

WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Learning to have a personal relationship with the Spirit of God

By Alan Schreck

To many Christians today, even charismatic Christians, the Holy Spirit is the “**invisible person**” of the Blessed Trinity. Although he may not be a totally “missing person,” most of us are not aware of the full scope of the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in our daily lives. The New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit, far from being the “invisible person” of the Trinity, should be the most *real* person of God in our daily Christian experience.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A PERSON

One reason why the Holy Spirit is “invisible” to many Christians is simply because it is hard to envision or relate to the Spirit as a person. It is easier to relate to God the Father and the Son as persons, because we have human models of fathers and sons, and because the Son has actually come to us as a human person, Jesus Christ. It is difficult for some of us to relate to the Holy Spirit as a person because many biblical images of the Spirit are not human images.

Even the name *Spirit* (*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek) literally means “wind” or “breath.” It’s hard to imagine having a personal relationship with wind! The English word *Spirit* too evokes the image of a phantasm or ghost, rather than a person.

The Holy Spirit is also pictured in the Bible as “living water” (John 7:38-39), a dove (Mt.3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3-4). Christian author Dorothy Sayers tells of the mythical Japanese gentleman who complained, “Honorable Father, very good; Honorable Son, very good, but Honorable Bird I do not understand at all.”

Of course, these inspired images tell us some important things about the Holy Spirit. Breath is a sign of life, and the Holy Spirit is the life-giving breath of God, just as *living water* denotes the Spirit as God’s life-giving refreshment. *Wind* reminds us of the freedom of the Holy Spirit’s action (John 3:8). The dove calls attention to the Holy Spirit as the true source of peace and of his purity. And tongues of fire are an image of the Holy Spirit’s power to strengthen and purify.

But the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force. The Holy Spirit is a person, just as much as the Father and the Son are. The Spirit has a unique personality and mission. In his Last Supper discourse in the gospel of John, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as a “paraclete,” “counselor,” or “advocate” who will “teach you {the apostles} all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). A *New American Bible* footnote explains that “the paraclete in John is a teacher, a witness to Jesus, a prosecutor of the world. He represents the continued presence on earth of Jesus who has returned to the Father.”

All of this implies that the Holy Spirit is a person. The Acts of the Apostles also testify to the “personhood” of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit can be “lied to” (Acts 5:3) and “put to the test” (Acts 5:9). Some people say that the book of Acts might more properly be called “the Acts of the Holy Spirit,” because throughout it the Spirit is busy speaking (Acts 10:19, 13:2, 21:11, 28:25), consoling (9:31), sending people forth (13:4), deciding (15:28), warning (20:23), prompting (21:4), even snatching Philip from one place to another (8:39)!

The Holy Spirit prevents Paul and Timothy from preaching the message in the province of Asia, and “when they came to Mysia they tried to go on into Bythnia, but again the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them” (Acts 16:6-8). It is clear that the New Testament presents the Holy Spirit as a person who is in an active, personal relationship with the disciples of Jesus.

“DEFENSE ATTORNEY”

What kind of a person is the Holy Spirit? What does he do in a Christian’s life?

The primary work of the Holy Spirit is to reveal Jesus as Lord and to enable us to proclaim that truth clearly and boldly. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “That is why I tell you that nobody who speaks in the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Cursed be Jesus.’ And no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:3) No one can recognize or profess that Jesus is Lord unless the Holy Spirit reveals this.

In John’s gospel Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the “paraclete,” which was a Greek legal term meaning a defense attorney, spokesman or intercessor. The Holy Spirit is the Christian’s “defense attorney”—defending the truth of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Jesus, in Luke’s gospel, told his disciples, “When they bring you before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves or what to say. The Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment all that should be said.” (Luke 12:11-12).

The Acts of the Apostles illustrates this truth many times, as Peter, Stephen, Paul, and others boldly defend their faith in Jesus Christ before Jewish courts, Greek thinkers, and Roman governors and kings through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14-33, 4:8-21, 5:27-32, 7:1-56).

TEACHER AND INTERCESSOR

Jesus told his apostles that the “Spirit of truth will guide you to all truth” (John 16:13) and “will instruct you” (John 14:26). Jesus was their “rabbi” or teacher, but as he prepared to go to the Father he promised to send his followers a new teacher, the Holy Spirit.

Besides teaching us the truth about Jesus and the Father, the Holy Spirit also teaches us how to pray and even prays within us when we don’t know how. “The Spirit too helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in speech. And he who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26-27).

In prayer, the Holy Spirit teaches us our identity as sons and daughters of God and confirms in our heart that God is truly a Father to us. Paul testifies that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:14-16; see also Gal.4:5). Thus the Holy Spirit is actively at work in the lives of Christians, to guide us, teach us, and intercede for us.

OVERCOMING SIN IN OUR LIVES

The Holy Spirit is also the person of God within us who empowers us to overcome sin in our lives. Before believing in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, human beings are slaves to their passions and to sin, which lead to death (see Rom. 7:14-15, 20, 24).

Paul clearly teaches that thanks to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit the struggle against sin is no longer a frustrating ordeal. Rather, Paul proclaims that “the law of the Spirit, the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, has freed you from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). This is the ultimate “liberation theology”!

Paul stresses in writing to Corinthians, “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. All of us, gazing on the Lord’s glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory in his very image by the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17-18). This is why Paul is able to claim that “if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old order has passed away, now all is new! (2 Cor. 5:17). God has actually made us into temples where his Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16). The Holy Spirit is at work in Christians to overcome sin and to transform us into the image of God.

Paul acknowledges that there is still a conflict within us between “the flesh” and the work of the Holy Spirit. He draws a sharp contrast between the work of the flesh and that of the Spirit (Rom. 8: Gal. 5). The term *flesh* refers to our unredeemed human nature—our human nature in rebellion against God. It is the Holy

Spirit who overcomes the flesh and empowers us to follow God's will. Instead of manifesting the works of the flesh, such as lewd conduct, impurity, hostilities, bickering, anger, selfishness, jealousy, and envy (Gal. 5:19-21), the Christian manifests the fruit of the Spirit—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22). This "good fruit" and the power to overcome sin are reliable signs of the active presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life.

GIFT AND GIFT-GIVER

The Holy Spirit is God's greatest gift to us—the gift of himself dwelling within us. Jesus taught that the Father delights in giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (Lk 11:13). Peter, at Pentecost, told his hearers that if they repented and were baptized in the name of Jesus "then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

The Holy Spirit is not only the gift of God but God bringing gifts. Isaiah speaks of the Spirit of the Lord resting on the Messiah as a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2). Christians, who receive the same Spirit as Jesus, also have a share in these gifts.

A more extensive (though not exhaustive) list of gifts or manifestations of the Spirit is given in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. "But it is one and the same Spirit", Paul says, "who inspires all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:7-11). Paul taught that the Holy Spirit gives *each* Christian manifestations or gifts for the upbuilding of the body of Christ, the church (Eph. 4:11-12).

Immediately following Paul's listing of these "gifts of the Spirit" he emphasizes that they are meaningless unless they are exercised in love or charity. Many people don't realize that St. Paul's great chapter on love (1 Cor. 13) is basically an instruction on the proper use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The gifts are important, but they will pass away. Only faith, hope and love will remain. Therefore, these gifts are only to be used in genuinely loving the Lord and one's neighbor through them.

In the following chapter (1 Cor. 14) Paul gives some practical advice about the use and value of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. All the gifts (even the gift of tongues) are to be received with thanksgiving **but the most valuable gifts are those that are most useful in "building up" the church, such as prophecy**. In assemblies of worship the gifts of the Spirit are to be exercised in an orderly and peaceful way, so that everyone is encouraged by them and strengthened in their faith. Thus, Paul teaches that each Christian and the entire church is "charismatic," possessing gifts ("charisms") of the Holy Spirit that enliven and enrich its life. They are to be used in love and for strengthening one another in our Christian lives.

If the Holy Spirit is God's gift, he is a gift of God's love and unity. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Some of the greatest Christian theologians, such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, have spoken of the Holy Spirit as the love binding together the Father and the Son, whom they share with us and "pour into our hearts." It would be true to say that God's love in us is the Holy Spirit.

Love and unity go hand in hand. Since the Holy Spirit is love, he unites us with God and our neighbor. St. Paul exhorted the Christians in Ephesus to bear with one another in love, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:2-3).

PLEDGE OF ETERNAL LIFE

The Holy Spirit was such a real person in St. Paul's life that he often spoke of him as the "guarantee" ("pledge") or "first fruits" of the eternal life that Jesus had won for him. Paul told the Corinthians that God has "given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" that all of his promises would be fulfilled, including the promise of an eternal dwelling in heaven with God (Cor. 1:20-22, 5:1-5, Eph. 1:13-14).

The Greek word here translated “guarantee” (*arrabon*) originally referred to a sample or foretaste of a product, given in order to guarantee that the rest of it would be delivered on time and would be of the same quality as the sample. The Holy Spirit then is a “guarantee” in the sense of a sample or foretaste of the eternal life God has promised.

The notion of the Spirit as the “first fruits” of our redemption has the same implication. As Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Rom.8:23). Through the Holy Spirit dwelling with us, Christians experience even in this life the same joy, peace, and freedom that we will possess in fullness in God’s eternal kingdom.

However, having the Holy Spirit as our “guarantee” or “first fruits” of eternal life does *not* mean that we no longer have to live in faith and hope. After Paul referred to the Spirit as the “first fruits” of our redemption, he continued: “For in this hope we were saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen; for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience” (Rom. 8:24-25). Earlier Paul says, “we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (Rom. 5:5).

Our hope for eternal life is a confident hope, a hope that “does not disappoint us” (Rom.5:5). Nonetheless, it is still hope and not the full possession of the resurrection life itself. Paul blessed the Romans with these moving words: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13).

Another whole article could be devoted to discussing how we receive the Holy Spirit—such as through the sacraments and through asking the Father and Jesus in faith for their great gift. This article is intended simply to call attention to the ways that Christians can experience the Holy Spirit. How could anyone consider the Holy Spirit an “invisible” or “missing” person of the Trinity? The New Testament tells us that the Holy Spirit is within us: revealing and defending the lordship of Jesus; empowering us to witness to him; teaching us to pray and interceding for us; convicting us of sin and giving us the power to overcome it; bringing forth the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience; giving us a variety of gifts for the upbuilding of the body of Christ; enabling us to love God and others and to maintain unity with them; and, through all these things, serving as a “foretaste” of the life we hope to share with God forever in his kingdom.

The Holy Spirit, far from being “invisible,” should be a Christian’s closest and most familiar companion. The Bible tells us that if he is missing from your life all you need to do is invite him in, asking Jesus and the Father to send the Holy Spirit to you. Thanks be to God for the great gift of himself dwelling within us—the Holy Spirit!

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