicene Creed. This was done to refute the Arians. The church in Spain was being troubled by a group of Arian heretics who denied the full deity of the Son. However, these Arians were willing to say that the Holy Spirit was God. This caused their opponents to reply that Jesus must be God also, because the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (filioque), and God can only proceed from God.

This does not mean that the term filioque was widely accepted at that time. In fact, the filioque was resisted in both the West and the East for generations. Western theologians knew that the Eastern church had not accepted the concept. Pope Leo III, for example, refused to allow the addition during his lifetime. In fact, he ordered the engraving of the creed in Latin and Greek, without the filioque, on two silver plates to adorn the wall of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. He did this even though he agreed with the filioque doctrinally.

Eastern theologians, fearing that the filioque taught Sabellianism, insisted that there can be only one God, who is the Father, and that the Father must be the source for both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

When Pope Benedict VIII officially declared the filioque statement to be part of the creed spoken at the Latin mass in 1014 A.D., he deeply offended the leaders of the Eastern church. Forty years later, in 1054 A.D., after several centuries of controversy about doctrine and practice related to this and other matters, a break which continues to this day occurred between the Roman church of the West and the Orthodox church of the East.

Confusion in the Modern Church

Robert W. Jensen is one modernist who sees himself on a mission to amend inherited teaching.⁷¹ According to Jensen, "Spirit" was a "term" that biblical theology provided to describe what comes from a meeting between God and a believer. The "Spirit" is "faith's knowledge of God."⁷² He writes, "Truly, the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community."⁷³ He calls "the Spirit" a "dynamism" that gripped the church as it expected the future return of Jesus.⁷⁴ Because of his belief that the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Trinity, but a power that comes from God, Jensen is a modern example of Dynamistic Monarchianism. Pieper states that "most of the English, American and German Unitarians are Dynamic Monarchians."⁷⁵

Modern theology, with its rejection of the authority of scripture, presents human speculation about the Trinity. Liberal scholars openly deny the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. They use the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but explain them to be three divine operations of one divine Person (Modalistic Monarchianism).⁷⁶

The Prussian Reformed theologian, Schleiermacher, recommended that the name Father be used to represent the real God, and that the names Son and Spirit be used to represent temporary ways that the Father revealed himself. "The Holy Spirit was to him merely the 'Gemeindegeist' (spirit of the believing community) proceeding from Christ, 'a working, spiritual force.'"⁷⁷ Schleiermacher tended to agree with Immanuel Kant that God is unknowable. He suggested that the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost meant simply that the risen Christ had caused the beginning of the organized, corporate entity known as the church.⁷⁸

Later in the 1800s Albrecht Ritschl, an agnostic, repeated and varied Schleiermacher's doctrine slightly by saying that the Holy Spirit was an impersonal power emanating from God and dwelling in the church.⁷⁹

Modern day Modalism tries to make the Trinity a reasonable doctrine by saying, "God is love. The Father is love given in the past, the Son is love manifested in the present, the Spirit is love stretching into the future."

There are also modern Subordinationists, including some Arminians, who argue that the Son is younger than the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is younger than both because he proceeds from both of them. In contrast, the Athanasian Creed states, "And in this Trinity none is before or after another; none is greater or less than another, but the whole three Persons are coeternal together and coequal."⁸⁰

In the ancient Christian church a group of Jewish Christians known as the Ebionites thought of the Holy Spirit as a female person of the Trinity.⁸¹ A modern theologian whose writings appeared on the internet recently also speculates about the gender of the Holy Spirit. Citing examples from the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, he notes that one branch of the Syrian Orthodox Church has a whole system of theology based on the femininity of the Holy Spirit. Then he proceeds to develop his own similar theological system, suggesting that a female Holy Spirit explains the feminine characterization of "Wisdom" in Proverbs 8:12-31.⁸² Modern feminist theologians who prefer to worship God as Sophia, a goddess, are of the same unorthodox opinion.

The Holy Spirit can be the Subject of Cultural Misunderstandings

Words need to be chosen thoughtfully

Louw and Nida make the interesting observation that many cultures of our world are animistic, and that in such cultures it can be very difficult to find a completely suitable word to speak of the Holy Spirit. "If one uses a term which normally identifies local supernatural beings, there is a tendency to read into the term the meaning of evil. . . . If one uses a term which means 'heart' or 'soul' (and thus the Spirit of God would be literally equivalent to 'the heart of God'), there may be complications since this aspect of human personality is often regarded as not being able to act on its own."⁸³ In many languages the best equivalent for Spirit is "breath," which is the root meaning of the biblical word for the Spirit.

Understanding must be established carefully

In all parts of the world, including the western nations, it is necessary to explain carefully what is meant by the words "Holy Spirit." The term refers to the third person of the Triune God, the Lord and giver of life. Although he is equal to the Father and the Son in every way, he is not one of three gods. He is God, who together with God the Father and God the Son is worshiped and praised because of who he is, because of what he does for us as the Lord and giver of life, and because of the life-giving faith that he creates in us to the glory of Jesus our Savior.