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WHY THE PERSONHOOD OF THE HOLY SPIRIT MATTERS

**At a time when the greatest growth explosion
in Christianity is among charismatics, a greater clarity
regarding the person of the Spirit is warranted.**

Borrowing imagery from a children's story, Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen points out that today the Holy Spirit is no longer "the Cinderella of the Trinity," being left alone at home while her two sisters go to the ball. "Nowadays, it will not do to speak about the Holy Spirit as the *theos agraptos*—the God about whom no one writes—as did Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century."¹ There is a revolution going on regarding the Holy Spirit. This revolution is experiential and ecumenical, as well as academic. Scholars

today search for greater clarity on a topic that has always remained elusive: Just who is the Holy Spirit?

The search is timely, and especially so for Christians whose understanding of last-day events place today's world on the brink of a great deception by Christ's archenemy. What we understand regarding the nature of the Holy Spirit will influence our response to His work in our lives.

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The Study of the Person of the Spirit

Seventy years ago Samuel Chadwick, referring to Puritan John Owen's works on the Holy Spirit, contended that "the last great book on the Spirit was written in 1674."²² John Owen's work was a tour de force on the topic of the Holy Spirit, but much more surfaced on the subject in the 20th century. From small beginnings in Kansas City and Los Angeles—giving life to classical Pentecostalism—to the charismatic renewal among Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, to today's Third Wave that includes large numbers of evangelicals, the "silent" theology of the Spirit of yesteryear has turned into a veritable postmodern Tower of Babel.

But not everything written or said about the Spirit these days contains truth. Contemporary approaches to pneumatology vary a great deal. And much serious work on the Spirit bypasses His nature, focusing instead on His function and work. It is not surprising, then, that our very own 2005 edition of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* covers the person of the Spirit, the question of His divinity, and His relationship with the Godhead in only two pages, while more than twice that many are spent on His mission alone.

If understanding the person of the Spirit is so critical for our times, why is it so difficult to accomplish?

Obviously, one reason is that comparatively little is explained in the Scriptures. Much is assumed, but little is explained. And even though the New Testament mentions the Spirit tenfold more often than the Old Testament, it remains concerned with ethics and not with nature. True, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is "one of the most elusive themes in the Bible or in theology,"²³ but should we not seek to understand what is revealed for the sake of our instruction, as Paul suggests (Rom. 15:4)? Surely, we must do so with great reverence and humility, yet with determination, for "the dispensation in which we are now living is to be . . . the dispensation of the Holy Spirit."²⁴

For many Christians, the Father is seen as fairly impersonal and transcendent, and the Son as far removed in history, while the Spirit "is the point at which the Trinity becomes personal to the believer."²⁵ Since this is so critical, study we must, while not forgetting an important warning penned by Ellen White at a time when, in 1911, popular interest in the Spirit was growing rapidly: "It is not essential for us to be able to define just what the Holy Spirit is. . . . The nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Men cannot explain it, because the Lord has not revealed it to them. . . . Regarding such mysteries, which are too deep for human understanding, silence is golden."²⁶

Fundamental Questions Regarding the Person of the Holy Spirit

In 1906 Ellen White wrote that “The Holy Spirit has a personality, else He could not bear witness to our spirits and with our spirits that we are the children of God. He must also be a divine person, else He could not search out the secrets which lie hidden in the mind of God.”

The statement alludes to three fundamental questions that must be answered to begin to understand the Holy Spirit and the implications of His personhood: (1) Is the Holy Spirit God? (2) Is the Holy Spirit a person in the Godhead? (3) What is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Godhead? Though much of the biblical evidence may be familiar to the reader, it nevertheless bears repeating for the sake of our proposal.

1. *Is the Holy Spirit God?* We must admit that the direct scriptural evidence on this question is scant. This, no doubt, is one key reason that so many sincere believers throughout the history of the Christian church have not been convinced of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Even though Paul’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit may be more central in the New Testament than his doctrine of justification by faith, “the deity of the Father is simply assumed . . . that of the Son is affirmed and argued, while that of the Holy Spirit must be inferred from various indirect statements found in Scripture.”⁸

However, God has left enough evidence for us to understand basic truths. The clearest of these may be the statement by Peter in Acts 5, where he asks deceiving Ananias why he had lied “to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:3)⁹ regarding the sale of his land, and then declares, “You have not lied to men, but to God” (vs. 4). For Peter, “lying to the Holy Spirit” and “lying to God” were interchangeable expressions, his point being that Ananias was not merely lying to the apostles of the budding New Testament church, but to God Himself. This is all the more significant considering that Luke wrote his account from the point of view of the mighty acts of the Spirit, as “the promise” of the Father (Luke 24:49) had finally been realized. This critical event in the life of New Israel mirrored that of the old.

The day of Pentecost was known among the Jews as “the day of the giving of the Law,” in reference to when the Law of God, written with the finger of God—or Spirit of God, according to Jesus (compare Matthew 12:28 with Luke 11:20)—was given at Mount Sinai. It was only days later that some in Israel, in spite of experiencing mighty signs and wonders by the covenant God who had shown His superiority over the gods of Egypt, brazenly chose to follow gods of their own making in the form of two golden calves.

In AD. 31, on the Day of Pente-

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cost, the "finger," or Spirit, of God descended with mighty signs and wonders upon the waiting believers to begin writing God's law upon their hearts (Acts 2). But just like their predecessors, some, like Ananias and Saphira, chose to make a pretense of following God while their allegiance remained with Mammon. Their fate was the same as that of the 3,000 that fell in the wilderness that day (Acts 5:3–11; Ex. 32:21–28). Why such harsh punishment? Because just as the affront 1,500 years before was shamelessly made before Almighty God, the same happened with the rebellious couple before the same mighty God as before: God the Holy Spirit.

Paul gives another example of interchangeable expressions in 1 Corinthians 3 and 6. In chapter 3:16, he writes, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Three chapters later, he uses almost identical language: "do you not know that your body is a temple of

the Holy Spirit who is in you" (6:19). Paul uses the temple of God or the temple of the Holy Spirit interchangeably. "The Holy Spirit is not a mere spirit," said Martin Luther, "a creature, for example, or something apart from God and yet given to men by Him, or merely the work of God which He performs in our hearts—but that He is a Spirit who Himself is God in essence."¹⁰

Jesus also used the words "God" and "Holy Spirit" interchangeably. During the night encounter with Nicodemus, Christ made reference to how possible it was to be born again—a common reference to salvation—by the Spirit, even if the secret disciple considered it impossible, saying: "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). Later in His ministry, when another group of disciples gathered to inquire how it could be that people not expected to be saved could be saved, Jesus responded: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). Clearly, for Jesus it was

A number of statements in Scripture mention all three members of the Godhead, making Them equal in nature and rank, though not in function. The well-known baptismal formula that was part of the Great Commission states that Christ's followers must baptize new disciples "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

God who made salvation possible, even as it was the Spirit who made human beings born again. This is because the Holy Spirit is the one with the ability to bring about conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11).

In the Book of Hebrews we find the only biblical reference to “the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14), whereas in the Book of Deuteronomy we find the only biblical reference to “the eternal God” (Deut. 33:27). We know that only God is eternal. We also know that only God can raise the dead to life. “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. . . . Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice” (John 5:25, 28).

On what basis can Christ call the dead to life? He explains in the following verse: “Just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself”

(John 5:26). A few years later, Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote, in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, *He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit* who indwells you.” The same Spirit who raised Jesus will raise you and me from the dead because, like God, He too has life in Himself.

In the discourse given on the night of His betrayal, Christ announced the coming of the *para-kletos*, often translated in English as “Comforter” or “Helper” (John 14:16, 17). Linguistically, this alludes to the “parallel” status the person introduced has with the One introducing Him. This is why Christ referred to the Holy Spirit as “another” Comforter, He being the first the disciples knew. The point to be made here is that Christ would “ask [‘pray’ in the King James Version] the Father” for the Spirit. Just a few minutes earlier, Christ had referred to Himself and His Father as equals

(vss. 9, 10). If the Comforter is equal—or parallel—to the Son, and the Son is equal—or one—with the Father, the Comforter, or Holy Spirit, is equal with the Father.

The Holy Spirit possesses attributes belonging only to God. He is omnipresent, making the Psalmist exclaim: “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Ps. 139:7). The Holy Spirit is omniscient, for Paul says, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God” for “the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:10, 11). And the Holy Spirit is omnipotent, since He distributes gifts “to each one individually *just as He wills*” (12:11).

Finally, a number of statements in Scripture mention all three members of the Godhead, making Them equal in nature and rank, though not in function. The well-known baptismal formula that was part of the Great Commission states that Christ’s followers must baptize new disciples “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). The formula highlights a single name, not three different ones, making one and all of them of the same substance (*hupostasis*) as the others. The apostolic blessing of 2 Corinthians 13:14 reveals the same triune God: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.”

And the spiritual gifts discourse makes the same point by speaking of “varieties of gifts, but the same *Spirit*” (1 Cor. 13:5) and varieties of effects, but the same *God*” (vs. 6). In Peter’s greeting, we find the triune Godhead linked together as before, yet giving hints of their various functions: “Peter, . . . to those who reside as aliens, scattered . . . , who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Peter 1:1, 2).

2. *Is the Holy Spirit a Person?* The personhood of the Holy Spirit was something that early Adventist pioneers struggled with. Along with anti-Trinitarian views, some thought of the Holy Spirit as less than a person. Long-time church editor and General Conference Secretary Uriah Smith, for example, as late as 1891, described the Holy Spirit as “that divine, mysterious emanation through which they [the Father and the Son] carry forward their great and infinite work.”¹¹ A year earlier, he had pictured the Spirit to be a “divine influence” and not a “person like the Father and the Son.”¹² The lack of clarity in the Adventist Church regarding the person of the Holy Spirit was the result of a lack of a truly Trinitarian understanding of God. Even Ellen White, quoting the King James Version, kept referring to the Holy Spirit as an “it”

in her writings. However, all that changed by 1898. A new understanding of the nature of Christ and the person of the Spirit made her clearly state that “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived,”¹³ and the personal pronoun “He” was used in reference to the Holy Spirit, who was said to be “the Third Person of the Godhead.”¹⁴ The publication of *The Desire of Ages* propelled a paradigm shift that surprised many and shocked some. Well known is the story of young M. L. Andreasen, who was so skeptical of the changes that he sought to ascertain whether or not this was her own writing. In 1902, after visiting with Ellen White in her Elmshaven home and seeing the manuscript, he was convinced that it was so.

Today, the Seventh-day Adventists’ official statement of beliefs clearly states that “the Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit is a person, not an impersonal force.”¹⁵ This is standard Christian doctrine. But Christian theological tradition has never been a good enough reason for Seventh-day Adventists to settle on biblical teachings. What, then, is the Bible evidence for the personhood of the Spirit?

At times, people have viewed the Holy Spirit as an “it,” in part, because the neuter gender for Spirit, both in the original Greek—*pneuma*—and in English, have contributed to this concept. Romans 8:16 is an example,

where the KJV translates the text: “The Spirit *itself*” (emphasis added). Since pronouns are to agree with their antecedents in person, number, and gender, you would expect the neuter pronoun to be used to represent the Holy Spirit. However, when John the Beloved recorded the words of Jesus, he used the masculine pronoun *ekeinos* (“he”) when referring to the Holy Spirit. “When the Helper comes, . . . that is the Spirit of truth, . . . He will bear witness of Me” (John 15:26). “When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (16:13). “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (14:16). Either John made a consistent grammatical error or he purposely called the Holy Spirit a “he.” Since no similar error is made in the rest of John’s Gospel, we conclude he did it to make a point: Jesus referred to a Person and not a thing. Not much should be made of John’s use of the masculine personal pronoun; his point was not a specific gender but personality.

The Bible also identifies in the Holy Spirit a number of attributes characteristic only of persons. For instance, the Holy Spirit wills. Paul and his companions were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them” (Acts 16:6, 7). In 1

“The Holy Spirit is said to have a mind. Paul reminds us that “He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is” (Rom. 8:27). Such mind is used by the Spirit to intercede on our behalf “for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes . . . with groanings too deep for words” (vs. 26).

Corinthians 12 we are told, after several gifts of the Spirit are mentioned, that “the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (vs. 11).

Also, the Holy Spirit is said to have a mind. Paul reminds us that “He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is” (Rom. 8:27). Such mind is used by the Spirit to intercede on our behalf “for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes . . . with groanings too deep for words” (vs. 26).

As only persons can, the Spirit gives instruction as well. Paul writes to Timothy: “The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Nehemiah reminisced how God had given Israel His “good Spirit to instruct them” (Neh. 9:20). And Jesus promised His disciples that when facing danger or stress because of Him: “the Holy Spirit will teach

you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:12).

A further characteristic is the fact that the Holy Spirit is capable of feelings. Paul counsels the Ephesians to make sure not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph. 4:30); and Isaiah recalls how Israel had so stubbornly “rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore, He turned Himself to become their enemy” (Isa. 63:10).

And the Spirit has influence. Paul assures us that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Jesus promised that “when [the Spirit] comes, [He] will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8).

Finally, only persons can love, and all three members of the God-head love (see John 3:16; 13:1). Paul appeals to the Romans: “I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit [to pray for me]” (Rom. 15:30). And he had already told them, in Romans 5, that “hope does not disappoint, because

When Jesus announces the coming of the promised Comforter, He says, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, . . . the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, 17). Though we clearly see evidence that the Spirit has and exercises His will, we find in this text that it all depends on the two other members of the Trinity: the Son’s request and the Father’s provision.

the love of God has been poured out within our hearts *through the Holy Spirit*” (5:5).

3. *What is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Godhead?* Seventh-day Adventists assert that “from eternity, God the Holy Spirit lived within the Godhead as the third member. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equally self-existent. Though each is equal, *an economy of function* operates within the Trinity.”¹⁶ In examining this economy of function and the role of the Spirit as the third member of the Godhead, we must keep in mind that there is less explicit revelation in the Bible regarding the Holy Spirit than that regarding the Father and the Son. This is never easy to understand. Though it is true that in the New Testament the Spirit is regarded chiefly in relation to the church and the Christian life, the question of the Spirit’s relation to God can be answered by Scripture.

Whereas the Christological con-

troversies in the early centuries of the Christian era were the result of the dual nature of Christ, the resistance to accepting the Spirit as a person and as fully God stems from His role in the Trinity, this “economy of function.” Is this in Scripture? Though the Bible does not provide a systematic discussion about the Holy Spirit, the closest treatment can be found in Christ’s Passover night dialogue in the Upper Room. There we find striking statements that reveal what appears to be a voluntarily subservient role of the Spirit to the rest of the Trinity.

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Spirit, Christ indwells His disciples: “In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (vs. 20). Then Christ adds that He will disclose Himself to them then (vs. 21). In fact, the promise is that both Father and Son will come to make Their abode with them (vs. 23), and even though no explicit mention is made about the Spirit being the third Guest in their hearts, it is the Spirit who will aid the disciples in comprehending what He has just said. We find here a clearly subordinate role in the person of the Holy Spirit, even though He is another *parakletos*, another like the Son.

This in no way should be understood to mean the Spirit is somehow a lesser God than Christ or the Father, but appears to be the Spirit’s role and function in the Godhead, not His status or rank. In chapter 15, again the Spirit’s subordinate role appears: “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me” (vs. 26). Finally, in chapter 16, we may find the most clear statements regarding this triune relationship: “When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall

disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you” (vss. 13–15)

Just as the Son reveals the Father’s love and character, and just as the Son chooses not to take His own initiative but yields such prerogative to the Father (see John 5:30; 6:38), so does the Spirit in relationship to the Son. The danger here is to harbor a subconscious Arianism that sees the Father and the Son on one plane but the Holy Spirit in a lower, subservient plane because of His function in the plan of salvation, just as Arius’ followers read statements in the Bible pointing to Christ’s subservience to the Father and concluded He could not be fully divine. In fact, in this functional economy, it appears as if the Father is the source, the Son the mediator, and the Spirit the one who applies what God designs to do.

The concept of a plural union within the Godhead that is interactive and mutually submissive is seen even in the passage Jews have used for generations to voice their monotheism: the *Shema*. “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4). The word translated “one” means “one among others, the emphasis being on a particular one.” According to Otto Christensen, “the possibility of there being others in this ‘oneness’ is inherent.”¹⁷ Moses could have used another word to

indicate “one” as in “one alone.” But the word he used results “from the unity of numerous persons.”¹⁸ The same word is used to describe the submissive union between the first pair: “A man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). A match made in heaven is the union of two distinct persons who, loving one another supremely, choose to become one.

This concept, as simple as it is, is nevertheless revolutionary, in part because sin has managed to make lonely units out of all of us. However, God had other ideas from the beginning. In every family with more than one child in the home, it becomes obvious to the adults that each young sibling has significantly different philosophical, stylistic, and general ways of approaching life and issues. Even if much of their shared experience is the same, parents soon notice that these two, or three, or four young persons are definitely not alike, though living under the same roof, eating the same food, and originating from the same parents.

If one considers the injunction that God gives to humankind through Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply, and *fill* the earth” (Gen. 1:28) simple mathematics leads to the conclusion that it would take at least three children per couple to do so, one in addition to the two it would take to replace themselves. How

appropriate, considering the Trinity. The command in verse 28 comes right after we are told that God said, “Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness” (vs. 26) and then corroborated it with: “And God created man in *His* own image, in the image of God *He* created him; male and female *He* created them” (vs. 27, emphasis supplied). From plurality to singularity and back to plurality again: male and female. This idea is also true in marriage. What do two people find attractive about one another so as to be married? One key attraction is how unlike one another they may be: opposites attract.

Why is this in society? Because it mirrors, in a small and pale way, what it means to live and to love and to be. God, as a solitary one, would not reflect these values as clearly as God can be a union of three persons. And so He wishes for us to experience the same. Since “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and love cannot become a practical reality unless it can be shared with others, God then is Three as One.

The Godhead, then, is a society. Not a group of Gods but a union of three Persons who practice and express perfect love in perfect humility. And why three? Perhaps because with three “there is a dimension of openness and extension not necessarily found in a relationship between two persons,”¹⁹ which could be more closed in nature.

There is a divine humility in all this that becomes the more astonishing the more one ponders it. Since God then is a God who is in relationship within Himself first, it follows that He would seek to create in order for others to experience the same. However, the intrinsic presupposition to self-sacrificing love is freedom of exercise, including the freedom to withhold it. Every new creation in the universe becomes a risk.

There is a divine humility in all this that becomes the more astonishing the more one ponders it. Since God then is a God who is in relationship within Himself first, it follows that He would seek to create in order for others to experience the same. However, the intrinsic presupposition to self-sacrificing love is freedom of exercise, including the freedom to withhold it. Every new creation in the universe becomes a risk, for creatures can choose to keep their capacity to love to themselves instead of sharing their love with God and others, thus turning love into sin. The fact that God has known this all along and still risked it, that He would rather set out to have a love relationship with His creation than withhold creation for fear creatures would make a wrong use of their freedom, is a demonstration of His deep love. John the Beloved understood this when he

wrote, “There is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18) and “We love, because He first loved us” (vs. 19). What remarkable condescension! To love and risk it all instead of keeping it within the perfect safety of the Trinity.

Why a Biblical View of the Person of the Spirit Matters

Why does it matter to understand the Holy Spirit as a person in the Godhead? The story of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 gives us a clue: If we don’t understand or refuse to understand that the Holy Spirit is a person in the Godhead, we will tend to treat Him as an “it” and incur our own destruction.

This is why the unpardonable sin is the one committed against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31, 32). For us, the point of contact with God is through the Holy Spirit: “Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence?” (Ps. 139:7). The point

If we treat the Holy Spirit as an “it,” a mere emanation or influence devoid of personality and will, we find it especially easy to ignore Him, to lend deaf ears to His voice and invitation to leave self behind and abandon it to the hands of a God with whom all things are possible.

of most immediate contact is not through the Father, and not even through Jesus. Whereas Christ is the sinner’s intercessor as our High Priest in heaven (Heb. 7:17–8:2), the Spirit is our intercessor as *parakletos*—one like Him—on Earth (Rom. 8:26, 27), in our midst. It is only through the ministry of the Holy Spirit that we can access the efficacy of Christ’s intercessory ministry. Without Him it would be impossible even to understand or accept Christ as our Savior and Lord.

If we treat the Holy Spirit as an “it,” a mere emanation or influence devoid of personality and will, we find it especially easy to ignore Him, to lend deaf ears to His voice and invitation to leave self behind and abandon it to the hands of a God with whom all things are possible. Like the Pharisees of old, we are likely to reject the very One our hearts longed for and the Spirit reveals, the greatest object of our gratitude: Jesus Christ our Savior.

We can understand the Son’s despair at the Jewish leaders in

Jerusalem mere days before Calvary. They had rejected Christ the Messiah by rejecting the wooing of the Spirit to their hearts. With deepest emotion, while on the temple courts, Christ cries: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt. 23:37, 38).

A second reason it is important for us to understand that God the Spirit is a person is because if we treat Him like a “feeling” or a mere “power” meant to warm our hearts when we sense the need for it, we will become unbelievers. In Revelation 16 we are introduced to the false trinity, an allegiance made up of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (Rev. 16:13, 14), with this last entity being the equivalent of the third Person of the Trinity. Just as a prophet speaks for God, specifically for the Holy Spirit—“for I was moved by

the Holy Spirit' men spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21)—the false prophet pretends to do the same.

But whereas the Holy Spirit speaks through the Word of God, the false prophet does so by signs and the use of the supernatural. The Spirit of God is not a "cosmic vending machine, responding mechanically with power or blessing if only we insert enough coins of faith."²⁰ Those who will trust God only when able to see signs and wonders do not trust a Person but a "power" or a "sensation." They do not walk by faith, for "faith comes [only] from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Faith does not come by miracles. Therefore, those who treat the Holy Spirit as a "power" to be called upon at will—instead of a Person to respond to by yielding our wills—will be deceived, perceiving a god of their own making rather than the God of the Bible. And a god of our making will in the end lead us to disappointment and unbelief for having been deceived. This is the apocalyptic picture of "the kings of the earth" (Rev. 18:9) and "the nations" turning against the former object of their affections.

A third reason that it matters that we think of the Spirit as a Person in the Godhead is because a consideration of His utter humility, a trademark of His Person, will lead us to surrender and service. The Bible says, "No one knows who the Son is

except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:22).

Much more is said in the Bible about God the Father and God the Son than about God the Holy Spirit. Though the Holy Spirit is mentioned 88 times in the Old Testament, and 262 times in the New Testament, this amount is dwarfed by the thousands of references to the other members of the Trinity. But it was the Spirit who inspired these biblical writers (2 Peter 1:21), and yet He did so in typical divine humility. The Holy Spirit says very little about Himself.

That's the way love is as revealed in the Person of the Spirit: He focuses on the Father and His relationship with the Son more than on His own relationship with the Son or the Father. The Son was in the Father and the Father in Him, and the same can be said of His relationship with the Holy Spirit, and that of the Holy Spirit with the Father. That the Spirit communicates so freely about the Father and the Son is an insight into the selfless love that exists in the Trinity, and in particular, the way the Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son. The Spirit voluntarily adopts a lower position of service because of His love for the Son and His desire to see Him glorified, in spite of the fact that He is the Person in the Godhead whose time of activity and pre-eminence is

now. Donald Williams has pointed out that the reason for this is because “there is no conflict between submission and equality.”²¹

The Christian God—three in one—is completely different from the gods in the Olympic pantheon or the Nordic tales. The gods with “the small g” engaged in constant warfare one with another. They each had an individual will and plan and clearly were not of one purpose. They each had their pride and their turf to protect. Such gods remind us of the conflict and pride that existed among the disciples of Jesus before Calvary and Pentecost.

When the Spirit is allowed to work among those who wrangle and push for the pre-eminence and are suspicious of one another, however, a holy submissiveness takes over their hearts that allows them to become of “one accord” (Acts 1:14; 2:1, KJV). The group then mirrors the Trinity in this respect. In fact, absolute humility may be the most distinct characteristic of the Triune God. How else could God handle His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and other attributes only the God of the Universe can have?

Jesus voiced this truth when He said: “Learn from Me, for I am *gentle* and *humble* in heart” (Matt 11:29). Humble in heart: that is a matter of choice and will. God can do anything, but He chooses to restrain Himself because He is love.

Contemplation of the deep humility demonstrated for eternity by the third Person of the Godhead puts our pride and pettiness in the dust.

A fourth reason that it matters that God the Spirit be a person is because only persons can choose to cooperate with one another, and we are invited to cooperate with the Spirit as He leads Christ’s church. When the early church, led by the Spirit, faced their first major theological controversy (Acts 15:1–29), the church—“leading men among the brethren” (vs. 22)—convened at Jerusalem to deal with the matter. After the matter was decided, it is interesting to see how they described the decision: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us* . . .” (vs. 28). Such close association and cooperation can be achieved solely through trusting personal interaction. When Paul and his missionary associates wished to preach in Asia and twice were prevented from doing so by the Spirit, they ended up in Macedonia instead, “concluding that God [notice, the Spirit here is called God] had called [them] to preach [there]” (16:10).

Such open interaction can be achieved only among persons who love and respect one another. The Spirit is much more than an impression in Paul’s mind. He is his constant Guide. When the glorified Jesus in Revelation addresses the churches in Asia through the Holy

Spirit, He admonishes seven times to pay attention to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The warnings and counsels by the Spirit to the churches presuppose an established relationship. One can have such relationships only with persons. To recognize the voice of the Spirit means believers have spent enough time listening to such a voice. He is not a heavenly ghost—the Spirit speaks so we can listen. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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⁴ *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 511.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 862.

⁶ *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 51, 52.

⁷ *Evangelism*, p. 617.

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¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Sermon on John 15:26, 27” in *Luther’s Works*, 24:297, cited in Arnold V. Wallenkampf, *New by the Spirit* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1978), p. 14.

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¹² *Looking Unto Jesus* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1897), p. 10.

¹³ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 530.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

¹⁵ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, p. 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 71, italics supplied.

¹⁷ Otto H. Christensen, *Getting Acquainted With God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1970), p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁰ Donald T. Williams, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1994), p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

