

# We Believe in the Holy Spirit

LESSON  
ONE

IN THE TRINITY



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# We Believe in the Holy Spirit

## Lesson One

### In the Trinity

#### INTRODUCTION

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I once heard a story about a man who was injured in an accident and lost his memory. He forgot every detail of his life: his name, his friends, even his family. It took him months to recover from his injuries. And during that time, he was tended to most faithfully by one particular nurse. At first, he only knew her as “nurse.” But he soon learned her name, and then her schedule, and then her personality. He grew to care for her, and they often spent time together, just laughing and talking. One day, during one of these visits, the man’s memory returned, and he suddenly recognized the nurse. To their delight, he exclaimed, “I remember you. You’re my wife!” And of course, she was.

In some ways, this story is a bit like the relationship between the Holy Spirit and God’s people. God’s Holy Spirit has always loved his people and cared for them faithfully. But in the Old Testament, they didn’t even know who he was. It wasn’t until the New Testament that Jesus began to reveal the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the Trinity, and as the person of the Godhead who’s most intimately involved in our lives.

This is our first lesson in the series *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*. And we’ve entitled it “In the Trinity.” In this lesson, we’ll focus on the Holy Spirit as a full and equal member of the Godhead.

In systematic theology, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is referred to as “pneumatology.” The word “pneumatology” comes from two Greek roots: *pneuma*, meaning “spirit,” and *logos*, meaning “study.” So, in a broad sense, “pneumatology” refers to “the study of spirits” or “the study of spiritual things.” But in Christian theology, pneumatology has a much narrower meaning. Specifically, it refers to “the study of the Holy Spirit,” the third person of the Trinity.

Historically, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as a distinct, uncreated person of the Trinity took millennia to develop. This was due largely to the fact that God chose to reveal this aspect of his being over time. And as God revealed more and more of himself, we began to develop a fuller understanding of his Trinitarian nature. Traditionally, systematic theologians have defined the Trinity by saying:

**God has three persons, but only one essence.**

By the term “person,” we mean a distinct, self-aware personality. And by the term “essence,” we’re referring to God’s being, his fundamental nature, or the substance of which he consists.

The doctrine of the Trinity was hinted at in the Old Testament, but only the person of the Father was expressed with much clarity. In the New Testament, all three persons of the Trinity were fully revealed: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the nature of their relationship with each other was also defined. Finally, in the early church, all those

details were formulated into theological doctrines that Christians have embraced ever since.

In this lesson on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, we'll explore the historical development of pneumatology in three steps. First, we'll see how the Holy Spirit appears in the Old Testament. Second, we'll look at what the New Testament teaches about him. And third, we'll consider the formalized doctrine of the Holy Spirit in church history. Let's look first at how the Holy Spirit was revealed in the Old Testament.

## OLD TESTAMENT

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Now, we know that God has always existed in Trinity. And the personal distinctions between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit have always been true of him. All three persons are, and always have been, uncreated and fully God. But during the days of the Old Testament, God's people didn't understand that God existed in three persons. They simply knew and worshiped him as the one true God. Of course, we can see hints throughout the Old Testament that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person. But it's only with the clarity of the New Testament that we can recognize these hints.

The 20th century theologian B.B. Warfield, who lived 1851–1921, compared the Old Testament to a room that's richly furnished but poorly lit. He said that when we introduce better lighting, it doesn't change what's in the room. It simply enables us to see the things that were already there. Listen to how Warfield applied this idea to the Trinity in his work *The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity*, published in 1915:

**The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.**

God didn't reveal himself as the Trinity in the Old Testament — at least not in a way that his people could recognize clearly. Even so, because God really does exist in Trinity, and because the Old Testament really does reveal him, the Old Testament contains clues about the Trinity. And when we read the Old Testament with the insight we gain from the New Testament, we can see these clues more clearly.

**So, the Old Testament is telling us the story of God's work in preparation for the coming of the Savior, of the Messiah. And it does that by describing God's work by means of the Spirit of God, by means of the Son of God in Psalm 2 for example. And so, you find all through the Old Testament an introduction, not only of God's name but God's work associated with his name. But when God works, he works in multiple forms in the text. So, the language of God being multiple, where there are more than one identification of how this**

work is being done, either by means of his Son or by means of his word in Psalm 33, or by means of his Spirit, introduces the idea of there being multiple persons in the Godhead, without having to be explicit about that. The New Testament picks up right where the Old Testament leaves off. It focuses on God's work in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and at Jesus' baptism the Father, the Son and the Spirit all appear together. So, there's not a modalism where these are just names that are attributed to the same person or the same individual. The Father and the Son and the Spirit are distinct persons, and the New Testament is able to take all of the terms and the work of God that's promised in the Old Testament, bring it to fruition and to fulfillment, so they work together by introducing the ideas and the work of God and the name of God as well as the Son and the Spirit and then the New Testament brings it together in fullness to give us a doctrine of the Trinity.

— Dr. Steve McKinion

There are many ways to investigate the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. But for our purposes, we'll focus on the Old Testament's references to God's Spirit, and on how those references indicate the Spirit's divinity or deity, and his personhood. Let's look first at some Old Testament references to God's Spirit.

## SPIRIT

The Old Testament uses several names for God's Spirit, including "Holy Spirit," "Spirit of God," "Spirit of the Lord," and, sometimes, when God is speaking, "my Spirit." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word we translate as "spirit" is *ruach*. In general terms, *ruach* can refer to a variety of things. It can be wind or breath. In animals, it can be the principle of life that animates them. In human beings, our *ruach* is often our immortal soul. *Ruach* can also refer to spirits that don't have material bodies. But when used of God, it's generally either a synonym for God himself, or it refers to his personal presence and active engagement with creation.

In the names "Spirit of God," "my Spirit," and "Spirit of the Lord," *ruach* is combined with a name or pronoun for God, indicating that God's Spirit is associated with God in some way, or that it actually *is* God. And the Old Testament name "Holy Spirit" couples *ruach* with the Hebrew word *qodesh*, meaning "holiness." God's *qodesh* or "holiness" is his "otherness" or "apartness" — his quality of being different from his creation. It includes things like his absolute moral purity, as well as the splendor of his appearance. The same word is also reflected in other names for God, like "the Holy One," as we see in places like 2 Kings 19:22, Isaiah 30:11-15, and Hosea 11:9-12.

It can be tempting for Christians to think that these Old Testament names refer directly to the third person of the Trinity. But we need to remember that God didn't explain his existence in three persons until the New Testament. So, in the Old Testament,

these names refer to God without clearly distinguishing between his persons. Even so, these names helped prepare God's people to learn about the Trinity in the New Testament. And, in light of the New Testament's teaching, theologians have commonly applied these references to the Holy Spirit's nature and work.

Having looked at some Old Testament names for God's Spirit, let's see how these names demonstrate the Spirit's divinity or deity.

## **DIVINITY**

When we speak of the Holy Spirit's divinity or deity, we have in mind that the Spirit is actually the uncreated God, and not simply one of God's agents. As we've said, Old Testament references to God's Spirit sometimes identify God himself, and sometimes describe his engagement with creation. But in both cases, they point to his eternal, uncreated divinity.

We'll consider four Old Testament characteristics of God's Spirit that point to his divinity, beginning with references that equate the Spirit with God himself.

### **God himself**

Let's look first at a passage written by the prophet Isaiah. After describing the ways God had saved and redeemed Israel, Isaiah criticized the way Israel had responded to God. Listen to what he wrote in Isaiah 63:10:

**They rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them (Isaiah 63:10).**

Isaiah applied the name Holy Spirit to God himself, probably to emphasize that God's holiness was what caused him to take offense at their sin. This is similar to the grieving of the Holy Spirit that Paul warned against in Ephesians 4:30. And in response, God punished his people by fighting against them. And listen to how Isaiah continued in 63:11-14:

**Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people — where is he who brought them through the sea ... who set his Holy Spirit among them, who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand, who divided the waters before them, to gain for himself everlasting renown, who led them through the depths? ... [T]hey were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord. This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name (Isaiah 63:11-14).**

Isaiah referred to the miracles God had performed when he rescued Israel from Egypt. These included dividing the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to cross unharmed,

and drowning Pharaoh's army. These miracles are also recorded in Exodus 14, 15. In Exodus 15:3-6, Moses wrote:

**The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea... Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy (Exodus 15:3-6).**

Here, it's clear that the Lord himself performed these works. So, when Isaiah attributed them to God's "Holy Spirit" and to the "Spirit of the Lord" in Isaiah 63, he intended his original audience to interpret these as names for God himself.

In addition, when Moses spoke of God's "right hand" winning the victory, he was using metaphoric language that compared God to a human warrior. And his point was that God himself had directly entered and won the battle. In the same way, when Isaiah later equated God's Holy Spirit to God's arm, he meant that God himself was invisibly present as a warrior fighting on behalf of his people.

And something similar is often true of the name "Spirit of God." For instance, in Genesis 1:2, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at creation. In Job 33:4, the Spirit of God is the creator of human beings. And in Psalm 106:32, 33, he is God, the Lord, against whom the Israelites rebelled and grumbled at Meribah. In these and many other places, the context identifies or equates the Spirit of God with God himself.

**Through the activities of the Holy Spirit, which we read about in the Old Testament, we become sure that he is God. For example, his role in creation: In Genesis 1, Moses never wrote that the Holy Spirit was created. On the contrary, he said that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The idea here is that he was embracing the creation like a bird embraces its nestlings, and he was giving life and power to the creation. The same idea is found in Psalm 104, which says, "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created." The Holy Spirit has the ability to create, and this proves that he is God himself.**

— Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail, translation

And the same thing applies to the name the "Spirit of the Lord," using God's covenant name "Yahweh" in place of the more generic name "God." In addition to referring to God in Isaiah 63:14, as we just saw, it also refers to him in Micah 2:7, and arguably in several other passages too.

And the simple phrase "my Spirit" also directly identifies God himself. In Genesis 6:3, it speaks of God contending with humanity. And in Haggai 2:5, God spoke of remaining present with his covenant people through his Spirit.

A second fact that points to the divinity of God's Spirit in the Old Testament is that the Spirit empowered prophecy and visions.



## Prophecy and visions

When the Spirit of God inspired Old Testament prophecies and visions, he often revealed knowledge that only God could possess. And he also delegated authority to the prophets to speak on God's behalf. And in some cases, God's Spirit even controlled the spirits of human prophets in spectacular ways, very similar to the Holy Spirit's gift of prophecy in the New Testament. In all these situations, it's reasonable to conclude that the Spirit of God was actually God himself.

The Spirit's divine authority and power are demonstrated this way in 1 Samuel 19:20-24, where Saul and his men were temporarily given the gift of prophecy. It's also evident in 2 Chronicles 24:20, where the prophet Zechariah was empowered to speak God's words on his behalf. And it's apparent in Ezekiel 11:24, where the Spirit of God gave Ezekiel a prophetic vision.

But one of the most dramatic movements of the Spirit of God happened to the wicked prophet Balaam in the book of Numbers. Throughout Numbers 22–24, Balaam was willing to curse Israel on behalf of their enemy Balak, king of Moab. But Balaam admitted that he could only curse Israel if the Lord permitted it. And contrary to Balak and Balaam's intentions, the only prophecies Balaam could deliver were blessings on Israel. God so overwhelmed Balaam that the prophet was incapable of saying anything God hadn't commanded. In Numbers 24:2-4, we find this record of Balaam's encounter with the Spirit of God:

**When Balaam looked out and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God came upon him and he uttered his oracle: "The oracle of Balaam ... the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty" (Numbers 24:2-4).**

The Spirit of God provided Balaam with the words of God and a vision from the Almighty. This explained why Balaam failed to curse Israel — God himself provided the words that Balaam was compelled to speak.

Like the "Spirit of God," the "Spirit of the Lord" was also the source of prophecies, indicating that this name could also refer directly to God. In Numbers 11:29, Moses revealed that the Lord's Spirit was the source of his own prophetic gift, as well as of the gifts of other Israelite prophets. In Ezekiel 11:5, the Spirit of the Lord put God's words in the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel. And David's last words before his death directly equate the Spirit of the Lord with the God of Israel himself. Listen to what David said in 2 Samuel 23:2-3:

**The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.  
The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me ... (2 Samuel 23:2-3)**

Here, the parallelism of David's poetry suggests that the Spirit of the Lord and the God of Israel are one and the same.

Finally, God himself used the name “my Spirit” to describe the pouring out of the spiritual gift of prophecy on all his people during the last days. In Joel 2:28-29, God said:

**I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28-29).**

In Acts 2:1-29, the apostle Peter taught that this prophecy was fulfilled when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost. In other words, Joel’s Old Testament reference to God’s Spirit ultimately refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. Again, this doesn’t mean that Joel’s prophecy explicitly declared the existence of the third person of the Trinity. But it does mean that the Spirit in Joel’s prophecy was none other than God himself.

The third Old Testament characteristic that points to the divinity or deity of God’s Spirit is that he imparted special skill and knowledge to select human beings.

### **Special skill and knowledge**

In the Old Testament, God’s Spirit supernaturally gifted certain human beings to perform ministry tasks. For example, in Exodus 31:3 and 35:31, God filled the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab with his Spirit so that they could craft the tabernacle and its furnishings. The idea was that God personally blessed them with enhanced abilities and knowledge to ensure that their work would please him. This was particularly important because, according to Exodus 25:9, 40, the craftsmen were to pattern the earthly tabernacle after the heavenly one. So, they had to have sufficient skill and knowledge of all the crafts necessary to complete this task, such as metalworking, woodworking, stone cutting, embroidery, art, and every other craft necessary to build the tabernacle.

A parallel to this type of gifting can be seen in the various spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit provided to the church in the New Testament, as in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. And just as the gifts are provided by the divine Holy Spirit in the New Testament, they were also provided by God’s divine Spirit in the Old Testament.

The fourth way we see the divinity or deity of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament is in the Spirit’s anointing and empowerment of kings and other leaders among God’s covenant people.

### **Anointing and empowerment**

When the Spirit of God anointed kings, he acted as the suzerain or great emperor of the covenant in order to delegate authority to a vassal or servant king. In the structure of the covenant, God himself ruled over everything. And he appointed lesser kings to rule over portions of his kingdom on his behalf. For instance, Saul and David were kings over God’s servant nation Israel. They ruled on God’s behalf and were completely under his

authority. That's why in 1 Chronicles 29:23, David's throne in Jerusalem is referred to as the throne of the Lord. So, when the Spirit of God anointed kings, he was exercising authority that belonged to God himself. And this indicates that the Spirit was himself God.

Most of the Old Testament references to this kind of anointing and gifting refer to the Spirit as the "Spirit of the Lord," using his covenant name Yahweh. This was probably to emphasize the covenantal nature of these offices, which reported directly to God as their suzerain. An example of this can be found in the transfer of this anointing from Israel's first king Saul to his successor David. As we read in 1 Samuel 16:13-14:

**Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power... Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul (1 Samuel 16:13-14).**

David received the Holy Spirit when he was anointed as king, even though he hadn't yet ascended Israel's throne. Similarly, Saul lost the Holy Spirit's supernatural blessing and gifting, even though he still ruled as king. Later, after David sinned with Bathsheba, David feared the same thing might happen to him. So, in Psalm 51:11, he begged to keep God's Holy Spirit. He wasn't asking to keep the throne — he expected to be able to keep that, just as Saul had kept it even when he sinned. Instead, David asked to keep God's empowering presence that enabled him to carry out God's royal will.

The New Testament sheds some light on this activity of the Spirit in the account of Jesus' baptism and anointing for his office of Messiah or Christ. This account is recorded in Matthew 3:14-17, Mark 1:9-11, and in Luke 3:21, 22. In all of these accounts, Jesus' baptism prepared him for ministry, the Holy Spirit descended on him bodily in the form of a dove, and the Father spoke from heaven to confirm that he was pleased with Jesus. Without question, the Spirit of God at Jesus' baptism is the third person of the Trinity. And this helps us see that the same Holy Spirit performed the same function in the Old Testament.

Of course, the Old Testament's original audiences wouldn't have interpreted this to mean that the Spirit of the Lord was a distinct person within the Godhead. Nevertheless, they should have been able to see that when the Spirit anointed and gifted people, it meant that God himself was interacting with the world. We see this in the anointing of Saul in 1 Samuel 10:6, and in the gifting of David for his rule as king in Isaiah 11:2. It's also apparent in Micah's gifting for his office of prophet in Micah 3:8. And the Spirit of the Lord appointed and empowered Israel's judges throughout the book of Judges: he came upon Othniel in 3:10; Gideon in 6:34; Jephthah in 11:29; and Samson in 13:25, 14:6, 19, and 15:14.

**The Old Testament suggests that the Spirit is God without fully, explicitly naming that. So, when we read in the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1:2, we have the Spirit of Elohim hovering over the waters or hovering over creation. This seems ambiguous, but when you turn to Psalm 104 the psalmist is going to say that the Spirit is the one that gives life to creation. And then we move on to a passage like Ezekiel**

**36. And it's a strange passage within God's promise of a new covenant. God says to his people, "I'm going to put my Spirit in you, and I'm going to move you to want to follow and do my decrees." What this is saying is that the Spirit in them is going to create a new kind of person, one that's not bent toward disobedience but one that's bent toward obedience. And so, when we think about, what's the Spirit doing in the Old Testament, the Spirit is the one... One of the basic things he's doing is he's giving life. He's the life-giving principle. He's the one that gives creational life, so to speak, and new creational life; even in the Old Testament we see this. And so, when we ask, "Who gives life?" the only one who gives life, we know this, is God himself. And so, the Old Testament itself even suggests that the Spirit is God the Almighty.**

— Dr. Uche Anizor

So far, we've considered how the doctrine of pneumatology developed in the Old Testament by focusing on references to God's Spirit, and on the Spirit's divinity or deity. Now let's briefly mention how these references also point to the Spirit's personhood.

## **PERSONHOOD**

The Old Testament clearly shows that God is personal. But it doesn't indicate how many persons he has, or whether or not his persons are distinct from each other. So, when we say that the Old Testament demonstrates the Spirit's personhood, we don't mean that it points to him as distinct from the Father and the Son. We just mean that it proves him to be a fully divine, uncreated person.

By contrast, it's sometimes argued that, in the Old Testament, God's Spirit was presented as an impersonal force or power. But as we've already seen, many references to the Spirit are direct references to God himself. And God is definitely not an impersonal force. So, every passage that equates God's Spirit with God himself demonstrates that the Spirit is personal. In addition to this, there are also passages that ascribe personal qualities specifically to the Spirit, qualities that could never be used to describe an impersonal force.

**When the Old Testament uses language of Spirit, it's in the context usually of God's presence and God's power. Because the references are to a relationship with a God who is personal, it seems like that we should understand those references as referring to the personal presence of the God who is, that although it's possible to read disconnected and to read those texts individualistically and isolated from the overall testimony of the Scriptures, I think if we look at the Old Testament canon as a whole, and we see the Spirit's work related to, connected to the empowerment of God himself, that that leads to**

**the implication to this is the Spirit of God, that this is a person. As we move then to the New Testament, it becomes clear and explicit that the third person of the Godhead is a person like the Father and the Son.**

— Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

The Old Testament points to the personhood of God's Spirit in many ways. But for the sake of time, we'll look at just four ways, starting with how the Old Testament calls attention to the Spirit's emotions.

## Emotions

As we know, impersonal forces don't exhibit emotions. Only persons do. In our own lives, we experience grief, anger, joy and many other emotions. And Scripture describes the Holy Spirit in similar ways. For instance, Isaiah wrote that Israel's rebellion against God "grieved" the Holy Spirit. Listen again to what Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 63:10:

**They rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them (Isaiah 63:10).**

Similarly, verses like Micah 2:7 raise the possibility that the Lord's Spirit can be angry.

## Relationships

Second, we see the Spirit's personhood in passages that speak of him actively engaging in relationships with humanity. For instance, in the story of the flood of Noah's day, Genesis 6:3 speaks of God's Spirit contending or striving with humanity. This contending was personal because it involved evaluating and intelligently responding to humanity's sin. There may even be a suggestion that God's Spirit flooded the world only after his patience had run its course. Impersonal forces don't contend with us, respond intelligently, or demonstrate patience. In order for the Spirit to do these things, he had to be a person.

## Authority

Third, the Spirit's personhood is demonstrated by people's response to his authority. As just one example, Exodus 17:1-7 records the people's rebellion at the waters of Meribah. In this account, the people complained to Moses that there was no water for them to drink, and they "put the Lord to the test." Psalm 106:33 recalls this same event saying that the people "rebelled against the Spirit of God." Now, of course, people can rebel against impersonal laws and institutions. But when Psalm 106 says that

the people rebelled against God's Spirit, it means that they rebelled against the Lord who had authority over them, not just against his rules.

## Volition

And fourth, the Spirit's personhood is also indicated in places where he's shown to be speaking of his own volition and making choices about what prophets should say on his behalf. For example, in 2 Samuel 23:2, David claimed that the Spirit of the Lord spoke through him. That is, David was giving voice to what *the Spirit* wanted him to say. Similarly, in Ezekiel 11:5, the Spirit of the Lord spoke to the prophet Ezekiel and told him what to tell his people. Again, impersonal forces don't have conversations, let alone ideas they want to express. Only persons do.

As we've said before, passages like these don't reveal the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the Godhead. But they do demonstrate that God's Spirit is a divine person and not simply a force.

In many places in the Old Testament, God's Spirit is both fully God and fully personal. But these passages don't refer to any of God's persons *specifically*. After all, God's existence in three persons wasn't revealed until the New Testament. But as we'll see, the New Testament often identifies the third person of the Trinity with God's Spirit in the Old Testament. So, as Christians, it's right for us to conclude that these Old Testament references foreshadow the revelation of the Holy Spirit as a full member of the Trinity.

Now that we've considered the Holy Spirit in the Trinity from the perspective of the Old Testament, let's turn to God's further revelation in the New Testament.

## NEW TESTAMENT

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The New Testament commonly refers to the Holy Spirit in ways that echo the Old Testament. For instance, it uses the Greek word *pneuma*, meaning "spirit" in the same way the Old Testament uses *ruach*. Both words have the same range of meaning, referring to wind, breath, the life force of animals, human souls, and non-corporeal spirits. In fact, the Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Old Testament — commonly translates *ruach* as *pneuma*.

Just as in the Old Testament, God's Spirit is known by a variety of names in the New Testament. Many of these employ the word *pneuma*. He's most often called "Holy Spirit." But he's also known as "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of the Father," "the Spirit of the Lord," "the Spirit of Jesus," "the Spirit of Christ," "the Spirit of Truth," "the Spirit of Holiness," "the Spirit of Life," "the Spirit of Grace," and other similar names. These names identify the Holy Spirit with God's Spirit in the Old Testament, and also describe his character and work. They show him to be one with the Father and Son, and to have attributes like truth, holiness, life, and grace.

With regard to the Spirit's personhood, the New Testament teaches much more clearly and directly that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person within the Trinity. But even in the New Testament, God's people had to grow in their understanding of his person and work. Jesus' teachings in the Gospels give us glimpses into what Jews and Christians understood during his earthly ministry. And the rest of the New Testament teaches us what the apostles ultimately came to understand and to teach.

In line with this history, our discussion of the New Testament will divide into two parts. First, we'll explore what Jesus directly taught about the Holy Spirit. And second, we'll see what the apostles later taught during their ministries. Let's begin with Jesus.

## **JESUS**

During his earthly ministry, Jesus confirmed the Old Testament teachings that the Holy Spirit is God himself, and that the Holy Spirit is a person. But he also revealed something new — namely, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons within God. This is one of the reasons the Jews became so upset with Jesus. They were utterly offended by his claim to be God. As John commented in John 5:18:

**For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18).**

The Jews wrongly assumed that Jesus couldn't be God because the Father in heaven was already God. They rightly understood that there is only one true God. But they wrongly inferred from this that God existed as only one person. This is probably why the Jews didn't become angry when Jesus identified the Holy Spirit as a person. They must have assumed, however wrongly, that Jesus was simply referring to God as the Holy Spirit. We see this in Matthew 12 and Mark 3, where Jesus explained his power of exorcism. In Matthew 12:24, the Pharisees accused him of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the prince of demons." And Jesus responded in verse 28 that he cast out demons "by the Spirit of God." In the context of Jesus' broader teachings, it's clear that he was referring to the Spirit as a distinct person from the Father. But there's no indication that the Pharisees grasped the significance of his words.

In his private discussions with his followers, Jesus was even more direct. His fullest teachings on the Holy Spirit's distinct personhood can be found in John 14–16. These chapters are part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" — his final words to the eleven faithful apostles that were intended to prepare them for his death. In John 14:16-17, Jesus said:

**I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you (John 14:16-17).**



The unbelieving Jews — along with the rest of the world — were unaware that the Holy Spirit was a distinct person from the Father. But the apostles had already learned about the Holy Spirit’s distinct personhood from Jesus. And Jesus continued to call attention to the Spirit’s distinct personhood throughout his Farewell Discourse. In John 14:26, he mentioned:

**The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name (John 14:26)**

In John 15:26, he spoke of:

**The Counselor ... whom I will send to you from the Father ... who goes out from the Father (John 15:26)**

In John 16:7, he added:

**Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).**

And in John 16:13, Jesus said:

**The Spirit ... will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come (John 16:13).**

Throughout his Farewell Discourse, Jesus repeatedly taught that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person from both the Father and from himself. The Holy Spirit would be sent by the Father and by his Son Jesus. The Spirit would speak what the Father told him to speak, and he would replace the Son as God’s active presence among his people. So, the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. He’s his own, distinct person.

**Now, I think many of us when we hear the word “Holy Spirit” we might be tempted to think of the wind, and sometimes we might be tempted to think it’s an “it,” but when you look at John 14–16, you find something unique about the person of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus Christ referred to him as a “he,” meaning it’s not an “it” but rather is personal... But not only is he just a person, his origin — the fact that he comes *from* heaven — clearly is a sign that he is actually also divine in nature. And there’s also another word that Jesus uses, which is “*another*” Counselor, someone who is distinct from him but yet will continue what he has done. And he is also referred to as the Spirit of truth — some of the characteristics that only Jesus Christ has. He just told us he’s the way, the truth and the life... So, the Holy Spirit is distinct in person, but he has the same substance as the Lord Jesus Christ in terms of, he’s the Spirit of truth as well, just like the Lord Jesus Christ *is* the truth.**

— Rev. Vuyani Sindo



In Matthew 28:19, in the Great Commission, Jesus also called attention to the distinct personhood of the Spirit when he said:

**Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).**

In both English and Greek, the word translated “name” here is singular, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all listed as equals.

This section of the Great Commission is commonly called a “Trinitarian formula” because it lists the names of all three persons of the Trinity in a way that points to their joint membership in the Godhead. When Jesus said that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all shared a single name, he indicated that they all shared God’s own authority — meaning they must all be God. He also indicated that all three persons of God would rule over the disciplined nations.

Having looked at Jesus’ teachings in the New Testament, let’s look at what the apostles said about the Holy Spirit.

## **APOSTLES**

First, we should emphasize that the apostles believed everything that the Old Testament and Jesus taught about the Holy Spirit. They understood him to be fully divine, and to be a distinct person from the Father and from the Son. As just one example, listen to Peter’s words in Acts 5:3-4. After Ananias and his wife Sapphira lied about a monetary gift to the early church, Peter said to them:

**Ananias, how is that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? ... You have not lied to men but to God (Acts 5:3-4).**

Peter said that lying to the Holy Spirit was lying to God, proving that the Holy Spirit is God himself. Moreover, the very fact that Ananias was able to lie to the Holy Spirit proves that the Holy Spirit is a person. And in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul affirmed the Holy Spirit’s divinity and distinct personhood when he ended his letter this way:

**May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).**

Paul expressed a Trinitarian understanding of God by mentioning all three persons on an equal footing, both in terms of the honor and the attributes he ascribed to them. Similarly, in 1 Peter 1:1-2, Peter described believers as:

**God's elect ... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood (1 Peter 1:1-2).**

These Trinitarian formulas resemble the one that Jesus used in the Great Commission. They testify to the fact that the Father, the Spirit, and the Son Jesus Christ are all equally God, sharing the same power and glory, and that they're all distinct persons.

And the apostles affirmed the Spirit's full divinity and personhood in many other ways, too. They ascribed personal qualities to him, like thought and emotions. For instance, in Acts 15:28, the Holy Spirit determined how the Old Testament law applied to Gentiles. Romans 5:5 speaks of his love. And Ephesians 4:30 mentions his grief. The apostles also spoke of him performing intentional actions, like interceding for the church in Romans 8:26, 27, and distributing gifts according to his own will in 1 Corinthians 12:11. And they ascribed incommunicable divine attributes to him — attributes that only God can possess. For instance, Paul described his omniscience in Ephesians 1:17, and 1 Corinthians 2:10, 11, where he said that the Spirit knows everything that God knows. And Hebrews 9:14 calls the Holy Spirit the “eternal Spirit,” indicating that he existed even before creation, and that his continued existence is everlasting and unbreakable.

But one of the most frequent ways the apostles testified to the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity was by attributing the inspiration and authorship of the Old Testament Scriptures to him. In Acts 1:16, Peter referred to:

**The Scripture ... which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David (Acts 1:16)**

In Acts 28:25, Paul said:

**The Holy Spirit spoke the truth ... through Isaiah the prophet (Acts 28:25).**

And in 2 Peter 1:20-21, Peter provided Scripture's fullest summary of the Spirit's work in authoring Scripture, saying:

**No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).**

**The personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit through the inspiration of Scripture is, I think, fascinating. Here we're talking about God's word, and yet it is often through the Spirit that God's word is given to us; repeatedly, we hear “the word of the Lord” or “the Spirit said” or “David said” or “Moses said,” and these are kind of aligned all together... This is one of the primary functions of the Spirit. The**

**word of God is the word of the Spirit, and the word of the Spirit is the word of God.**

— Dr. J. Scott Horrell

Beyond this, the apostles' understanding of the full divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit was affirmed when the Spirit was finally poured out on the church, just as Jesus had promised. Acts 2 records that on the first Pentecost after Jesus ascended into heaven, the entire church received the gift of the Holy Spirit in a spectacular way. What appeared to be tongues of fire descended on them, and they spoke the gospel in every language. And from this point forward, the apostles were gifted in ways that demonstrated God's power over all creation. They were enabled to heal the sick, raise the dead, and perform many other miracles that testified to the truth of the Holy Spirit's divine power and favor.

It's clear that the apostles saw the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the Trinity. They recognized that this truth was hinted at in the Old Testament. And they understood that Jesus had revealed it, too. But they also had experienced the reality of the Spirit's powerful presence, as he moved history forward into a new stage of God's saving work. The Holy Spirit was poured out on them in power, so that they worked miracles, received revelations from God, and were even inspired to write the Scriptures of the New Testament.

So far in our lesson on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, we've explored the historical development of pneumatology by focusing on the Old Testament and on the New Testament. Now we're ready to address our last major topic: the development of formalized pneumatology in church history.

## CHURCH HISTORY

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For the first few centuries, the early church worked to explain and summarize Scripture's teaching on the Holy Spirit. Scripture has always taught that there is only one God, and that the Father, Son and Spirit all are that one God. But this is obviously a complex and mysterious idea. So, Christians have often disagreed over how to explain and define it.

We'll look at four steps in the development of pneumatology in early church history. First, we'll consider the affirmation of the Holy Spirit in the Apostles' Creed. Second, we'll explore the formalized Trinitarian doctrine. Third, we'll see how this doctrine was reflected in the Nicene Creed. And fourth, we'll mention the distinction between the ontology and economy of the Trinity. Let's begin with the Apostles' Creed.

## APOSTLES' CREED

The Apostles' Creed grew out of local baptismal creeds that date as far back as A.D. 200. These were creeds that new believers were expected to affirm when they were baptized. Some ancient accounts indicate that when a person was baptized, he or she was expected to provide three affirmations: one relating to the Father, one to the Son, and one to the Holy Spirit. And the Apostles' Creed is structured around these affirmations. As such, it liturgically places the Holy Spirit on the same level as the Father and the Son. And it does this because it reflects the early church's belief that the Holy Spirit is a third distinct person within the uncreated Godhead, on an equal level with the Father and the Son.

Moreover, within the structure of the Apostles' Creed, the various works of each person of the Trinity are listed under his name. So, the Father is said to be the Maker of heaven and earth. Regarding the Son, the Creed lists his conception, birth, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and future return. And the Holy Spirit is mentioned as the one responsible for the church and for the application of salvation to believers.

**The Apostles' Creed points to the Holy Spirit as a full member of the Trinity. The shape of the Apostles' Creed is undeniably Trinitarian: “[We] believe in God the Father ... creator of heaven and earth. [We] believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit ... [and we] believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints ...” and so on. And so, the Trinitarian shape there is very clear, and it says a little bit about the primary role which each of three of the persons play, so the Father: creator of heaven and earth; the Son who was born of the virgin Mary and grew and died as the sacrifice of sin on the cross; and the Holy Spirit whose role is actually manifest primarily now in the church, the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins and the work in the body of Christ today.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Despite the fact that the Apostles' Creed pointed to both the Spirit's full divinity or deity, and his full personhood, it still didn't provide a clear definition of the doctrine of the Trinity. It contained all the right elements. But it didn't produce the vocabulary that the church eventually came to embrace. As a result, people could say they affirmed the language of the Creed even if they didn't agree that the Spirit was a third distinct person on an equal level with the Father and Son.

Having mentioned how the Apostles' Creed reflected the development of pneumatology in church history, let's consider the initial stages of formalized Trinitarian doctrine.

## TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE

God's existence as the Trinity is highly mysterious. It's so far beyond our experience that we have a hard time thinking about it, let alone talking about it. So, in order for the early church to discuss their beliefs about God, it was useful for them to find consistent ways to talk about him. And much of the early church's work in this area benefited from the work of the early theologian Tertullian.

Tertullian was a prolific Christian writer who lived from around A.D. 155–230. He used and popularized the Latin term *trinitas* as a way to refer to the Bible's teachings that God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Trinitas* can be translated "three" or "triad." But when it refers to the Godhead, we translate it "Trinity."

Tertullian also used the Latin word *persona* — which we translate "person" — to refer to the distinct persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And he used the Latin *substantia* — meaning "substance" or "essence" — to refer to God's being, which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share in common. This is why the traditional definition of Trinity says:

**God has three persons, but only one essence.**

Of course, the church didn't reach this understanding of the Trinity without difficulty. And in the conversations that led up to this definition, the Holy Spirit was often at the center of debate. There were some, like the fourth-century theologian Eustathius of Sebaste, who wrongly believed that the Holy Spirit was neither the self-existent God nor a created being. And even the creeds of the church didn't provide many details that all Christians were expected to affirm. For example, the Apostles' Creed merely said, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." And the original Nicene Creed, written in A.D. 325 by the First Council of Nicea, simply said, "We believe ... in the Holy Spirit."

As a result of this lack of clarity, there were many arguments over the details of Trinitarian doctrine. In fact, it got so bad that during the reign of the Roman emperor Constantius II, and for a short while after his death, many in the church actually rejected Trinitarianism, at least in the form we know it today. The Second Council of Sirmium in A.D. 351 and the Third Council of Sirmium in A.D. 357 affirmed what's been called the "Arian heresy." This teaching denied the Son's full membership in the Godhead and denied that the Son was of the same essence or substance as the Father. At this point in history, many parts of the church broadly rejected the same Trinitarian doctrine they had previously accepted as biblical.

Now that we've considered pneumatology in church history from the Apostles' Creed to the initial formalization of Trinitarian doctrine, let's turn our attention to the Nicene Creed.

## NICENE CREED

As we've mentioned, the original Nicene Creed, written in A.D. 325, said very little about the Holy Spirit. But in light of the controversies that arose, another council

was held to debate and resolve the questions about the Trinity. In A.D. 381, the First Council of Constantinople met. They rejected the Arian heresies, and defended the Nicene understanding of the Trinity. They also revised and expanded the Nicene Creed so that it could no longer be affirmed by Arians and others that denied God's eternal existence as three distinct, uncreated persons in one essence. With regard to the Holy Spirit, the Nicene Creed was expanded to say:

**We believe ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.**

This version of the Creed is sometimes called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, in order to distinguish it from the original Nicene Creed.

It's likely that this expanded emphasis on the Holy Spirit was motivated, at least in part, by the work of Basil of Caesarea, who lived from around A.D. 330–379. Basil's book titled *De Spiritu Sancto*, or *On the Holy Spirit*, was greatly influential in refuting the beliefs of people like Eustathius, who refused to acknowledge the full deity of the Holy Spirit. Basil also made the point that since the Holy Spirit was God, he deserved to be worshiped. The expanded references to the Spirit in the Nicene Creed themselves constituted a form of worship, since the Creed became part of the church's liturgy. But they also helped lead the church more broadly to focus on the worship of the Spirit in the rest of their liturgy and prayers.

**There was an interesting dispute over worship of the Holy Spirit in the fourth century. In his book, *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil of Caesarea tells us that there were two liturgies that were used in his church. The first liturgy was praise to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. A second liturgy was praise to the Father, with the Son, together with the Spirit. Some who were Arian in orientation objected to this liturgy because they really didn't believe the Holy Spirit was divine. But if, as Scripture teaches, we have good reason to believe that the Holy Spirit is divine, then it's appropriate that we express to him in worship, doxology, and praise his true nature.**

— Dr. Keith Johnson

So far, we've considered the development of pneumatology in early church history in terms of the Apostles' Creed, formalized Trinitarian doctrine, and the Nicene Creed. Now let's address the distinction between the ontology and economy of the Trinity.

## ONTOLOGY AND ECONOMY

As church history progressed, theologians eventually came to understand the Trinity from two different perspectives. They began to speak of both the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity.

The word “ontological” refers to being and existence. So, the theological term “ontological Trinity” has to do with the existence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the Trinity. From this perspective, the Holy Spirit is equal in power and glory to the Father and the Son. And he shares with them all of God’s divine attributes. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism question and answer 4 puts it, all three persons are “infinite, eternal and unchangeable in [their] being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

You’ll recall that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan version of the Nicene Creed says:

**We believe ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.**

The western church later expanded the Latin version of this Creed to add the word *filioque*, meaning “and the Son,” to the end of this phrase. So, most churches in the West now use a version that says the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.”

Some theologians have understood the Holy Spirit’s procession to be ontological. That is, they believe the Spirit’s personhood is eternally “breathed out” from the Father, or from the Father and the Son. But others have understood the Spirit’s procession as a function of the economic Trinity.

The theological term “economic Trinity” refers to how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact with each other, especially as it pertains to creation. From this perspective, each one has different roles and different responsibilities, and even different authority.

Many parts of Scripture suggest that the Holy Spirit willingly serves the Father and Son. For instance, he was sent or “given” by the Father and the Son. Scripture teaches this in passages like Luke 11:13, John 14:26 and 15:26, and Acts 2:33. And when he comes, the Spirit obeys the Father and the Son by doing the work they’ve sent him to do. We learn of this in places like John 16:13, Romans 8:11, and 1 Peter 1:2.

Because of passages like these, many theologians say that, within the economic Trinity, the Father and Son have greater authority than the Holy Spirit. Even so, it’s important to emphasize that the Spirit is still fully God, and that this authority structure exists because they all want and agree to it. So, the Holy Spirit isn’t in any way inferior to the Father and the Son.

**It’s important to recognize the difference between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. This is a very useful distinction that the theologians have made, and it helps us avoid a lot of confusion when we study the doctrine of the Trinity. When we speak of the ontological Trinity, we’re referring to its nature. We refer to the fact that the three persons of the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit —**

are equal in substance, power, and glory. Of course, none of them are superior in this regard. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. We could say it like this: the Father is one hundred percent God; the Son is one hundred percent God; the Holy Spirit is one hundred percent God. But when it comes to their roles, the division of roles, then we are talking about the economic Trinity. We mean with this that the Bible teaches us that despite the three being equal, as we've said, in substance, power and glory, when it comes to their various jobs or roles, we see in Scripture that the Father is the one who has the role ... in salvation, as the one who chooses to save. The Son is the one who performs the work of redemption by dying for us, and the Holy Spirit is he who applies the work of redemption. When we talk about the economic Trinity, we see there is also the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Holy Spirit to the Son and to the Father. That does not mean that the Son is less than the Father in the ontological sense, or the Holy Spirit is lower in that sense, but by mutual agreement, we could say that they willingly submit to the authority of the Father.

— Dr. David Correa, translation

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit took centuries to formalize. But this doesn't mean that the church didn't always believe the central elements of pneumatology. After all, the church in all ages has embraced the Scriptures. And the Scriptures clearly teach that the Holy Spirit is a fully divine person — an equal member of the Godhead. Rather, the formalization of pneumatology happened in stages, and generally in response to heresy. Theologians realized that they needed to provide more details, and to communicate more clearly, in order to prevent others from falling into error. And these formulations have stood the test of time. Throughout the centuries, nearly all branches of the church have affirmed the same beliefs about the Holy Spirit's role in the Trinity.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, we've explored how the Old Testament speaks of God's Spirit in terms of his divinity and personhood. We've seen how this understanding was expanded in the New Testament under Jesus and his apostles. And we've surveyed pneumatology in church history by considering the Apostles' Creed, the formalization of Trinitarian doctrine, the Nicene Creed, and the distinction between Trinitarian ontology and economy.

Understanding who the Holy Spirit is in the Trinity is an important part of understanding his work in our lives. As we'll see in future lessons, the Holy Spirit is even more personally involved with us than the Father and the Son are. He indwells us. We rely on him for spiritual strength, for experiencing God's forgiveness when we sin, for



growth in holiness, for perseverance in faith, for the gifts that allow us to minister to others, and for a host of other blessings. And knowing that the One who lives in us is the personal, fully divine Spirit of our Father, and of our Lord and Savior, helps us appreciate his ministry and cooperate with the work he's doing in our lives.

**Dr. Ramesh Richard (Host)** is Founder and President of RReach, a global proclamation ministry that seeks to evangelize leaders and strengthen pastors around the world. He is also Professor of Global Theological Engagement and Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Richard received his Th.D. in Systematic Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary and his Ph.D. from the University of Delhi. In 2008, Dr. Richard was the keynote speaker for the 23rd Annual International Prayer Breakfast at the United Nations. He is also the founder of Trainers of Pastors International Coalition (TOPIC) and the general convener of the 2016 Global Proclamation Congress for Pastoral Trainers.

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**Dr. Uche Anizor** is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Talbot School of Theology.

**Dr. David Correa** is Pastor of Jesus Presbyterian Church and Director of the Youth Ministry Institute at San Pablo Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Merida, Mexico.

**Dr. J. Scott Horrell** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Keith Johnson** serves as the Director of Theological Education for the U.S campus ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ and is a guest professor of Systematic Theology for Reformed Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Glenn R. Kreider** is Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Steve McKinion** is Associate Professor of Theology and Patristic Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail** is President of Great Commission College in Egypt.

**Rev. Vuyani Sindo** is a lecturer at George Whitefield College in South Africa.

**Dr. Simon Vibert** is the former Vicar of St. Luke's Church, Wimbledon Park, UK, and is presently the Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Director of the School of Preaching.