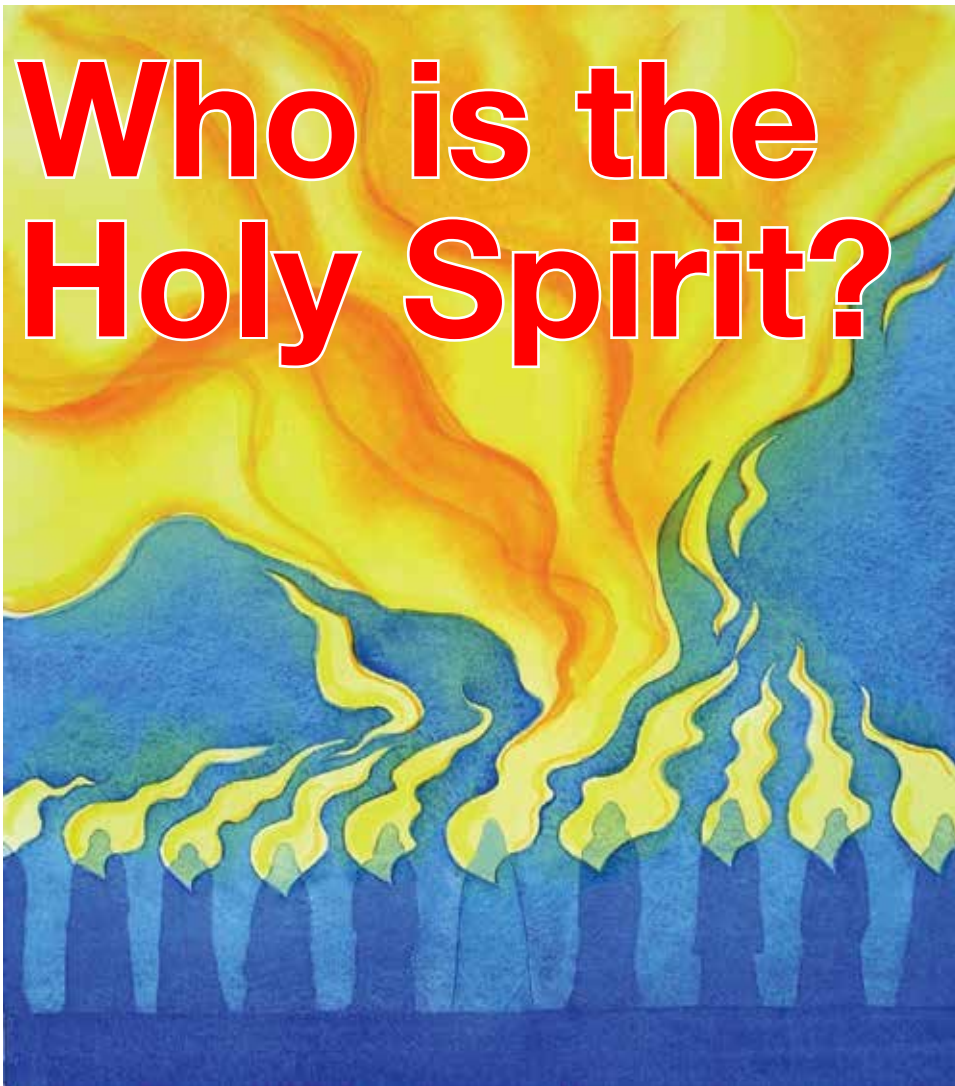


Who is the Holy Spirit?



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Whenver and wherever the Church has faltered in her understanding of and relating to the Spirit, it is because one of two errors have been held. The first is when the Spirit is granted personality but denied divinity; regarded as a less than divine agent, a created, perhaps even supreme among created beings, but nevertheless a subordinate to God, marching to the beat of his superiors. The second error, is when the Spirit is granted divinity but denied personality; regarded as divine force, action, energy, but not as a distinct person within the Godhead. In this study we want to consider the Holy Spirit – in his divinity and personality.

1. The Holy Spirit's Divinity

One can marshal a host of Biblical texts which equate divinity with the Spirit, both directly – in using the divine names of Lord, God interchangeably and synonymously with Spirit (19 such in the New Testament alone); and indirect indicators to the Spirit's divinity evident in the Spirit's activities and abilities

which are exclusively divine domains. Former Wycliffe Hall Oxford Principal, W H Griffiths-Thomas wrote, 'The allusions to the Holy Spirit are such as cannot possibly be predicated of anyone else than God himself.'

a) The Holy Spirit's Divine Ascriptions

In the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Spirit is synonymous with the presenting, speaking, acting God – no categorical distinction is made when it speaks of God and the Spirit. To speak of one is to comprehend the other. A couple of examples will suffice to establish the point:

In Genesis 1:1-3 – God introduces himself as – God (*Elohim*) who creates the world in the beginning. The Spirit of God (*Ruach Elohim*) which hovers over the waters . . . God (*Elohim*) who speaks and creates.

Luke 1: 35 – The angel says, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God.'

Acts 5: 3f – Ananias is accused by Peter of 'lying in your heart to the Holy Spirit'. Peter then says, 'You have not lied to men but to God.'

In 2 Corinthians 3: 3 Paul speaks of the

'The Spirit is not a vague, distant, abstract, impersonal incommunicable force field.'



Simon Ponsonby

writes about the Divinity and Person of the Holy Spirit

'Spirit of the Living God' who has written on human hearts (echoes of Ezekiel 36: 24-27). Most telling is 3:17, 'The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.' Then, echoing Moses' gazing on God (Exodus 33/34) and reflecting of glory, Paul states, 'and we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed . . . For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.'

b) The Holy Spirit's Divine Attributes

The Spirit is Eternal. Hebrews 9:14 'Christ offered himself, through the eternal Spirit, without blemish to God . . . The Greek term *aioniou* means 'without beginning or end' and as such may only be used of the eternal God.

The Spirit is Everywhere (Omnipresent) Psalm 139 is addressed verse 1 to The Lord. But in verse 7 the Psalmist states 'Where can I go from your Spirit, or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.' This key text states that the Spirit is the presence of God who (you) is everywhere.

The Spirit knows Everything God knows (Omniscient?). 1 Corinthians 2: 6-12 states that the Spirit reveals to us the wisdom of God.

Paul's argument appeals to an anthropological metaphor in verse 11 that only a person's own spirit knows the person's own thoughts. Similarly, only God's Spirit knows God's thoughts. And the Spirit of God, who alone knows God, reveals the thoughts of God.

The Spirit can be sinned and blasphemed against (Matthew 12: 31) Ultimately, sin is against God, violating his will and way. Blasphemy is a thought, word or deed which manifests contempt for God. To blaspheme the Spirit is to reject God's saving plan revealed in Christ, manifested by the Spirit's power in which he ministered.

c) The Holy Spirit's Divine Actions

The Spirit is God's Presence amongst us. In Leviticus 26: 11-12, the Lord promises Israel to be their God who will walk with them and make his dwelling/tabernacle among them. In part this was fulfilled by the Tabernacle, later Solomon's temple, where God's manifest localised presence (*shekina*) dwelt. Paul takes this very text in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and says it is fulfilled in the Church who are the temple of the living God – elsewhere in Corinthians he states they are the Temple of God by virtue of God's indwelling Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The Spirit is Life giver. In Genesis 2, we see God creating humankind from dust and then bringing that to life with his own breath (*ruach*). Psalm 104: 27-30 states that when God withdraws his breath/spirit (*ruach*) there is death, yet when he sends forth his Spirit there is creation. The Old Testament understanding is of all life sustained by the providential sending of the breath/Spirit of God. In the New Testament, Paul says that the Spirit is Life (Romans 8: 2) gives Life (2 Corinthians 3: 6) raises us to new life (Romans 8: 11).

d) The Holy Spirit's Divine Associations

In the Trinitarian Baptism (Matthew 28:19), discipleship, the identification with Christ's Lordship by an individual, is signified by being baptised in the tri-personal name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 'Baptism into the name of' reflects a Hebraic/ Aramaic concept *lesem*, which means to be 'fundamentally determined by'. The existence of the Christian disciple is to be fundamentally determined by a tri-personally named, tri-personal God. Subsequent interpreters see in triadic name, an implicit equality among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Exegeting this text, the great reformer John Calvin says, 'For this means precisely to be baptised into the name of the one God who has shown himself with complete clarity in the Father, Son and the Spirit. Hence it is quite clear that in God's essence reside three persons in whom one God is known.'

It follows that the tri-personal God with whom we have to do, is the God from whom we seek and receive a Trinitarian Blessing, hence 2Corinthians 13: 14 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.' Murray Harris says, 'Without embarrassment, Paul has conjoined the Lord Jesus Christ with the Holy Spirit with God in benediction.' Parity of status is implied, for it would be blasphemous for a Jew to place alongside God any other name in blessing.'

We have seen that Scripture portrays a Spirit who sports the exclusive names of God, who acts like God, who looks like God and who hangs out on equal terms with God. 'The Holy Spirit is no less and no other than God himself, distinct from Him whom Jesus calls Father, distinct also from Jesus himself, yet no less than the Father and no less than Jesus, God Himself, God altogether.'

2. The Holy Spirit's Personality

Holy Number Crunching – Confronted with the reality of the divinity of Jesus and of the Spirit along with the Father, the early Church wrestled to the limits of their mental, theological and linguistic abilities to articulate the mystery of how God could be One, as revealed in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6: 4), whilst being revealed and known identifiably and onomatically divisible as three. To escape this conundrum, some tried to make the Son and the Spirit less than God, created, all be it exalted subordinates. But as we have noted, given the revelation of divinity of the Spirit and the Son, any notion of a platonic idea of demi god hierarchy was to be rejected.

Early Church theologians in the East and West were searching high and low to comprehend and articulate the Biblical witness. By the early third century Tertullian in the West was speaking of '*tres Personae, una Substantia*'; whilst in the East, Origen was speaking of the three '*hypostases*' sharing one '*ousia*' essence'. Both wrestled with matters of source – whether and how one came first in the triad, whether there was absolute equality, eternity etc. The universal Church councils of Nicea 325 and Chalcedon 451 hammered out the theology and nuanced the language, (albeit focused more on Christology) and settled upon what became the orthodox view: One God, in three persons, one person the Father, another the Son, another the Holy Spirit, who all share the same divine essence, eternity and glory. As the Athanasian creed stated: the persons are not to be confounded nor the essence divided.

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Red Soil

by Hilary Cansdale

I lie on an upland field
Spread-eagled on the weathered turf.
The ground beneath me beats up, slow;
breathes out a breath of warm, moist air.
My fingers on the short-cropped grass
pick up the pulse of sun and moon.

Face-down I lay my cheek against the earth,
And smell your smell of greenness, herbs
and wind;
of rich red soil, of animals and rain.
I breathe it in, and I am whole again.

One of the 'Four Quantock Poets from Aisholt'
Hilary Cansdale wrote poetry until her death in
summer 2014. Her body is buried in the red
soil of Aisholt Churchyard.

A Birthday

by Christina Rossetti

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

Written in 1857 'A Birthday' is an intriguing poem. It is not clear exactly what is being celebrated. But at one level the birthday is about rebirth into union with the Divine.

Who is the Holy Spirit?



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There is some debate about what the term Personae or Hypostases actually meant for the ancients, especially in being used of the divine. The Latin term referred to a mask worn by a character in a play or an identity enacted; whilst the Greek term refers individual, substantial, actual being. They came to convey a sense that approximates to our notion of the identifiable, communicable, distinguishable self. For them, it was a term that they scratched around to find, not Biblical in origin, but which conveyed the idea of 'inner distinction' within the unity of the Godhead, and capacity for external relation with human persons.

There is much debate about what 'person' means today and a biologist, ethicist, philosopher, psychologist, theologian would all come up with different concepts. Conscious of semantic limitations, I am working from a definition of the Person as an individual possessing such traits as 'agency, reason, language, intentionality, relating to others. self-consciousness.'

The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber promoted the classic I-Thou definition of personhood (earlier explored by Kierkegaard and later by Barth, Brunner and Tillich to name but a few). Persons are beings in relationship – communion, interaction. Unlike an I-It which would be a person using something in utilitarian manner, or relating in monologue, I-Thou sees the value in the other. There is mutual, reciprocal, respectful interchange. Dialogue, self giving, receiving, risk, vulnerability, communion, bonding. This I-Thou framework has been fruitfully and widely explored in modern theology and philosophy helping to explore human identity, the Immanent Trinity (God in himself) and the Economic Trinity (God in his activity to the world).

Who's who

The descriptions of the Spirit are not as gender specific as that for God the Father

He is entirely God, though not God in entirety, outgoing, outreaching, outstretching to the world He has created in love and for love.

and Son. In the Hebrew Old Testament, Spirit – *Ruach* is usually grammatically feminine and in the Greek New Testament, Spirit – *pneuma* is grammatically neuter. In the later Latin translation, Spirit took the masculine form *Spiritus*. The pronoun 'it' is commonly adopted though unhelpfully so as an 'it' suggests object rather than personal. However, in John's Gospel, the proper name Paraclete is masculine (John 14: 26; 15: 26; 16: 8, 13 –14) and John employs the 'masculine adjectival demonstrative' '*ekeinos* – that one'. We may not want to say the Spirit is male, but we do want to say the Spirit is not impersonal.

Grammar employed doesn't prove personhood, but points toward it. This is underlined when Jesus speaks of sending 'another advocate' (John 14: 16). someone like himself – and not an abstract impersonal force. This thought is supported when Jesus says the Spirit, not speaking on his own, (John 16: 13) will teach truths he's heard from Christ, speaking with authority from the Father. These must imply a person in partnership with the purposes of God in Christ.

Personal functions performed by the Spirit

We have already noted that he Comforts, Hears, Speaks, Teaches. Other actions and possessions logically understood as 'personal' qualities include:

Determining and directing the Church's course of direction (Acts 11:12, 15: 28, 16: 6, 21: 4). The Early Church were led by someone, not something!

Helping and Praying for the Church in her weakness (Romans 8: 26,27)

Mind - *phronema* - (Romans 8: 27) the capacity for intelligent thought and used exclusively as a predicate of humans and the gods/God

Will – *boulomai* – (1 Corinthians 12: 11) – a term used of, 'a person's desire, decision of the will after deliberation by humans)

Feeling – the ability to be grieved or insulted (Ephesians 4: 30, Hebrews 10: 29)

These faculties can hardly belong to an inanimate, insentient, impersonal force or energy. They are traits of a living, dynamic, sentient, rational, relational person. Consequently, Puritan genius John Owen could state, 'For he to whom all personal properties, attributes, adjuncts and operations are ascribed and to whom nothing

is ascribed but what properly belongs to a person, he is a person and so are we taught to believe him to be.'

The Holy Spirit is God, present in person. Not an independent autonomous self, but a person in relations within the Godhead, who reaches out personally to relate to mankind. Catholic theologian Yves Congar called him, 'A person without a face', but a person nonetheless. In a scene from an old episode of Coronation Street, Maureen said that she believed the Holy Ghost to be 'a sort of essential essence' – perhaps thinking of some aromatherapy oil penetrating essence or oriental Chi or Star War's 'The Force. Maud Grimes piped up from the wheel chair: 'The best description I heard of was that it was a sort of oblong blur and that'll do me.'

He is God the Lord

NO – it won't do me, nor may it do for you, for that is not who God the Spirit is. The Spirit is not a vague, distant, abstract, impersonal incommunicable force field. He is God the Lord with us in person – a being in personal relation with us. The Holy Spirit is not an 'It', not a 'what', but a 'Thou', a 'he', and a 'who'. No oblong blur, no Star-wars esque force-be-with-you; no impersonal energy emanating from divinity. He is entirely God, though not God in entirety, outgoing, outreaching, outstretching to the world he has created in love and for love. 🕊

This material is abridged from Simon Ponsoby's book: *God Inside Out*, chapter 1, Kingsway, 2007.

About the painting 'The descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles and Mary at Pentecost' by Elizabeth Wang, a Roman Catholic artist whose work has been exhibited widely including at Westminster Cathedral. See also www.radiantlight.org.

about the writer

The Revd Simon Ponsoby is Pastor of Theology at St Aldates church, Oxford, a position which combines running a School of Theology, writing and a travelling, teaching ministry focussed on renewal and the spiritual life. Simon has published a book on the Spirit filled life entitled *More* and *God Inside Out*, a theology of the Spirit for the 21st century. His latest book due out in spring 2015 is an expository commentary on Romans called *God is For Us*. Simon is married to Tiffany, an artist and they have two sons, Joel and Nat. Simon enjoys hot curry, strong cheese, military history and collecting vintage fountain pens.