

# The Holy Spirit in the scriptures

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**W**hat do the biblical writers say about the Holy Spirit? And how have Christians made meaningful the biblical testimony to God's Spirit?

## The church's Trinitarian language

For early Christians, the Holy Spirit was closely linked to the new self-disclosure of God that came in and through Jesus. Before Jesus, the Spirit was known among the Israelite people as the "Spirit of God" (Gen. 1:2; Job 27:3) or the "Spirit of Yahweh" (Judg. 6:34; Isa. 61:1), empowering God's people for special ministries (Exod. 31:3; 1 Sam 10:6). After the resurrection, however, the first disciples recognized Jesus in their worship

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experience as the Lord of God's newly reconfigured people. They also recognized the deeper significance of their memories of Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

It was only natural that all this activity be identified as the moving of the "Spirit of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:45). Not to identify this

activity with God would have seemed inappropriate to the first Christians, since they used Hebrew categories to make sense of their experience. For example, in Rom. 8:9, Paul uses "Spirit of God" and "Spirit of Christ" to identify the rule of the Spirit, in which believers now participate. Notice the interchangeable use of the designations *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*, in the unified expression of God's gracious reconciling presence; all three share a seamless identity.

The same seamlessness comes through when Paul explains that the diverse spiritual gifts energizing the church in God's mission are held together by the reality of "the same Spirit . . . ; the same Lord . . . ; the same God who activates all of them in everyone"

(1 Cor. 12:4–6; NRSV). The varied yet unified expression for God is regularly found in the Pauline tradition and among the other New Testament writers. For example, “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6; see also 1 Cor. 6:11 and Heb. 9:14).

Later, in the third and fourth centuries, Greek rational thought influenced proto-orthodox church theologians to individualize or isolate the unified expression of God’s presence into “three distinct persons” or “three masks,” but of the *same* “substance” or “essence” (*homoousios*); it was not enough to say they are *similar* in essence (*homoiousios*), as did Arian theologians. Only one letter

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distinguished the two Greek terms, but that letter made a big difference for the proto-orthodox theologians arguing the divinity of Jesus, against Arianism. In the end, the language of “same substance” (*homoousios*) emerged as the orthodox confession (First Council of Nicea, 325 CE).

Trinitarian debates in the history of the church have, however, sometimes led to division and misunderstanding. The theological rationalizations have tended to introduce more problems than they solve. Is God like

the three states of matter—solid, liquid, and gas—an analogy that suggests God’s evolution from state to state? Or is God like the three parts of an egg—the shell, the white, and the yolk—suggesting categorically distinct roles within the self of God? For example, is it the Son’s role to satisfy the Father’s requirement for honour and justice by paying for the penalty of human sin? While not the only way Christians have thought of the saving significance of Jesus’ death on the cross, this view of the atonement is an example of how isolating the members of the Godhead from one another can put them in opposition and thus compromise the unity of God’s “being-in-relation.”<sup>1</sup>

### **A traditional “isolated” view of the Trinity**

Even though an isolated view of the Trinity became popular

among some Christians, the New Testament writers give no evidence of ever imagining God to have three parts or of God's evolving from one form to another. Fundamentally, the orthodox articulation of the Trinity at the First Council of Nicea in the year 325 was aimed at ruling out both of these notions: that God had three parts, or that God had evolved from one form to another, abandoning the previous form. The doctrine of the Trinity that finally emerged was an attempt to recognize the multiplex character of God's "being-in-relation," without suggesting three individual deities or some sort of transactional exchange between them.

Trinitarian language continues to be difficult for Western "either/or" thinking. However, instead of focusing on "substance" or "persons," more promise may come in describing the Trinity in terms of relationship or as a community-of-being. Thus, the basic Trinitarian confession remains: God, as revealed in Jesus, is fully personal within God's own mode of existence as Spirit (that is,

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relational and therefore necessarily plural), and God, as Creator, wills to give God's very self to the creatures of the world in loving relationship.<sup>2</sup> In this way, there is a dynamic and relational unity within God's being.

### **A relational understanding of the Trinity**

In a relational understanding of the Trinity, God makes space within the very self of God for the universe, as creation is launched, carrying forward God's desire for intimate relationship. God's community-of-being

relates to creation in different ways, helping it to understand both God and itself better over time. God as revealed by the *Son* shows God's desire to relate intimately to humanity. God as revealed by the *Spirit* shows God being true to God's very character of breathing life into the world and moving all creation forward to its goal of shalom. God as revealed by the *Father* shows God's parental desire to give God's very self for creation in loving relationship, so that ultimately it may recognize who it is, and who it is becoming. In this way, the Trinity is not so much a metaphysical problem to solve but an invitation to share the life of God together.<sup>3</sup>

With a relational understanding of the Trinity, we hear the New Testament chorus saying that the Holy Spirit is God's living presence among God's people, carrying out the mission of the risen Lord Jesus, which is the creation of a new humanity.<sup>4</sup> The Spirit is the way God's presence is made known to us in these last days through Messiah Jesus. The Spirit motivates, empowers, and guides God's people, enabling them to go beyond previous possibilities in the formation of open, sharing, and true communities of Jesus.

The mutation within Jewish monotheism that the early Christian disciples enacted was in response to their encounter with the

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risen and exalted Lord Jesus. Their experience of his powerful presence among them in worship, guidance, healing, and discernment, as they gathered in Jesus' name, could only be accounted for if God were truly behind it. Thus, the monotheistic category of singleness mutated to one of *relational unity* as well, for the Christians who followed that first generation. Not to understand the experience of Jesus as an experience of God would be to reject God, for God was surely behind all that they had experienced of the divine presence among them in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Christian

monotheism (unity) is different from Jewish or Islamic monotheism (singleness). For Christian theology, "what the mystery of the Trinity discloses is not a mathematical problem (how can one be three?) but the mystery of life given and shared. The Trinity is the mystery of God's own life as life given and received and shared in a never-diminished abundance of being. The Trinity shows us God as community."<sup>6</sup>

Such developments in theism are not new, however. The Christian mutation of Jewish monotheism was yet another shift in the development in Jewish theism. Like their Israelite ancestors long before them, who had abandoned belief in many gods (*polytheism*; see Gen. 31:19–35; 35:2–4), then belief in one god among many (*henotheism*; see Exod. 20:1–7; Deut. 32:8–9), and who, finally by the end of the exile came to understand Yahweh as the only God (*monotheism*; see Isa. 40), the early Christians also came

to recognize most clearly “the glory of God in the face of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:6) through the Holy Spirit, who animated their gatherings. Since the master of the universe was most clearly present and represented in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of

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Nazareth, it was not a great leap to expand the language of “Lord” to refer to him. Now, in the post-Easter period, the unity of Yahweh included the Holy Spirit, who touched and continues to touch members of the faith community personally with the personal presence of God through the risen Lord Jesus.

### **Characteristics of the Holy Spirit according to the New Testament writers**

What then do the New Testament writers actually say about the Holy Spirit? New Testament scholar Tim Geddert notes at least

twelve characteristics or activities of the Spirit that can be identified.

1. The Spirit is both preserver and initiator of God’s living presence within creation, which is why the Spirit can be further characterized as holy (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 8:9).
2. The outpouring of the Spirit is a sign that the end-time has begun (Acts 2:16–17; 10:44–48; John 20:22).
3. Receiving the Spirit is simultaneously a call to ministry and an equipping for ministry (Acts 1:8).
4. The Spirit is a sign of and the effective cause of humanity’s participation in God’s salvation—the deposit or first installment (*arrabōn*, 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14) and the “first fruits” or “guarantee” (*aparchē*, Rom. 8:23) of the promised creation inheritance.
5. The Spirit facilitates a range of experiences, both individual and collective, in which God’s people share (Acts; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:4).
6. The Spirit facilitates moral and ethical growth (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Gal. 5:22–26).
7. The Spirit brings about a loving, trusting relationship with God (Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6).

8. The Spirit is the source of the “overflowing life” that God gives the people of God (John 7:38; 1 John 3:24; 4:13).
9. The Spirit is the mediator of the presence of the resurrected Jesus in the life of the believer and the church (John 14:18–26; Rom. 8:3, 9–11; 1 Cor. 15:45; Col. 2:11).
10. The Spirit who gathered the church as the end-time expression of God’s kingdom is constantly about the task of preserving and renewing the church in God’s mission (1 John 4:1–6; 1 Cor 2:6–16).
11. The Spirit speaks to the church through scripture (as it is interpreted in a discerning Christian community) in ways that invite the church in every culture and time to ongoing transformation, and that animate its witness to the world (John 16:13; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 5:1, 13–14).
12. The Spirit gives spiritual gifts for the “building up” of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12–14).

Given this list of characteristics of the Holy Spirit, two stand out. The Spirit is known as the power of God’s presence active

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within human beings, *and* as the personal presence of God initiating conversion, transformation, and discernment among God’s people. And yet the New Testament writers do not spell out the distinct personal identity of the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, the language is ambiguous—at one place, “Spirit of Christ,” then at another, “Spirit of God.” For some later theologians, the ambiguous language made sense, if the Spirit was indeed the spirit of the Father *and* of the Son (that is, the double procession of the Spirit); and so

the *filioque* clause (“and the Son”) was added to the Nicene Creed at the Third Council of Toledo (589).

### **The gifts of the Spirit animate the church**

The personal presence of God is brokered by the Spirit through the power of the risen Messiah Jesus, and animates the community gathered around the Lord with gifts of service and mutual

encouragement. However, throughout Christian history the instruction regarding spiritual gifts has often proved controversial and divisive. Typically one instruction is taken in isolation from the other New Testament teaching. Attending to all the voices in the choir and locating one's community within the interpretive matrix are important for developing a biblical theology of spiritual gifts.

In outlining what the New Testament has to say about spiritual gifts, Tim Geddert again helps steer a path through some of the contention by drawing out a number of assertions and implications.

1. The church is the main context for the discovery and exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:12, 26).
2. The church is the body that discerns what gift is genuine and what is not (1 Cor. 14:29). The tests of authority remain the same as they always have been in the church: the gift promotes clear affirmation of Jesus as Lord; the gift is exercised in freedom from ulterior motivation or of personal gain and in coherence with the memory of Jesus' life and ministry. Given these parameters, a wide variety of customs, explanations, and practices is acceptable.
3. Spiritual *fruit* is more crucial than are spiritual *gifts*, and fruit helps the church make sure that the exercise of gifts is proper and helpful (1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 5:22).
4. Every member of the body has at least one gift (1 Cor. 12:7, 11, 18, 27; Eph. 4:7).
5. No member of the body has all the gifts (1 Cor. 12:11, 14, 18, 24, 28).
6. Each member needs the gifts of the others (1 Cor. 12:21).
7. No gift is given to *all* members (1 Cor. 12:8–10, 18–21).
8. God decides who gets which spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:11, 18, 24, 28).
9. Members of the body are not ranked as important or not important according to which gifts they have (1 Cor. 12:24–25).
10. A person who has a spiritual gift is responsible before God to use that gift in ways that are helpful to the church (1 Cor. 14:26–28).

11. Spiritual gifts were not meant just for the first century. There is no biblical evidence for the cessation of gifts. (Note that 1 Cor. 13:10 refers to the *eschaton*, when salvation will be completed.)

Based on what these writers say about spiritual gifts, several implications can be delineated for the church's exercise of spiritual gifts. (1) No gift should be pushed onto a church that is not open to it. This would not build up the church. (2) Spiritual gifts can be exercised in home fellowship groups, even if the whole

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church is not present to benefit. Early house churches are similar to home fellowship groups. (3) There are genuine spiritual gifts that are not mentioned in the Bible. The New Testament presents no complete list. (4) There is no clear division between spiritual gifts and human capabilities or talents. (5) Spiritual gifts are not permanent or personal possessions but empower God's people for specific ministries in specific contexts within the mission of God.

From the list of these gifts it is clear that the Spirit's primary purpose is to bring glory to God—to help all acknowledge God's presence, power, and claim on human beings (Mark 2:12; Rom. 1:21; 1 Pet. 2:12). As

believers continue to exercise the spiritual gifts within the faith community, they steadily grow in the recognition of their partnership with God in the mission of God.

Paul's affirmation offers an excellent summary of the character and function of God's Spirit at work among God's people: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17–18).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. Norman Kraus, *God Our Savior: Theology in a Christological Mode* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 92.



<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>3</sup> Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 113–14.

<sup>4</sup> Kraus, *God our Savior*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 122.

<sup>6</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 251.

### **About the author**

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