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June 11, 2010

The Holy Spirit: A Personal Member Of The Godhead

Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev



There is an assertion that floats around the edges of Christianity that the Holy Spirit is not a personal member of the Godhead, but an impersonal power from God. This assertion, which has a small following in Adventism, takes many forms and angles, but at its core it asserts that the Bible does not support a view of the Holy Spirit as having any “personhood.” I will address the issue of the conceptualization of the Holy Spirit directly from the Bible, which, if it gives strong evidence for ascribing personhood and full deity to the Holy Spirit, settles the question for me. Afterward, I will address one historical and one philosophical idea that may shed light on the perceived confusion concerning the Holy Spirit.

Interpersonal Relationships

The first category I will address is interpersonal relationship. In his closing address to his letters to the Corinthians, Paul initiated a classical Trinitarian benediction: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13:14). Here Paul recognizes that the Holy Spirit is especially identified with fellowship (*koinonia*), which is the very heart of interpersonal relationship. Other scriptures describe personal ministry which the Holy Spirit undertakes in direct relation to individual believers. These include convicting ([John 16:8-11](#)), regenerating ([John 3:5-8](#)) guiding ([John 16:13](#)), sanctifying ([Romans 8:1-17](#)), empowering for service ([Acts 1:8](#)), revealing ([Luke 2:26](#)), and moving the inspired prophets to speak and write the scriptures ([2 Tim 3:16](#), [2 Pet 1:21](#)).

All these denote an active function of relationship. Even when the Spirit is portrayed as not asserting his own will (as in “He will not speak on His own initiative”) there is an active relational component to the description of personal relationship to the believer (as in the same verse “He will guide,” “He will speak; and He will disclose.” [John 16:13](#)). The last two texts on inspiration, along with numerous texts describing being filled with the Holy Spirit, denote that it is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for the production of scripture and prophesy, which we certainly believe to have propositional content. This task, like all these tasks, requires more than just impersonal power, it requires the conscious communication of content. All these personal interactions with individual believers highlight what Paul highlighted at the end of the Corinthian letters, that the Holy Spirit is especially in close personal relationship/fellowship/*koinonia* with us.

Interdependent Relationship

In [John 14-17](#) we find the Father, Son and Spirit portrayed as being in an interdependent interactive relationship for the purpose of including us in their intimate relationship of love and obedience. If you see and know the Son you see and know the Father (14:6, 9), the Son reveals the Father (17:6, 25); and while the Son brings glory to the Father, the Father glorifies the Son (17:4). The Father sends the Son (16:5), and the Spirit (14:26); the Son sends the Spirit (15:26, 16:7), the Spirit teaches, guides and testifies concerning the Son (14:25, 15:13, 26), and through the Spirit living in us the Son, who is in the Father, will

come to us (14:16-20).

The interactions are portrayed as reciprocal between all three. This is especially true when it comes to us believers as pictured in John 17:6-10: Through the revelation of the Father by the Son to us, who are given to the Son by the Father, the Son gains trust to give us the words the Father gave to him and have us accept those words in obedience. In this way, the Son is a bridge between the Father and us believers engendering the loving, trusting, believing, and obeying intimate relationship. This bridge of the Son is secured to us forever by the Spirit living in us (14:16-18). It is true that the Son and the Spirit take submissive roles in this relationship for our salvation (14:31, 15:13, 14), but there is another aspect of these verses that tend to suggest equality: Unity.

Unity

There are several direct statements of unity between the Father and the Son: “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14:10); “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine” (17:10); even a direct “we are one” (17:22). This unity extends indirectly to the Spirit as well, as evidenced verses like John 16:14, 15: The Spirit “will bring glory to by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” This reciprocal ownership and open access between what the three share describes a unity of the three.

Similarly, in John 14:16-23 portrays a unified indwelling. Jesus suggests that he will come to us, though he had to leave us, through the promise of the Spirit living in us, and finishes the passage with the promise that the he and the Father both will come to us and make their home in us. This Father and Son making their home in us is on account of the Spirit living in us. *This is a strong unity which equates the presence of one of the three with the presence of all three.*

Whether this unity is perceived as a unity of purpose or a unity of being has been hotly contested, but either way the unity of the three is a perception of a Trinity. This unity of the three also suggests that the Holy Spirit has personhood just as the Father and the Son have personhood. That, along with the clear interpersonal relationship that the Spirit has with the believers, as shown above, strongly suggests that the Bible presents the Holy Spirit as a person. Even though most biblical presentations of the Spirit do not include a body, *personhood is not derived from body, but from relationship.*

Platonic/Stoic Conceptions Of The Spirit

So how did the Holy Spirit begin to be understood as an impersonal force? The answer lies in history and philosophy. The philosophical milieu of the early Christians who began the Christian tradition of interpretation of the texts of scripture included a Platonic/Stoic conception of God in three parts: The transcendent One, or *Monad*, which Plato called the “Father”; the demiurge or *Logos* who was the immanent creator, which Plato sometimes referred to as the “Son”; and the infusive power of life and energy which fills all the universe and the living creatures in it with life force and power, which Plato and Zeno of Citium called the “*pneuma*”, that is “breath” or “spirit.” This philosophical conception of spirit was often assumed when reading scriptures about the Holy Spirit, which tended to make the traditional readings of scripture emphasize the force and subordinate role of the Spirit over the texts that portray the personal and relational aspects of the Spirit. However, neither philosophy nor tradition should control our readings of scripture.


Four excellent resources which demonstrate from the Bible that the Holy Spirit indeed is portrayed with the central characteristics of personhood or personality include:

1. The section on “The Mission of the Holy Spirit” in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe.*; Second Edition, Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005, 73-7;
2. Millard Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 83, 4;
3. Arnold Wallenkampf, *New By the Spirit*, re-issued, Hagerstown, MD: Review And Herald, 2006, 10-2.
4. Woody Whidden’s chapter “The Personality and Deity of the Spirit and the Triune Oneness of the Godhead” in *The Trinity*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002, 66-77.

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What if Christ reveals all three person of the trinity to us? If He is the Father incarnate then Christ reveals how the Spirit of God could abide in the flesh manifesting the righteousness of God. He manifests the righteousness of God not by means of the flesh (His own will and strength) but from the Father through the presence of the Spirit as the vessel of God so that even in death of the body there is life through the Spirit. Is this the revelation that Christ reveals in His life, death and resurrection? If so perhaps we are not called to do what Christ did by the discipline of our bodies (the strength of the flesh) but to actually surrender that strength (rather weakness) of our bodies, allowing the Spirit of God to dwell within us? If so, what would occur? If Christ and the Father are one and the Spirit is the presence and being of God in Christ and together they are Holy, then isn't this description a picture of intimacy? If Holiness is intimacy what happens when the Spirit of God is in us? Are we made Holy by our works measured against the law accounting the means to such holiness to Christ, making Christ the means to the law or simply assisting our human means to achieve the righteousness of God? Or is the presence of God in us (our intimate relationship with Him) the righteousness of God that we read of in the Bible? If Holiness is intimacy then the intimacy of the Father, the Son and the Spirit truly is Holy, Holy, Holy; and the intimacy we share with Holiness in a relationship with God together with an intimate relationship with others reveals and manifests a prophetic gift greater than the prophets or even John the Baptist.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [June 11, 2010 at 10:39 AM](#)

One of my favorite quotes on the Trinity:

“The distinction between persons does not impair the oneness of nature, nor does the shared unity of essence lead to a confusion between the distinctive characteristics of the persons. Do not be surprised that we should speak of the Godhead as being at the same time unified and differentiated...diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity.” St. Gregory of Nyssa

Posted by: [Ron Krumpos](#) | [June 22, 2010 at 07:23 PM](#)

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