

Who Is The Holy Spirit?

For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.
-Matthew 10:20

The third person in the Holy Trinity is perhaps the hardest one to understand. She (more on my choice of pronoun later) appears to be short-changed in the Bible. The Old Testament seems to focus on describing the Father, and the New Testament clearly focuses on the Son. It's almost like an afterthought that the Holy Spirit came up at all. It's as if the Holy Spirit is the consolation prize for those who were born too late and in the wrong part of the world. Sure, we worship Her as part of the trinity as Jesus commands us to. We believe wondrous spiritual gifts come from Her. We say we want to be filled by Her. But does all this come with understanding, or merely obedience? I think either answer is good, but I also think the two are in a virtuous cycle; obedience can lead to understanding, and understanding can move one to obedience.

But for understanding to take place, I think the first step is to recognize the defeatist attitude implied with all I said above. We should search scripture expecting to find Her. But we have to know what we are looking for. To help us, I want to point out that the Greek word for "spirit" in both the Septuagint and the New Testament also has the meaning of "breath," "wind," and "breeze." This is very interesting, because now we see the Holy Spirit at least twice in the first two chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1:2, "A mighty wind swept over the waters [of the abyss]." The other is Genesis 2:7, "The Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living creature."

Now, in almost every ancient culture, including the Middle East where the Hebrews came from, the primordial chaos from which Creation came was represented by water. The Holy Spirit was responsible for bringing order out of chaos before any of Creation took place. It is the Holy Spirit that created the order upon which our reality exists. And not only is the Holy Spirit responsible for the order of reality, but She is also the bringer of life as She brought life to man.

I would also like to point out that this is not just an "ordinary" life like other animals and plants. The life She brings has a certain divinity to it. Going back to Genesis 1:26, we see that man was to be made "in our image, after our likeness." Although the full impact of this ability was hidden for over a millennia, it was revealed in its fullness in the conception of Jesus -- "The Holy Spirit will come upon you ... therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." Finally, we see many Biblical examples of life coming from the Holy Spirit by virtue of baptism. In John 3:5-8, Jesus tells Nicodemus that one cannot enter Heaven unless born again, and uses the image of the wind as He does so. The epistles are full of references of letting oneself be filled with the Spirit.

Another thing we can learn about the Holy Spirit is that She actually provides the greatest, most numerous and most consistent evidence of a single God with multiple persons. To accept God the Father needs no argument, as it is rather intuitive that a Creator God can be seen as a Father. It's basically the default position that both Unitarians and Trinitarians can accept. While I do believe Jesus is the second person of the Holy Trinity and that there is ample Biblical evidence to support it, the fact is that this evidence is also spread out and requires work to put it all together. But we find many examples of the Holy Spirit acting independently of God yet still divine. These examples are especially frequent in the Psalms.

Take for example Psalm 104:30, where the psalmist implores, "When you send forth your breath, they are created and you renew the face of the Earth." The way this verse is worded really doesn't support the idea of God simply blowing on the Earth like one might blow on a candle. The words "send forth" suggest something more like a journey. The psalmist clearly imagines that the Spirit of God was something that could be issued *from* God, yet at the same time *retains* its divinity -- like a mother might leave her family to get groceries, yet she still remains part of the family. We also see that God was the whispering sound when He visited Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13), and was the storm when He visited Job (Job 38:1).

Moving to the New Testament, we see lots of explicit testimony to the Holy Spirit. All four gospel accounts talk of a dove at the baptism of Jesus, and Saint John the Baptist explicitly calls Her "the spirit." (John 1:32) Jesus claims the Spirit has testified on His behalf (John 15:26). We see Jesus promising He will send one to help them (John 16:7). Jesus breathes on His disciples after the resurrection (John 20:22), which indicates a unity between the Son and the Spirit. And we have the most famous example of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which arrived with "a noise like a strong driving wind," and appeared to them as "tongues as of fire" (Acts 2:2-3).

Also note how personified all these examples are. She calms. She descends. She comes. She goes forth. She whispers. She bellows. She fills. She advocates. She testifies. The Holy Spirit is not just a mystical force, or the manifestation of God's will. She is one who does the Father's will, yet acts independently of the Father.

So even in this cursory review, I believe we have learned a lot about the Holy Spirit. We see that She is God yet distinct from the Father and the Son. She is responsible for order and peace. She first brings life to mankind, and then unites man with God. She is a mentor, guide and advocate. All these point to Her having personhood. But there are two more concepts I would like to address to help flesh Her out. For the first one, I would like to go back to how the Holy Spirit brings order out of chaos, how She brings life to mankind and how She teaches and guides God's people. All of these attributes point to the traditional role of a woman in Jewish culture. The Holy Spirit is the model for womanhood. We also see this role paralleled in the Holy Family. Jesus is both the son of the triune God and in the Holy Family. Jesus called both God and Joseph "father." This suggests the role of Mary should be paralleled in Heaven as well. And this parallel role is found in the Holy Spirit.

And for my other concept, I would like to focus on the unifying role of the Holy Spirit as well as Her ability to be sent from the Father and the Son. We are told that "God is Love." twice (1 John 4:7, 16), and we know something of the nature of love that can help us. Love is a unifying force, therefore it must have a lover (as in the one who loves), the beloved, and unity itself. As God the Father is first of all (as often testified to by Jesus), the Father is clearly the lover. We also have a strong case that the Son is the beloved -- "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5) This makes the Holy Spirit the unifying force of the love. And this is not just idle speculation, as so much scripture aligns perfectly with this arrangement. The Holy Spirit is what was asked for by prophets and sent out by Jesus so we can join God's love. To reject this offer is unforgivable because there is no union possible with God without Her. Therefore, we need to desire to be flowing with the Holy Spirit so such a union can take place. And as an aside, I would argue that the traditional role of the wife was likewise to serve as the unifying force between her husband and their children. Having spent time in Afghanistan, I can testify how often the young adults claimed their love for their mothers while at the same time serving their father's will.

In conclusion, the Holy Spirit is the ideal of womanhood. She brings order out of chaos. She

makes children for the father. She teaches and disciplines the children, and she forms the bond between the father and the children. She is what holds the family together.

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