

# The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit

Note: Our study will treat both the Spirit's *person* and *work*, but we'll focus slightly more on his *person* for three reasons.

-  Grudem's *Systematic Theology* gives more attention to the Spirit's work than his person. We'll fill in the gaps in Grudem's treatment.
-  There is widespread confusion regarding the person of the Spirit among evangelicals. A recent survey conducted by Ligonier Ministries revealed that 6 out of 10 evangelicals agree that "the Holy Spirit is a force but is not a personal being." This cuts to the heart of Trinitarianism and thus the very nature of God. Though deeply concerning, this is hardly surprising—especially in light of the third reason for focusing on the Spirit's person.
-  Non-Trinitarian groups often focus their attacks on the personhood of the Spirit. We'll begin our study by considering seven such attacks.

## Seven Attacks on the Personhood of the Spirit (and Biblical Defenses)

 Attack: Neuter pronouns show that the Holy Spirit is not a person. For example, Romans 8:16 says, "**The Spirit *itself* beareth witness with our spirit**" (KJV).

 Defense: In Greek, pronouns conform to the gender of the nouns they modify, regardless of whether the nouns are personal. The word for "eye" (*ophthalmos*) is masculine and takes masculine pronouns, while the word for "life" (*zōē*) is feminine and takes feminine pronouns. But no one argues that the eye is a man or life is a woman.

The word "spirit" is neuter, so it regularly takes neuter pronouns (as in Romans 8:16). Notice the rest of Romans 8:16 says, "**that we are the children of God.**" The word for "children" (*teknon*) is neuter and takes neuter pronouns. But no one argues that children aren't persons.

A similar word for child (*paidion*) is also neuter and is used of Jesus eleven times in Matthew and Luke (Matt. 2:13; Luke 2:28, 40). Both Matthew and Luke thus refer to Jesus with neuter pronouns. Would anyone argue that Jesus is not a person?

 Attack: The Holy Spirit doesn't have a name.

 Defense: Since the Holy Spirit didn't become a human, he doesn't need a human name.

Besides, the New Testament uses the word "name" (*onoma*) to refer to both proper names and titles. In the sense of a title, "Holy Spirit" is a name. This is clear in Matthew 28:19: "**baptizing them in *the name* of the Father and of the Son and of *the Holy Spirit.***"

 Attack: The Holy Spirit is "missing" from places that refer to the Father and the Son.



Defense: It's true that the Holy Spirit is never mentioned in Paul's salutations. However, he is mentioned in the salutation in 1 Peter 1:1-2: "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of **the Spirit**, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood."

What's more, there are passages that mention the Father and the Spirit but not the Son. Consider Luke 11:13: "how much more will **the heavenly Father** give **the Holy Spirit** to those who ask him!"

Likewise, there are passages that mention the Son and the Spirit but not the Father. For example, Matthew 12:32 reads, "whoever speaks a word against **the Son of Man** will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against **the Holy Spirit** will not be forgiven."

Who dares to make a big deal of the Father or Son "missing" from such texts?



Attack: Luke 1:35 defines the Holy Spirit as the power of God: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."



Defense: Luke also calls the Father "the power of God" (Luke 22:69). And Paul calls Jesus "the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Does this mean that the Father and Jesus are also impersonal powers?



Attack: The Hebrew and Greek words for spirit mean blowing air.



Defense: In both the Hebrew Old Testament and the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the words for "spirit" have a broad semantic range. It's true they often refer to wind or breath (roughly 70-80% of the time). Less frequently they refer to the divine Spirit (roughly 20-30% of the time).

However, the New Testament uses the word for "spirit" (*pneuma*) in a much narrower sense. *Pneuma* is translated as "spirit" or "Spirit" by the ESV 343 times and "spirits" 32 times. About 60% of the time it's capitalized ("Spirit"). The New Testament rarely—if ever—uses the word *pneuma* with the sense of "breath" and never to mean "wind" (except in symbolic imagery in reference to the Spirit of God).

Yes, the New Testament word for "spirit" (*pneuma*) comes from the verb *pneō*, which means "to blow." But we don't define words based on their etymology. For example, the English word *nice* comes from the Latin word *nescio*, which meant "ignorant." This is hardly what we mean today when we say someone is nice! Indeed, defining words by their "root" or "basic" meaning (rather than their contextual usage) is an exegetical fallacy.

Notice that the New Testament refers to God's "Spirit" three times as often as the Old Testament (which is three times the length of the New Testament!). This suggests that although the Holy Spirit was active in the Old Testament era, his work in the New Testament era is more prominent and reveals much more about him than was known prior to the coming of Christ. This is what progressive revelation looks like.



Attack: We should distinguish between *pneuma* with the article ("the [holy] spirit") and without it ("[holy] spirt"). They mean two different things.



**Defense:** This has more to do with Greek grammatical constructions than the Spirit’s personality. In the Gospel of John, personal names are sometimes used with the article and sometimes without it. Sometimes John refers to Jesus literally as “the Jesus” (John 1:29; 3:22; 6:15) and other times as simply “Jesus” (John 1:36; 4:1). The same pattern occurs with other names like Peter, Mary, and Lazarus. There is no theological difference between “Peter,” “Mary,” and “Lazarus,” and “the Peter,” “the Mary,” and “the Lazarus.” It’s purely a matter of syntax or style.



**Attack:** The Holy Spirit is often described in impersonal language. For example, the Spirit can be given (Luke 11:13; Rom. 5:5) and received (1 Cor. 2:12; Gal. 3:2), can fill you (Luke 1:5; Eph. 5:18), can be poured out (Acts 2:17; Titus 3:5-6), and can be described as being like water (John 7:37-39) or fire (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).



**Defense:** Such language is not restricted to the Spirit. God “gave” his Son (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32) and Christ’s own people did not “receive” him (John 1:11-2). Satan “filled” Ananias’ heart (Acts 5:3), God “fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23), and Christ ascended that he might “fill all things” (Eph. 4:10). David was “poured out like water” (Ps. 22:14) and Paul was “poured out as a drink offering” (Phil. 2:17). The Lord is “the fountain of living water” (Jer. 17:13), and God is said to be both “like fire” (Deut. 9:3; Mal. 3:2) and even “fire” itself (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29).

## The Names of the Holy Spirit



The Spirit is variously called “the Spirit of the Lord” (Luke 4:18; Acts 5:9), “the Spirit of God” (Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:11), “the Spirit of your Father” (Matt. 10:20), “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7; Phil. 1:9), “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11), “the Spirit of his Son” (Gal. 4:6), and “the Holy Spirit” (about 91 times in the New Testament).

These names show that the Spirit is clearly not separable from God. It’s understandable, then, how some Bible readers think the Spirit is simply an aspect of God’s being. Yet the Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ the Son. This means the Spirit is more than an aspect of God or an extension of his being.

*Unqualified* references to the Holy Spirit (which dominate New Testament usage) and references to the Spirit acting (speaking, directing, regenerating, sanctifying, etc.) show the Spirit is not merely a power shared by the Father with the Son.



One name for the Spirit that poses some interpretive challenge is the Greek word *paraklētos* (only found in John’s writings: John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1). It has traditionally been translated “Comforter” (KJV) and “Helper” (NASB, ESV), but for about a generation now the trend has been to translate it as “Advocate” (NIV, NRSV, NET, NLT).

“Advocate” fits the legal context in the Gospel of John, including the idea that the Spirit “will bear witness” (John 15:26) and his role in convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:7-11).

Broadly speaking, an advocate is a mediator or intercessor—someone who speaks on behalf of his “client” before a judge. Some scholars have argued that the primary sense of *paraklētos* in John might be that of an agent or “broker” who functions as an intermediary between his “client” (i.e., the believer) and a “patron” (i.e., God). According to this view, the Spirit’s role is primarily to give

believers access to eternal life and other spiritual blessings from God secured by Christ.

Should we choose “Advocate” or “Mediator”? We probably don’t need to decide between these two shades of meaning. Both recognize the Holy Spirit as someone acting on our behalf in our relationship with the Father and the Son. The main takeaway is that the Spirit is a divine person who works in and among believers on behalf of the Father and the Son.

## The Holy Spirit and the Doctrine of the Trinity

A Trinitarian pattern of language appears about 85 times in the New Testament. Below are five prominent texts that present the Holy Spirit as one of three divine persons in ways that clearly laid the groundwork for the doctrine of the Trinity.

 **Matthew 28:19:** “...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Since the Father and Son are divine persons, it is reasonably clear that the Holy Spirit is also. What’s more, all three persons are jointly the object of confession in the initiatory Christian rite of baptism.

 **John 14:26** (literal translation): “But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

In this nutshell of the New Testament story, we see the coordinating work of three divine persons. The Son came from the Father, returned to heaven, and then the Holy Spirit came from the Father in the Son’s name.

 **1 Corinthians 12:4-6:** “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of activities, but the same God who works all things in all.”

Of course, the “same Lord” is Jesus (as made clear one verse earlier). Paul uses recognizable Jewish monotheistic rhetoric but in such a way as to distinguish the three divine persons.

 **2 Corinthians 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.”

This sentence closes the epistle and takes the familiar form of a benediction—a liturgical-style prayer for divine blessing on those who are hearing or reading the text. The three phrases all attribute spiritual blessings to the three persons: Grace comes from Christ, love from God, and fellowship from the Holy Spirit.

 **Galatians 4:4-6:** “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Paul’s statement here teaches the same doctrine we saw in John 14:26. God the Father sent the Son

from heaven into the world for our redemption, then sent the Spirit to accomplish the interior work of redemption within us.

## The Work of the Spirit: Revelation

💡 The Spirit enabled prophecy in the Old Testament era. This is clear in passages that state “**the Spirit of God**” or “**the Spirit of the LORD**” “**came upon**” or “**rested on**” individuals who prophesied (Num. 11:25-29; 1 Sam. 19:20; 2 Chron. 15:1). Ezekiel takes things a step further when he says, “**The Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me**” (Ezek. 2:2). In short, the Spirit speaking *is* God speaking.

💡 The Spirit also speaks in Holy Writ. Jesus and the New Testament writers attribute the words of the Old Testament to the Holy Spirit (Matt. 22:43; Acts 1:16; Heb. 3:7-11), and Scriptures originating from New Testament apostles and prophets preserve revelation given in the Spirit (Eph. 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:12).

2 Peter 1:20-21 is particularly illuminating: “**Knowing this first, that all prophecy of Scripture comes not from one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy ever was borne of human will, but humans carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.**”

🔍 This debated text probably means that prophecy does not originate from the prophet’s own interpretation of events but is the result of the Spirit moving him to speak for God. It’s probably a mistake to interpret this text to mean that individuals aren’t supposed to study Scripture with the intention of understanding its teachings. While individual Christians should read Scripture in fellowship with other believers, each person has a responsibility to seek and follow the truth as best they can (Rom. 15:4; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 3:16). We must also avoid being misled by untaught and unstable people who twist the text (2 Pet. 3:16), such as those who deny the personhood of the Spirit!

💡 The Spirit has fully revealed the gospel in the New Testament, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that he would minister both *to* the apostles himself and *through* them by his Spirit (John 14–16). Note the list of similarities between the work of the Son and the Spirit:

- ☑ Just as the Son “**taught**” (John 6:59; 7:14; etc.), Jesus told his disciples the Spirit “**will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you**” (John 14:26).
- ☑ Just as the Son “**testified**” to himself (John 3:11; 4:44; etc.), the Holy Spirit “**testifies**” to the Son (John 15:26).
- ☑ Just as the Son spoke what he “**heard**” from the Father (John 8:40), the Holy Spirit “**will speak**” what he “**hears**” from the Son (John 16:13).
- ☑ Just as the Son came to glorify the Father (John 12:28; 14:13; etc.), the Holy Spirit will come to glorify the Son (John 16:14).

💡 What the apostles taught were things that “**God has revealed to us through the Spirit**” (1 Cor. 2:10). This reference to the Spirit comes in a sizable passage about the work of the Spirit in making the truth about Christ known (1 Cor. 2:1-16). Here are a few observations about this important passage:

- 🔍 The gospel is not something that humans could discover on their own, much less invent; it's something that the mind of humans could not imagine (1 Cor. 2:9). This means it could only be known by God revealing it, which he has done through the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10). This revelation is the key part of what Christian theology calls special revelation—the knowledge that God gives through such special means as prophets and apostles, but supremely in Christ's coming.
- 🔍 Paul distinguishes the *means* of revelation, the impartation of the gospel through the apostles (1 Cor. 2:7, 13a), and the *recipients* of that revelation, which are we who have received “**the Spirit who is from God**” and who are in that sense “**spiritual**” (1 Cor. 2:12, 13b, 15). It is an error to seek knowledge of the gospel apart from its revelation through the apostles and their associates, preserved for us in the New Testament.
- 🔍 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “**The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.**” This does not mean that unbelievers cannot have *any* cognitive grasp of gospel truth, or they would need to first believe the gospel before they understand it. Rather, the natural person (the unbeliever) does not *accept* the things of the Spirit and regards them as *folly* and so does not come to *know* them—to understand them as true. The implication is that a work of the Spirit is needed for such persons to perceive that the gospel is not foolish but rather worthy of acceptance.

### The Work of the Spirit: Creation

- 🌍 The Holy Spirit participated in the initial creation of the world. Genesis 1:2 says, “**The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.**” Though *rûach 'ĕlōhîm* is usually translated “the Spirit of God,” some versions use the gloss “a wind from God” (NRSV) or “a mighty wind” (NABRE).
- 🌍 The expression *rûach 'ĕlōhîm* occurs 12 times in the Old Testament and consistently means “Spirit of God.” What's more, the verb “hovering” doesn't fit the meaning of a wind. The same verb is used in a similar metaphor toward the end of the Pentateuch, where God is pictured as an eagle hovering over its nest to care for its young (Deut. 32:11). It thus seems likely that the Spirit of God hovering over the waters reflects his role in fostering an environment for life and nurturing that life.
- 🌍 Old Testament wisdom literature speaks rather clearly about the Spirit's role in physical creation. Job 33:4 says, “**The Spirit of God has made me.**” Likewise, the Psalmist declares in 104:30, “**When you send forth your Spirit, they (all animals and living beings) are created.**”

### The Work of the Spirit: Incarnation

- 👣 The Holy Spirit brought about the virginal conception of Christ. Matthew 1:18 tells us that “**When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit**” (NASB). In the genealogy immediately preceding the verse, Matthew uses “by” several times to name mothers (“by Tamar,” “by Rahab,” etc.). Jesus was supernaturally sired

“by” the Holy Spirit.

👉 Similarly, Luke 1:35 says, “**And the angel answered her, ‘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.’**” Gabriel’s statement here combines two Old Testament speech forms used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) concerning God’s activity. The Spirit “**came upon**” people to inspire prophecy (Num. 11:25-29; 1 Sam. 19:20; 2 Chron. 15:1) and the glorious cloud representing God’s presence “**overshadowed**” and filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35). The work of the Spirit in bringing about the virgin birth was the work of God.

👉 Of course, this does not mean the Spirit is Christ’s “father. He’s not a physical being. It does mean, however, that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the incarnation.

- ☑ The Father sent the Son to become incarnate.
- ☑ The Son actually became the incarnate one.
- ☑ The Holy Spirit performed the miracle of the virginal conception that began the incarnation.

### **The Work of the Spirit: Salvation**

💖 On the front-end of salvation, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of their sin and persuades them that judgment is coming, thus making them aware of their need for God’s mercy to save them (John 16:8-11). Such conviction of sin normally comes through believers who warn others about sin and judgment, as the Spirit-filled John the Baptist did (Luke 1:15-17).

💖 Along with conviction, the Spirit illuminates our minds to know that the gospel is true. Paul teaches that the Spirit enables us to recognize the truth of the gospel and accept it (1 Cor. 2:10-16), and he prays that the Father will give Christians “**the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him**” (Eph. 1:17). Since he had just said that believers have been sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14), he is praying that they will enjoy the illuminating work of the same Spirit they have received. This means that although illumination is a necessary work of the Spirit in bringing people to Christ, it is also an ongoing experience of those who have the Spirit within them.

💖 In conjunction with convicting and illuminating us, the Spirit regenerated us. Jesus famously told Nicodemus, “**Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit**” (John 3:3, 5-8).

Likewise, Paul says in Titus 3:4-5 that “**when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.**” Note the role of all three divine persons, with the work of regeneration specifically credited to the Holy Spirit.

🔍 Both of the above texts likely allude to the promise in Ezekiel 36:25-27 of God “**sprinkling clean water**” on his people, an image explained as the inner work of the Spirit within them. So although baptism may be viewed as symbolizing the work of the Spirit in regeneration, baptism is not itself in view in the above passages (which some have taken to mean baptism is a necessary precondition of salvation).

💖 At the moment of regeneration the Spirit justifies us (Titus 3:4-7), that is, *makes* us right with God (1 Cor. 6:11) and *declares* that we are right with him through the redemptive work of Christ (Rom. 3:21–5:21). He likewise makes us God’s children according to Romans 8:14-15, having “**received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’**” As adopted sons, we enjoy a new relationship with God.

🔍 In addition to speaking of adoption as sons as something we’ve already received, Paul later says in Romans 8:23 that “**we wait eagerly for adoption as sons.**” This is not a contradiction but a classic example of the “already–not yet” tension in the New Testament doctrine of salvation.

💖 Our justification is sealed by the Spirit at the moment of salvation, meaning that our final redemption is guaranteed. A key text is Ephesians 1:13-14: “**In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.**” The indwelling Spirit is like a “down payment,” an initial deposit that functions like a “guarantee” that the complete payment is still to come. We’ve been put on layaway!

💖 This guarantee is closely related to the Holy Spirit’s work of assurance. He assures believers in Christ that God loves and accepts them as his adopted children (Rom. 8:14-17; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). This doesn’t mean that believers never experience times of doubts or struggles in faith. As with all works of the Spirit, we must pay attention to the truth and seek to live according to it. Remember, Paul says we can quench (1 Thess. 5:19) and grieve (Eph. 4:30) the Spirit.

💖 This brings us to the work of the Spirit in sanctification. He makes God’s people holy. In one sense, we have already been sanctified. As 1 Corinthians 6:11 says, we “**were sanctified... in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**”

In another sense, sanctification is something we need to pursue. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 that “**this is the will of God, your sanctification,**” and in 2 Cor. 7:1 that we are to “**cleanse ourselves... bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.**” This “progressive” aspect of sanctification is a key work of the Spirit according to Paul in 2 Cor. 3:18: “**And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.**”