

# A UNITARIAN VIEW OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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<sup>1</sup> To download the audio version of this paper or access other One God Seminar presentations log onto [www.christianmonotheism.com](http://www.christianmonotheism.com)

## Introduction

Trying to pin down a biblical definition for the word “spirit” is like trying to give a cat a shower—it can be done, but only with great difficulty, and one is never sure if he has thoroughly completed the task. It is my intention to put forth a scriptural definition of the holy spirit. I will build a cumulative understanding beginning with the Old Testament (OT). Then, I will add to that provisional definition the new insights presented in the New Testament (NT). In order to keep organized, I will divide up the NT into the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Gospel of John, and the rest of the NT (mostly Paul’s epistles). Lastly, I will explain the biblical reasons why I do not believe the spirit is a person in a Trinitarian sense. Before beginning this survey, I will say a word or two about the unique opportunity biblical unitarians have to investigate the doctrine of the holy spirit (pneumatology).

Pneumatology is a frontier of inquiry for the unitarian community. There is much work to be done in defining the holy spirit apart from the historical straight jacket imposed upon it by the fourth century Cappadocian theologians<sup>2</sup> who declared that the spirit was “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.” They went on to declare, “With the Father and the Son, he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets....”<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, nearly three hundred years passed before the personality of the spirit was dogmatized in an official creed. The second century Apostles’ Creed did not mention the spirit, and the early fourth century Nicene Creed mentioned it almost as an afterthought in the phrase, “and in the holy spirit.” It follows then that the holy spirit’s personhood was not original to the apostles but was worked out later by zealous though errant post-biblical Christians. For the purposes of this survey, I will not engage with the rather sophisticated philosophical and theological constructs of later Christian tradition but instead will limit this study to the biblical documents themselves.

## The Spirit in the Old Testament

To start this survey, we will begin by focusing on the Hebrew Scriptures (the OT). The Hebrew word most commonly translated “spirit” is *ruach*. Below is a table enumerating the different English words *ruach* is translated along with their number of occurrences in the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

air.....	2	heart.....	1	strength.....	1
anger.....	1	inspired.....	1	temper.....	2
blast.....	2	mind.....	3	thoughts.....	1
breath.....	31	motives.....	1	trustworthy.....	1
breathless.....	1	points.....	1	wind.....	98
cool.....	1	side.....	4	winds.....	7
courage.....	1	sides.....	2	windy.....	2
despondency.....	1	Spirit.....	76	wrath.....	1
exposed.....	1	spirit.....	127		
grief.....	1	spirits.....	3		

*Ruach* is a fairly flexible word encompassing the meanings: spirit, wind, breath, and even matters of the mind and emotions. All of these words denote something unseen and unexplained. Here is how the holy spirit is defined in two standard Bible dictionaries and by one prominent biblical scholar:

### Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period

When used of living beings, *ruach* refers to the essence of the life and vitality in both human beings and animals that is manifested through movement and breathing (Genesis 2:7; 6:17; 7:15; Numbers 16:22; Ezekiel 10:17). Just as “spirit” was considered the essence of human life, so analogously the term “spirit” was used of the presence, activity, and power of God, that is,

<sup>2</sup> Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus

<sup>3</sup> The Constantinopolitan Creed

characteristics that demonstrate that God is truly a “living God” (Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; 1 Samuel 7:26; Isaiah 37:4; Daniel 6:20; Matthew 16:16; Revelation 7:2).<sup>4</sup>

### **New Bible Dictionary**

At its heart is the experience of a mysterious, awesome power—the mighty invisible force of the wind, the mystery of vitality, the otherly power that transforms—all *ruach*, all manifestations of divine energy.<sup>5</sup>

### **James Dunn on the Holy Spirit**

There can be little doubt that from the earliest stages of pre-Christian Judaism, ‘spirit’ (*ruach*) denoted power—the aweful, mysterious force of the wind (*ruach*), of the breath (*ruach*) of life, of ecstatic inspiration (induced by divine *ruach*)...In other words, on this understanding, Spirit of God is in no sense distinct from God, but is simply the power of God, God himself acting powerfully in nature and upon men.<sup>6</sup>

Consider the following usages of *ruach* found in the Hebrew Bible: The spirit of God may be taken from one and distributed to others (Numbers 11:17), inspire prophecy (Numbers 11:25, 29; 24:2-3; 1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 1 Chronicles 12:18; 2 Chronicles 15:1; 20:14; 24:20; Nehemiah 9:30; Zechariah 7:12), be a way God speaks to people (2 Samuel 23:2), lead someone to a different location (1 Kings 18:12), transport someone from one location to another (2 Kings 2:16), be defined parallel with the anointing of Yahweh (Isaiah 61:1 cp. Acts 10:38), empower leaders to judge/rule the people (Judges 3:10), impart warlike energy/confidence (Judges 6:34; 11:29; 14:6, 19), supply supernatural strength (Judges 15:14), cause righteous anger (1 Samuel 11:6-7), impart regeneration/peace (Isaiah 32:15), give the Messiah wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, the fear of Yahweh, and the ability to judge justly (Isaiah 11:2; 41:2), endow artisans with skill (Exodus 31:3; 35:31); and be defined parallel to the presence of God (Psalm 139:7).<sup>7</sup>

Each of these listed functions of the spirit refers to the one God, Yahweh, in action. The spirit of God is one of the primary ways of talking about God’s involvement in His creation. Most scholars agree, as James Dunn has already noted, the OT does not teach a literal distinction between God and His spirit. Oftentimes the writers of the Hebrew Bible employed literary metaphors when speaking of Yahweh’s deeds. For example, one may say “the word of Yahweh came to me” or “the spirit of God came upon him” or “the world was established by His wisdom.” These are ways of referring to the almighty, transcendent God in His mode of acting within creation. In actuality, it was God who spoke to the prophets, God who empowered the heroes of old, and God who created the world. However, these literary devices were used to preserve the “otherness” or transcendence of the greatest conceivable being and yet make plenty of room for His immanence and interaction within our world without raising any complicated questions. Anthony Buzzard is helpful when he writes:

### **Anthony Buzzard on the Holy Spirit**

If one combs through standard Bible dictionaries, it is obvious that ninety-eight percent of the biblical data is satisfied if we define the Spirit as God in effective action, God in communication, His power and personality extending their influence to touch the creation in a variety of ways...Is the Spirit really anything other than God’s energy, inspiring human beings to perform extraordinary feats of valor, endowing them with special artistic skill or miraculous powers, and especially communicating divine truth?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green editors, Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period ©1996, Hendrickson Publishers, page 298

<sup>5</sup> JDG Douglas, New Bible Dictionary (second edition) ©1962, ed. By JD Douglas, FF Bruce, JI Packer, N Hillyer, D Guthrie, AR Millard, DJ Wiseman, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., pages 1137

<sup>6</sup> James DG Dunn, Christology in the Making (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 133.

<sup>7</sup> For a more exhaustive list see The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon pages 924-6.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Buzzard, The Doctrine of the Trinity ©1998, International Scholars Publications, page 226.

Can we conclude the spirit is merely an impersonal power, a kind of empowerment given to the creatures He favors like a battery pack? Certainly not. Is it merely a communication device, like a radio transceiver which can send and receive messages from God? Certainly not. The spirit of God is a way of referring to Yahweh in action. Consequently, criticizing His spirit is the same as criticizing God Himself. To say God's spirit is impersonal is like calling someone's written communication impersonal. A letter carries an author's message, including his or her intentions and emotions. Of course, a piece of mail is not a person, but it is the very expression of a person. One experiences the distant person as near through the letter. God is so holy that even the holiest among us cannot see His face and live (Exodus 33:20). Until the resurrection, we are simply incapable of enjoying His immediate presence. Even so, He longs to communicate with us and have a relationship with us. He interacts with us through His spirit, His word, His empowerment, His wisdom, etc. Although God's spirit is intensely personal, Dunn is right to state, "But of the Spirit as an entity in any sense *independent* of God, of Spirit as a divine hypostasis, there is nothing."<sup>9</sup> Thus, we conclude (regarding OT pneumatology) that God's spirit is not a person, though it is very personal—it is the very self-expression of Yahweh, the one God (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 6:4).

### **The Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke)**

When one flips the page entitled "The New Testament" and enters the territory of Matthew chapter one, the definitions gained from the OT do not suddenly disappear. In fact, in the first three Gospels, references to the spirit of God are very much in tune with what we have already discovered. The holy spirit caused the generation of life in the virgin Mary (Matthew 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35); Jesus baptizes with it (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16); it descended upon Christ at his baptism (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22); it drove Jesus to go into the wilderness (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1); it gave the disciples words to speak when on trial (Matthew 10:20; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12); it enabled Christ to proclaim justice (Matthew 12:18); it empowered the Messiah to cast out demons (Matthew 12:28); it inspired David to write psalms (Matthew 22:43; Mark 12:36); it caused prophetic utterances (Luke 1:41, 67), it was upon Simeon (Luke 2:25), it reveals truth about the future (Luke 2:26), it empowered Jesus (Luke 4:14), and it is given by the Father to those who ask (Luke 11:13).

God's spirit is His influence, presence, and power at work accomplishing His will in the universe in general and in among His people in particular. This empowerment made possible the miracles recorded throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in the Gospels. For example, Jesus himself plainly stated God's spirit empowered him to drive out demons:

**Matthew 12:28**

But if I cast out demons by the spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

**Luke 11:20**

But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

This simple equation, "the spirit of God = the finger of God," marvelously supports what we have already found—the spirit is the means by which God acts, much like a body. I interact with the world through my body. God interacts with the world through His spirit—like a finger. All of what Christ was able to do was a result of the anointing of God's spirit. Peter put it this way, "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the holy spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Jesus' ability to heal was made possible by the empowering spirit of God—God with him.

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<sup>9</sup> James DG Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 136 (emphasis mine).

In conclusion, the synoptic Gospels do not contain significant changes from what we have already seen in the OT.<sup>10</sup> Jesus saw himself as a man inspired and empowered by the God's spirit. This enabled him to speak on God's behalf and perform miracles just like some of the prophets of old.

## The Spirit in John

In the first portion of the Gospel of John, the holy spirit is spoken of as something descending from heaven to remain upon Jesus (John 1:32-33), as the means by which one is born again (John 3:5), as an enablement for Christ to speak the words of God (John 3:34), as a way in which one worships the Father (John 4:23), as the essential nature of God (John 4:24), as a life giver (John 6:63), and as something to be received by the disciples (John 7:39).

It is clear from these examples that the essential character and functionality of God's spirit has not changed. However, the claim that is made by John 7:39 seems to contradict everything we have discovered. "But this he spoke of the spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for the spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39). Obviously, the spirit had been given in OT times as well as in Jesus' own ministry as evidenced by his miracles and healings. Nonetheless, there must be some significant difference between the spirit hitherto available and what Jesus said in John 7:39.

The answers are found in the chapters of John that make up the last supper discourse (John 13-17). During this dinner conversation, our Lord explains the coming presence of the *parakletos* (translated paraklete, comforter, helper, or advocate).<sup>11</sup> Jesus outlines the following chain of events: (1) the disciple demonstrates love for Jesus by keeping his commandments (John 14:15); (2) Jesus asks the Father to send the paraklete (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7); and (3) he sends it in Jesus' name to abide in the believer forever (John 14:16, 26).

The paraklete is "the spirit of truth" (John 14:17), which will teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said (John 14:26), testify about Jesus (John 15:26), be more advantageous to the saint than the presence of Christ on earth (John 16:7), convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11), guide them into all truth by speaking only what "he" hears (John 16:13), and disclose Christ to the disciple (John 16:14-15). Jesus revealed to his disciples that these new functions of the spirit would become available after he ascended to the Father. Some interesting language switches occur in this section of John's Gospel that deserve our attention. In some instances, Jesus tells them he will send the paraklete; in others, he says, "I will come to you." Note below:

### The Helper (Paraklete) Will Come

He will give you another helper, that he may be with you forever	14:16
the helper, the holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you	14:26
when the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father...	15:26
if I do not go away the helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you	16:7
when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth	16:13

### Jesus Will Come

I will come again and receive you to myself	14:3
I will come to you	14:18
you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you	14:17
he who loves me...I will love him and will disclose myself to him	14:21
if anyone loves me, he will keep my word...and we will come to him and make our abode with him	14:23
I go away, and I will come to you	14:28

<sup>10</sup> A possible exception could be the foreshadowing demonstrated by interchanging the spirit (Mark 13:11) for Jesus himself (Luke 21:14-15).

<sup>11</sup> *Parakletos* occurs 5 times in the NT (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1). The word literally means someone or something called alongside, i.e. a helper, advocate, etc.

The holy spirit is coming, *and* Christ is coming. How can this confusion be resolved?

**John 16:12-14**

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But 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 will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you.

Jesus would come to his disciples through the paraklete. Alva Huffer notes, "The work of Christ's Spirit as Comforter, Advocate, and Helper was nothing other than the work of Christ Himself as Comforter, Advocate, and Helper through that divine power."<sup>12</sup> It was through the paraklete that Christ and the Father would come and dwell within the saint (even while they remained in heaven). Jesus is not literally in each member of the family of God, but through the spirit his mind is "projected" enabling him to comfort, reveal truth, aid in times of temptation, and offer guidance. F.F. Bruce put it this way, "He had been with them for a short time, but the 'other paraclete,' his *alter ego*, would be with them permanently, and not only with them but in them."<sup>13</sup> The spirit which inspired Jesus during his ministry on earth would now enable him to be present within his disciples in a new advantageous way.

**The Spirit in the Rest of the NT**

Is it only in John that the spirit is defined as Christ indwelling the believers? How does the rest of the NT speak about the spirit? Before going any further and investigating Paul's epistles, which have much to say on the subject, it is necessary to recall the chief prediction of John the Baptist: "I baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the holy spirit" (Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). This prediction was reinforced by Jesus after he had spent forty days with his disciples in his resurrected body.

**Acts 1:4-5**

Gathering them together, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," he said, "you heard of from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the holy spirit not many days from now.

Then, after a few days of anticipation, the disciples were praying when the sky suddenly started making strange noises. Into the building rushed a violent wind accompanied by tongues of fire. Suddenly they found themselves in a state of such inspiration that they spoke foreign languages they had never before known. The "new" spirit Jesus had promised descended and provided them with the words they were speaking. Peter explained this event with the words, "having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the holy spirit, he [Jesus] has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:32-33). Jesus is the dispenser of the spirit. Not only was he the greatest prophet whose very words were inspired by the spirit, not only was he anointed by the spirit, but he is also the Lord of the spirit who baptizes his followers.

Paul's epistles further develop the connection between the ascended Jesus and the holy spirit. Consider the chart below which lists some of the places that Paul speaks of the spirit and Christ interchangeably.

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The spirit dwells in the believer	1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 2:22
Christ dwells in the believer	2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27
The spirit of Christ dwells in the believer	Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19

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<sup>12</sup> Alva Huffer, Systematic Theology ©1960, The Restitution Herald, page 92.

<sup>13</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Gospel & Epistles of John ©1983, Eerdmans Publishing Company, page 302

Paul freely switches between these phrases as if they were synonymous. The interchangeable nature of these terms is readily apparent in the following texts.

**Ephesians 3:14-17**

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...”

**Romans 8:9-11**

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But 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 dwells in you.

The spirit of God, the spirit of Christ, and Christ himself are all equivalent ways of communicating the same essential truth. Paul does not focus on ontological and metaphysical distinctions; rather, he sees the spirit primarily in functional terms within the experience of the Christian. From this perspective the spirit is Jesus. One Bible dictionary helpfully summarizes this as follows:

**The New Bible Dictionary**

The Spirit is now definitely the Spirit of Christ, the other Counselor who has taken over Jesus’ role on earth. This means that Jesus is now present to the believer only in and through the Spirit, and that the mark of the Spirit is both the recognition of Jesus’ present status and the reproduction of the character of his sonship and resurrection life in the believer.<sup>14</sup>

Again, the spirit is not a person but the projection of a person—the risen Christ—within the heart of the believer. Christ is the one “who searches the minds and hearts” (Revelation 2:23). He is the head of the body (Colossians 1:18) who causes “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16).<sup>15</sup> The risen Christ is with us always (Matthew 28:20) and in the midst of two or three gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20). Yet, at the same time, he is still a man (1 Timothy 2:5) seated at the right hand of God (Mark 16:19; Hebrews 12:2; etc.) in heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20; 1 Peter 3:22; etc.). So how can Christ enjoy intimacy with his church even while he is in heaven? Or to put the question differently, how could he disclose himself to his disciples without the world seeing him (John 14:22)? Christ is present through the spirit. The spirit which proceeds from the Father connects Christ to his body like a nervous system—making him aware of what is going on and allowing him to coordinate his body. The spirit fully represents Christ, and so, to me, the spirit is Christ.

Before delving into the reasons why the holy spirit is not a distinct “person,” I will conclude our biblical survey by offering a definition. The holy spirit is God in action (as we have seen from the OT and the Synoptic Gospels) as well as the abiding helper (presented in John’s last supper discourse) distributed under the auspices of the Father by the ascended Messiah in order to benefit the Church—his body—by connecting him to every believer. Thus one could say, “the holy spirit is God,” as well as, “the holy spirit is Christ,” even though it is technically neither, since they are in heaven, whereas the holy spirit is in God’s people. The spirit is simply the way God and Christ are able to indwell and influence the church.

Throughout our study so far, we have focused on what the holy spirit is, rather than what it is not. However, considering the fact that so much of Christendom holds to the doctrine of the Trinity—including the idea that the holy spirit is a distinct individual from the Father and Son—I thought it would be appropriate to discuss why the spirit is not a “person.” The pressure to conform to the “orthodox” doctrine of the spirit’s personality comes from multiple sources. From internet websites zealously anathematizing

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<sup>14</sup> JDG Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary* (second edition) ©1962, ed. By JD Douglas, FF Bruce, JI Packer, N Hillyer, D Guthrie, AR Millard, DJ Wiseman, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., pages 1140-1

<sup>15</sup> To say that Christ the head does not communicate with and control his body implies he is paralyzed.

anyone who dares to deny the spirit its co-equal, co-eternal, and co-essential status with the Father and the Son to most modern Bible translations that constantly translate neuter pronouns like “which” and “it” as “who” and “he” to my very own word processor that angrily underlines the capitalized “holy spirit” with jagged red electronic ink. Yet, regardless of the pressure to conform to a Trinitarian understanding of the holy spirit, there are several rather devastating reasons why the spirit is not a distinct “person.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Holy Spirit Does Not Have a Name**

In the Bible, one’s name meant more than what people said to get someone’s attention. Rather, one’s name encapsulated all that a person stood for. The meaning of one’s name reflected his or her nature. For example, God’s proper name, Yahweh, is derived from the Hebrew verb “to be.” The statements, “I am who I am” and “[He] who was and who is and who is to come” reflect the meaning of His name (Exodus 3:14; Revelation 4:8). To be Yahweh is to be the existent one—the one who is always there. Jesus’ name means “Yahweh is salvation,” which makes sense when one stops to consider that Jesus was the means of Yahweh’s salvation for all mankind. Consider the statement about Jesus, “For there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Yet, the holy spirit is given no proper name. This is astounding if the holy spirit were truly a “person” equal with, yet distinct from the Father and Son. In fact, in biblical culture having one’s name stricken from the record was one of the severest punishments. It is hard to imagine why “God the Holy Spirit” neglected to reveal “his” name when the Father and Son certainly have.

### **The Holy Spirit Never Sends Greetings**

At the beginning of each of the thirteen letters written by Paul, the first few verses include some variation of the following benediction: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>17</sup> This consistency is remarkable. Paul delivers grace and peace from God and Jesus to his readers but never from the holy spirit. If the spirit were a person, distinct from the Father and Son, then why does “he” never send grace and peace? In addition, the letter of James opens with “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ....” Apparently, James considers himself a lifetime slave to the Father and the Son, but no mention is made concerning the holy spirit. Furthermore, the first letter of John begins with the following statement of fellowship: “...indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Again, it would not make sense to leave out the holy spirit from fellowship with the believers if it were an independent person from the Father and Son.

### **The Holy Spirit Is Owned by God**

The phrase “spirit of God” appears twelve times in the NT, not counting variations.<sup>18</sup> In Greek, the phrase “of God” is one word, *theou*, which is in the genitive case. This is the possessive case and can be translated into either English using the preposition “of” or the apostrophe and “s” designation. For example, if Spot is the dog of Grace, then Spot is Grace’s dog—Grace is Spot’s owner. Thus it is with the spirit. It is God’s spirit—Yahweh is the source and possessor of the spirit. It goes where He sends it and does what He wants it to do. The spirit is not independent of God, but it is His influence and presence. For example, Paul asks, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

### **The Holy Spirit Is Never Prayed To**

Jesus gave explicit instructions for prayer in the Sermon on the Mount and then again at the last supper. He always instructed his disciples to pray to the Father. Then, at the last supper, he told them to pray to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ. This is especially noteworthy since the coming of the holy spirit was

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<sup>16</sup> According to the Trinity, person means an individual or a mind (emotions, intellect, and will). Person does not mean a human being. God the Father is a person. Jesus is a person.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:3

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 3:16; 12:28; Romans 8:9, 14; 1 Corinthians 2:11, 14; 3:16; 7:40; 12:3; Ephesians 4:30; Philippians 3:3; 1 John 4:2

one of the topics he discussed at length in John 13-17. Why not ask the spirit directly to come into the new believer? Instead, Jesus says, "...if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it to you" (John 16:23) and "...but if I go, I will send him [the helper] to you" (John 16:7). Furthermore, John the Baptist prophesied that one would come after him who would baptize in holy spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when Jesus poured forth what the people saw and heard—the holy spirit (Acts 2:33). If the spirit were a person, then why does it not have a say about its own sending? The chain of events is clear, the convert or evangelist prays to God in the name of Jesus to receive spirit, and then Jesus baptizes the new believer in the spirit which proceeds from God.

## **The Holy Spirit Is Left Out of Key Passages**

Jesus confirmed the time-honored creed of the Jewish people when he declared, "...Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:28-29). Where is the holy spirit in this creedal statement? Why didn't Jesus add the holy spirit in when he quoted it? When Jesus walked on this earth, he had an incredible oneness with his Father (John 10:30). He lived in a state of perpetual communion, always doing the works,<sup>19</sup> obeying the will,<sup>20</sup> and speaking the words<sup>21</sup> of his Father. In fact, several times, God spoke to Jesus audibly, and others heard what He said (Luke 3:22; Mark 9:7; John 12:28). Jesus expressed the oneness he enjoyed with the Father in the following words, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). No one really knows the Son except the Father. No one really knows the Father except the Son. No one can know the Father unless the Son reveals Him. These words express a great deal of exclusivity. Why is the holy spirit left out? Why doesn't Jesus also enjoy oneness with the third person of the Trinity like he does with the Father?

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus explained what would happen just before the Kingdom comes (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). After expressing to his disciples that they should be able to tell when the end is near, he clarifies by saying, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36). It is evident that in Jesus' mind, the potential beings who may have end-times knowledge include humans, the angels, himself, and the Father. Why is it that only the Father knows when the end will come? If the holy spirit were also God, why is it left out twice (once from those who potentially could know, but don't; and once from those who do know)?

Several of the prophets had visions of Yahweh on His throne (1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 1:26; Daniel 7:9; Revelation 4:2). Jesus has been promised the throne of David (Luke 1:32). Until then, he is seated with the Father on His throne (Revelation 3:21). What about the holy spirit's throne? Why is the holy spirit left out if it were also God? Of course, there are other reasons why the Trinitarian understanding of the holy spirit does not make sense, but these are, in my view, the five strongest. Before concluding our study, we should first work through the most common reasons given for believing in the spirit's personality.

## **What about All Those Personal Pronouns in John 14-16?**

Nearly all modern translations have adopted the standard of using personal pronouns (like "he" and "him") in reference to the holy spirit. This is unusual because the word "spirit" or *pneuma* is neuter in Greek, and the pronouns the Bible uses are likewise neuter (like it and which). Although it is often the case that masculine and feminine Greek pronouns are translated in English as "it" or "which," neuter words in Greek are virtually never translated into English using personal pronouns except when referring to the spirit. Immediately, this double standard should grab our attention as a potential area of bias in translation. Jason BeDuhn insightfully explains the matter as follows:

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<sup>19</sup> John 8:29; 10:25, 32, 37; 14:10; 17:4

<sup>20</sup> John 3:34; 5:30; 6:38; 14:31; 15:10

<sup>21</sup> John 7:16; 8:26, 28, 38; 12:49-50; 14:24; 17:8, 14

### **Jason BeDuhn on Translating Greek Gender into English**

Now it turns out that both “masculine” and “feminine” Greek nouns can be used for impersonal things as well as persons. But “neuter” nouns are used only for impersonal things, such as objects, animals, forces, abstract principles, and so on. The same holds true for “masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter” pronouns... But even though the “personal” category is larger in Greek than in English, the “Holy Spirit” is referred to by a “neuter” noun in Greek. Consequently, it is never spoken of with personal pronouns in Greek. It is a “which,” not a “who.” It is an “it,” not a “he.” This is the case, then, where the importance of the principle of following primary, ordinary, generally recognized meaning of the Greek when translating becomes clear. To take a word that everywhere else would be translated “which” or “that,” and arbitrarily change it to “who” or “whom” when it happens to be used of “the holy spirit,” is a kind of special pleading. In other words, it is a biased way to translate. And because this arbitrary change cannot be justified linguistically, it is also inaccurate.<sup>22</sup>

However, the word *parakletos* (comforter, helper, etc.) in Jesus’ last supper discourse is masculine in Greek. Still, grammatical gender is entirely different from sexual gender. For example, in Greek, the word “city” is feminine and the word “treasure” is masculine. As a result, when the NT refers to a city, feminine pronouns are used and when treasure is represented by pronouns, masculine ones are used. How does this translate into English?

#### **A Feminine Pronoun Translated as Neuter**

“When he approached, he saw the city [feminine] and wept over it [feminine]” (Luke 19:41).

The word translated into English “it” is literally the Greek word for “her.” Yet, the translators still used an impersonal pronoun because that is how English works.

#### **A Masculine Pronoun Translated as Neuter**

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure [masculine] hidden in the field, which [masculine] a man found...” (Matthew 13:44).

Why isn’t the word “which” translated “who” if it is masculine? This is because in English we never designate non-persons with masculine and feminine pronouns unless a figure of speech called personification is taking place. For example, ships and cars are sometimes represented in English with feminine pronouns, but everyone recognizes that they are impersonal objects.

Thus, a word’s grammatical gender does not automatically imply sexual gender.<sup>23</sup> If it did, then one would be quite confused about the gender of the holy spirit. In Hebrew *ruach* is feminine, in Greek *pneuma* is neuter, and *parakletos* is masculine. If grammatical gender did imply sexual gender, what pronouns would we use: “she,” “it,” or “he?” The only way to determine how to translate the pronouns is based on the belief of the translator concerning whether or not the word in question is a person. This process works fine in most cases except when the theological bias of translators dictates personhood. In these cases (“word” in John 1:1-3 and “holy spirit” throughout the NT), the translators break their own consistency and impose their theological bias without leaving so much as a footnote. Then, honest Bible students see that masculine pronouns are used in reference to the spirit along with capitalization—an equally biased contrivance—and then claim because of this that the spirit is a person. The result is circular reasoning.

The word “spirit” is neuter; therefore, the pronouns referring to “spirit” should be translated accordingly as “it,” “which,” etc. If modern translators followed this standard, there would be little question about the holy spirit (at least until the reader broached John 14:16 where *parakletos* (helper) is masculine and may thus be referred to with masculine pronouns). Everything depends on whether or not the translator believes the paraklete is a person, but this is a theological rather than grammatical question. Even so, several times in the context, these two words are used interchangeably. This has a significant bearing on the matter.

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<sup>22</sup> Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation* ©2003, University Press of America, page 140.

<sup>23</sup> We have already noted that if a Greek word is neuter, then it does reflect that in English, and the word should use impersonal pronouns.

**John 14:16-17**

...He will give you another helper, that he may be with you forever; that is the spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive...

**John 14:25-26**

These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the helper, the holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name...

**John 15:26**

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 testify about me

**John 16:13**

I have more things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...

The helper is the holy spirit (or spirit of truth). Since *pneuma*, the word translated “spirit,” is neuter, it is clear grammatically that the spirit is not a person. Furthermore, if in the other sixty-five books of the Bible the spirit is not a person (and the helper is equated to the spirit), then we must conclude that the helper (although represented by a masculine noun and masculine pronouns) should also be translated as neuter. The only reasonable exception would be if personification is in use.<sup>24</sup>

**What about the Phrase “The Holy Spirit Says?”**

Several texts have been used to support the belief the holy spirit is a person because the holy spirit speaks (2 Samuel 23:2; Matthew 22:43; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25; Hebrews 3:7; 9:8). Although communicating (i.e. speaking one’s mind) is certainly an indication of personhood, this is not necessarily the case for these texts because the spirit is a way of talking about God in action. Peter put it this way, “for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the holy spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:21). God speaks through the holy spirit; it is not only His finger but also His mouth. This is how we came to have the Scriptures. They were a result of God’s inspiration of the writer through the medium of His spirit, word, and wisdom.

It is a well-known fact that the Jews have regularly used other words in an effort not to pronounce God’s name. For example, “heaven,”<sup>25</sup> “blessed,”<sup>26</sup> “holy One,”<sup>27</sup> “Lord,”<sup>28</sup> etc. are ways of referring to Yahweh without uttering His name. In like manner, the phrases “word of God,” “spirit of God,” “breath of God,” “wisdom of God,” “glory of God,” and “power of God,” are circumlocutions for God’s activity in the world. Dunn is once again helpful here:

**James Dunn on “The Holy Spirit Says”**

As for the rabbinic formula (“The Holy Spirit says”), is this any more than what we might call a literary hypostatization? —that is, a habit of language which by use and wont develops what is only an apparent distinction between Yahweh and one of these words and phrases used earlier to describe his activity towards men (here particularly in inspiring scripture). Have we in all these cases any more than a personification, a literary (or verbal) device to speak of God’s action without becoming involved every time in a more complicated description of how the transcendent God can intervene on earth? —in other words, simply a useful shorthand device (“Spirit of God,”

<sup>24</sup> Personification would not be unusual because this technique is often used to express truth in Scripture (for example, wisdom is personified as a lady in Proverbs 8). Also, note that Jesus himself said “these things I have spoken to you in figurative language...” (John 16:25).

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 19:23-24; Mark 11:30; Luke 15:18, 21

<sup>26</sup> Mark 14:61; 1 Timothy 6:15

<sup>27</sup> 2 Kings 19:22; Job 6:10; 1 John 2:20

<sup>28</sup> Virtually every OT quotation in which “Yahweh” had appeared has been rendered “Lord” (*kurios*).

‘glory of God,’ etc.) which can both express the character of God’s immanence in a particular instance and safeguard his transcendence at the same time without more ado.<sup>29</sup>

## **What about the Intercession of the Holy Spirit?**

The following text is quoted in an attempt to prove that the holy spirit is a person:

### **Romans 8:26-27**

In the same way the spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the spirit is, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Joseph Thayer reads this text as follows:

### **Joseph Thayer on Romans 8:26**

Romans 8:26 means, as the whole context shows, nothing other than this: ‘although we have no very definite conception of what we desire, and cannot state it in fit language in our prayer but only disclose it by inarticulate groanings, yet God receives these groanings as acceptable prayers inasmuch as they come from a soul full of the Holy Spirit.’<sup>30</sup>

Another possible way to understand this text is to remember that the spirit is used interchangeably with Christ (cf. Romans 8:9-11). If this is the case here, then Christ is the one who intercedes on our behalf. This interpretation gains traction once we realize that a few verses later Christ is called the one “who also intercedes for us” (Romans 8:34). It is not at all unexpected to see a blurring of categories here; this is common in Paul’s letters.

## **What about Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?**

Occasionally, people claim that denying the personality of the holy spirit is the unforgivable sin of blaspheming the spirit. In order to get to the bottom of the matter, we must remember the context of Jesus’ remarks about blaspheming the holy spirit. A demonized man was healed by Christ, and the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Christ pointed out the absurdity of “Satan casting out Satan” and then confessed that it was by God’s spirit that he cast out demons. Then he made the statement, “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the holy spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). Blasphemy against the holy spirit is observing God in action through His human Messiah and declaring that the source of his power was demonic rather than divine. In essence, they were calling God the prince of demons. This sort of unrepentant, hardhearted, intentional blasphemy against God at work in His Messiah is unforgivable.

## **Conclusion**

I have endeavored to accomplish two tasks: to define the holy spirit from the Scriptures and to explain why the traditional doctrine does not hold up to scrutiny. After consulting both Old and New Testaments, we discovered the holy spirit is a way of talking about God and Jesus in action, especially within the church. Although the spirit is not a person distinct from the Father and Son, it is certainly very personal. If the biblical evidence for the spirit’s personality is so lacking, why do so many believe in it today? BeDuhn explains what happened:

### **Jason BeDuhn on Theology Influencing Translation**

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<sup>29</sup> James DG Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co. page 134.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* ©1977, Mott Media, page 522

Later Christian theology also applied the technical status of a 'person' on the Holy Spirit, which has led modern translators and readers to think of the Holy Spirit in human terms as a "who," even a "he," rather than as an "it" that transcends human measures of personhood.<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen, nearly all modern translations carry forward the tradition of theological bias on this issue. Ironically, translators were actually trying to honor the spirit as God and help people "rightly" understand the Scriptures. Yet, is it more honoring to change the meaning of someone/something or to represent it as it truly is? Certainly if the Bible teaches unequivocally the spirit is a person, then God doesn't need the translators' help to teach this doctrine by tweaking pronouns in favor of orthodoxy. The time is ripe for a fresh reconsideration of this matter. People deserve to know in actuality who God, His Son, and the holy spirit truly are.

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<sup>31</sup> Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation* ©2003, University Press of America, page 136.