

GO<sup>P</sup>

ON THE INSIDE

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The Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture

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Chapter 1

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## THE SPIRIT: GOD ON THE INSIDE

This book begins at the end! Rather than collecting all the evidence of what the Bible says about the Spirit and then coming to conclusions about what it means, we will begin with the conclusions already reached by generations of Christians before us. We will then seek to show how those conclusions are justified by testing them against the evidence that the Bible gives.

### THINGS MOST SURELY BELIEVED

The Christian Church has affirmed as part of its creed that:

- the Holy Spirit is truly and fully God. The Spirit shares with the Father and the Son the fullness of deity; is not an inferior deity of another kind, nor an inferior part of the one true deity. God's Spirit is fully and truly God, as the Spirit of the Father and the Son in the life of the triune God.
- the Holy Spirit is someone and not something; is not an impersonal force, nor merely the projection of God's power into the world. The Spirit is fully personal and, within the triunity of God, is as personal as the Father and the Son, though in a distinctive way.

In saying these things, any language used of God must be inadequate. It is like trying to capture the immensity of the ocean in a teacup. Yet this is the kind of language that the Bible leads us to use of God. It may be inadequate but it is not inaccurate. It is limited in speaking

of the greatest of all mysteries but it is not misleading. This is also the language that we have already seen in the introduction to this book.

We have clearly acknowledged that the Spirit is the Spirit of God and we have used personal pronouns—‘he’ and ‘him’—in preference to ‘it’. We have already assumed, therefore, and will go on assuming, that the words of the Nicene Creed are true:

*And I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the Giver of Life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son together  
is worshipped and glorified,  
who spoke by the prophets.*

This is the faith of the Church. We are beginning at the end in the sense that we are already operating with certain conclusions about the Holy Spirit before we have examined the biblical evidence. It is impossible to avoid this. The large majority of those who read this book will already be committed Christians who gladly affirm the faith that has been handed on to them. But it is necessary to show along the way why these conclusions have been reached and why they are still valid. This will involve examining the witness to the Holy Spirit in the Bible—and that is the task we now begin.

## GOD ON THE INSIDE OF THE CHRISTIAN

This chapter is entitled ‘God on the inside’. The Holy Spirit is God at work on the inside of the Christian believer. In the words of Tom Smail, he is ‘God at his closest to us’. The Father is God above us and over us, ‘high and lifted up’ (Isaiah 6:1, KJV); the Son is God with us and among us (Matthew 1:23); the Holy Spirit is God in us, on the inside. Jesus said, ‘You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you’ (John 14:17). This is why Paul can say,

'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Of course, because the Spirit is God's Spirit, this also means that through the Holy Spirit the Father and the Son live within us. Again, Jesus said, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them' (John 14:23). The Father and the Son come and make their home in Christians through the Holy Spirit: God on the inside. To grasp this is crucial for this reason: what God's Spirit does in the world and in the Church shows us clearly who the Spirit is and what he does *within God himself*. What the Spirit does in believers is characteristic of who and what the Spirit is.

This can be expressed slightly differently along other lines. In 2 Corinthians 13:13 we find the well-known words, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.' As grace is a prime characteristic of the person and work of Christ, and love is a prime characteristic of the person and work of the Father, so communion or fellowship is characteristic of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit creates and produces fellowship. God's Spirit is the bond, the power, that connects each believer with Christ and through him with the Father. Through Christ we have 'access to the Father by one Spirit' (Ephesians 2:18, NIV).

In the same way, the Spirit is the bond between Christians. 'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,' says Ephesians 4:3 (NIV). The Spirit is the Spirit of unity, of fellowship; the one who forges relationship. This work is characteristic of what the Spirit is and does in the world, because it is also supremely characteristic of what the Spirit is and does within the very being of the triune God. In other words, what the Spirit does in space and in time reveals what he does in eternity in God. Within God also, the Spirit is the Spirit of communion and fellowship, the dynamic bond of love between the Father and the Son, and much else besides.

## GOD ON THE INSIDE OF GOD

Having spoken about the inside of the Christian, is it really possible also to talk about the inside of God? Christians must speak with care and a sense of caution when they attempt to do so. To speak of God ‘on the inside’ would seem foolish were it not the case that, as we have seen, we have ‘access to the Father by one Spirit’ (Ephesians 2:18, NIV). It is the privilege of Christians to have access through Christ to the very life of God.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were made aware that they must keep their distance from God. Yahweh’s holiness and their sin combined to keep people at a distance. At Mount Sinai the people were warned to keep away from the Lord or ‘he will break out against them’ (Exodus 19:24). Even when the tabernacle was built, the people were still unable to approach God too closely. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year (Hebrews 9:7–8). The tabernacle and the temple were constructed in such a way as to create a sense of limited access. By means of the temple courts the people were gradually filtered out so that they could approach God on God’s terms only, and not without the cleansing blood of sacrifice.

Yet when Jesus made atonement for sins, the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Mark 15:38). In this, a profound spiritual statement is being made. Unrestricted access to God has been opened up for those who believe in Christ. Those who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13–18). Christians therefore have an abundant access to the one they call Father and are able to be bold and confident in making their approach: ‘Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

Christians may indeed, therefore, attempt to speak of the inside of God. From the outside, God is one, but those who have been reconciled to God have access to God’s inner being. From the

inside, we perceive that God is still one, but we understand more about the nature of this unity. It is a unity in variety, a unity of complete communion. God has three ways of being one and the same God. God is God as the Father, as the Son and as the Holy Spirit. The unity of God is a three-dimensional unity. We know this to be so because God has revealed himself in this way and has shown us who he is in his work, in the coming of his Son and the giving of his Spirit. From his work we are able to draw accurate conclusions as to who he is within himself. This ‘three-ness’ in God is known in the church’s language as ‘Trinity’.

Perhaps some technical theological language is appropriate and forgivable here. Christian theology has usually made a distinction between the ‘economic’ Trinity (that is, Father, Son and Spirit as they are seen through their activity in the world) and the ‘ontological’ or ‘immanent’ Trinity (that is, God as he is in himself, within his own eternal being). The key point is that the economic and the ontological Trinity are identical. There is not one God at work in the world concealing another God in eternity who bears no relation to the one revealed in time. The way God shows himself in the world is how God actually is in himself. The God revealed in time is a true revelation of the hidden God of eternity. There is no other God apart from this God, who shows himself to be Father, Son and Spirit. Were this not the case, we would not be able to speak of any kind of revelation of God, nor would we be able to rely on the fact that the God who is ‘for us’ in Jesus (Romans 8:31) is also ‘for us’ in eternity. This would be a frightening prospect, depriving us of any true knowledge of God. As it is, believing that the eternal God has truly revealed himself in time, we can be assured that the knowledge we have is secure, if by no means complete.

### God is a loving community

This understanding of God as divine community is one of the most dynamic and exciting aspects of the Christian faith. It means that,

truly understood, God is not some far-off, isolated being. God is a loving community of divine persons who has his being in perfect, self-giving love.

Within God's threefold, three-in-one existence, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. He is the dynamic, loving bond who expresses and sustains their unity. On the inside of God, the Spirit does the same kind of thing that he does on the inside of, and then between, believers. He creates fellowship. He unites in love. He enables Father and Son to be in perfect harmony with each other in himself. Because he fulfils this purpose first of all within God, the Spirit is able to fulfil the same within those who believe.

### DESCRIBING THE SPIRIT'S WORK

These themes have been taken up by many Christian thinkers. We shall look here at one ancient and one modern approach in order to illustrate and expand our thinking on the Spirit.

**Augustine (354–430)**, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa and one of the most influential theologians ever, described the Holy Trinity in terms of Lover, Beloved and Love. By this he meant that the Father is the Lover, the source of love; the Son is Beloved, the one who is loved; and the Holy Spirit is Love, the bond or 'nexus' of love between them. Now it is true, as is often pointed out, that this analogy runs the danger of making the Holy Spirit less than personal. The Spirit might be thought of as a mere bond, the product of two personal agents which is not itself to be thought of in personal terms. It must be borne in mind, then, that the analogy is not a complete and exhaustive one, but in its own way it is attempting to be true to the idea of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

**Bishop John V. Taylor (1914–2001)** developed the theme more recently than Augustine in a famous and elegant book entitled *The Go-Between God* (SCM Press, 1972). The Holy Spirit, according to Taylor, is 'the divine current of communication' between the Father

and the Son, eternally holding each in awareness of the other. The Spirit is the ‘go-between God’, the bond of union between Father and Son, truly God and truly personal, the creator and sustainer of awareness and fellowship not just within God’s own being but throughout creation. Similar to Augustine’s, Taylor’s imagery is also dynamic, living and full of creative possibilities for its application across a wide spectrum of life.

These are helpful trains of thought, not least because they bring God alive for us. God exists in dynamic, creative relationship; he is the living God whose being sparkles and overflows with love and joy. It is this overflow of the divine life that has gone out from God to bring the universe into being and to bring creatures such as ourselves into reconciled fellowship, breaking down the barriers that we erect, filling us also with that fullness of life which is God’s own.

So far, so good! But here we come to a major question: have we got it right? Is God really like this? The quick answer is that only God knows! But because Christians believe that God is revealed in Jesus Christ and that the Bible bears witness to this self-revelation, we must go on to ask whether the Bible teaches this understanding of God and specifically of the Holy Spirit. Because our concern is with the Holy Spirit, we will limit ourselves here to examining some of the evidence concerning the Spirit, but we shall find that it connects up with the wider issues.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT’S DEITY

The Holy Spirit is truly God. When we encounter the Spirit, we encounter God in the Holy Spirit and not something other or anything less. The truth of this statement rests on several kinds of biblical evidence, as follows.

**The Holy Spirit and God are treated interchangeably.** References are made in the New Testament to the Holy Spirit and God in a way that shows them to be interchangeable. For instance,

Acts 5:3–4 records the incident with Ananias and Sapphira. In verse 3, Peter says, ‘Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?’ and in verse 4 this becomes, ‘You did not lie to us but to God.’ To lie to the Spirit is to lie to God. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul says, ‘Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?’ To be indwelt by the Spirit is to be indwelt by God.

**The Holy Spirit is given the attributes of God.** Qualities that are ascribed to God are also attributed to the Spirit. These include:

- *power*: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’ (Luke 1:35).
- *omniscience*: ‘For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God’ (1 Corinthians 2:10–11).
- *eternity*: ‘... Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God’ (Hebrews 9:14).

**The Holy Spirit performs divine works.** The Holy Spirit is said to perform works which are clearly seen to be the works of God. These include creation (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30), the resurrection of Christ (Romans 8:11) and inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Clearly the Spirit is seen to be the agent of God at work in the world to such an extent as to be equated with God: ‘Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ (2 Corinthians 3:17).

In these accumulated texts and verses, the Spirit of God is intimately identified with the whole of God’s being and firmly placed on the God side of the divine–human interface. While complete unity is asserted, it is also clear that there is distinction: the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, but is not Christ; he is the Spirit that comes from the Father, but is not the Father. It is this identity-with-distinction that the doctrine of the Trinity aims to reflect.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE SPIRIT'S PERSONALITY

The Holy Spirit is personal. This is not to say that he is a person in the limited and individualist sense that a human being is, but that in the divine manner of being, there is also the kind of personal being and agency of which human being is a mere reflection. Relating to the Spirit, this finds expression in the New Testament in several ways, as follows.

**In the use of personal pronouns:** In Greek, the word *pneuma* (spirit) is a neuter noun and should take a neuter pronoun ('it'). It is significant, therefore, that on occasions, and in direct defiance of the rules of Greek grammar, the word is actually given a personal (masculine) pronoun ('he'). This is true of John 16:13, 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own', and probably also of Ephesians 1:14: '... this [who] is the pledge of our inheritance', although here there are two possible readings of the original text. The point is that the rules of grammar have to be bent in order to express the full reality of the Spirit. The rules must be bent in this specific way to be true to the personal nature of the Spirit.

**In descriptions of the Spirit's personal role:** The Holy Spirit is said to act in ways that are distinctly personal. This is particularly clear in the Gospel of John where, in referring to the Advocate (sometimes also translated as Counsellor or Paraclete) who would come, Jesus says that the Spirit will *teach* and *remind* the disciples (14:26), *testify* (15:26), *convict* the world of sin (16:8) and *bring glory*—but not to himself (16:14). These are all the activities of a personal agent, although sometimes expressed here in the negative mode. The impression is intensified when Jesus makes it clear that his own personal presence with his disciples is continued through the Holy Spirit (14:16–18). It would be impossible to speak in this way of a power that was less than personal.

**In the ascription of personal characteristics to the Spirit:** The Spirit is spoken of as possessing personal qualities. This is true in

the active sense: he is said to possess *intelligence* and *knowledge* (John 14:26), *decision* and *will* (1 Corinthians 12:11) and *emotions* (Ephesians 4:30), the qualities that cumulatively define and describe personal existence. It is also true in the passive sense: the Spirit can be *lied to* (Acts 5:3–4), *grieved* (Ephesians 4:30) and *resisted* (Acts 7:51).

The Spirit is truly personal and truly God. The references cited in support of this are by no means exhaustive, and in the course of this book there will be opportunity to note many others. But enough has been said to confirm the Christian understanding of the Spirit as truly personal and truly God. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to note the outrage felt by Jesus when the works of the Holy Spirit are denigrated: ‘Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come’ (Matthew 12:32). According to Jesus, to speak against the Holy Spirit is blasphemy. In the mind of the Son of God, the honour of the Spirit of God is of paramount importance.

### EVIDENCE FOR THE SPIRIT'S ROLE WITHIN THE TRINITARIAN LIFE OF GOD

Before completing this chapter, we need to review a further area concerning the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. On two significant occasions the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the closest possible connection with the Father and the Son.

**The baptismal formula:** In the baptismal formula mentioned in Matthew 28:19, the disciples are commissioned to baptize ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. Here are expressed:

- the *unity* of God, since there is one name in which we are baptized.
- the *triunity* of God, since there are three persons within the one name.

- the *equality* of the persons in God, since all three persons are mentioned.
- the *economy* or order within God, since the Father is mentioned first, the Son second and the Spirit third, corresponding to the economy, or order, of God's self-revelation.

**The ‘grace’:** In 2 Corinthians 13:13–14 we find the equally well-known words: ‘May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all’ (NIV). Here also we find the same truths, although expressed differently.

- There is a *unity* of persons, since the divine blessing comes from Father, Son and Spirit.
- There are *triunity* and *equality*, since the persons are each and together the source of divine blessing.
- There is *economy* or order, since the Father is designated as ‘God’. This does not deny that Son and Spirit are also God but that the Father is the source of their deity. They have their being from his.

## FURTHER INSIGHTS ON THE INSIDE OF GOD

The evidence of the verses above needs to be placed against that of references to the Spirit as the ‘Spirit of God’ (for example, 1 Corinthians 2:11; Philippians 3:3) and the ‘Spirit of Christ’ (for example, Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11). When it is further considered that both the Father and the Son are said to give, send or pour out the Spirit (John 14:16; Acts 2:33), we can see why several further conclusions have been drawn about the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit.

- Because the Father is the Father, he is regarded as the eternal source of the Son and the Spirit. He is, in the traditional language of the church, the ‘fountain and origin of deity’.

- Whereas the Son, because he is the Son, may be said (in the words of Nicene Creed) to be ‘eternally begotten’ from the Father, the Spirit is to be thought of as eternally ‘proceeding’ or ‘going out’ from the Father and from the Son. This is suggested by the general way in which the New Testament speaks of the Spirit’s work and particularly by the reference in John 15:26 to ‘the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father’. Thus the Spirit is not another Son, since the Spirit is not ‘begotten’. He has his own unique identity and way of relating within the Trinity.
- Because the Spirit is the Spirit of fellowship, and because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Spirit may be thought of as the bond of fellowship between Father and Son, the current of loving communication between them.

If these things are true, the picture of God that emerges is exciting: God is the living God, full of life in himself and active among us by his Spirit.



What does it mean to ‘know’ God? Far more than intellectual knowledge, to ‘know’ God is to engage in a personal relationship, to sense God’s active presence in our lives on a daily basis—and that’s where the work of the Holy Spirit comes in. The first Christians knew it was by the Spirit that they first believed and experienced God’s love poured into their hearts. Since then, the third person of the Trinity has often been overlooked, even neglected.

In the last thirty years, however, there has been an explosion of interest in the Spirit. Christians around the world have realized how all experience is touched in some way by the Spirit’s gracious activity. This book examines from the Bible why the Holy Spirit is far more important than most of us realize. It goes on to show that we need to take a fresh look at who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does—God on the inside of those who believe, on the inside of creation itself as Lord and Giver of life and, indeed, on the inside of God’s own being.

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