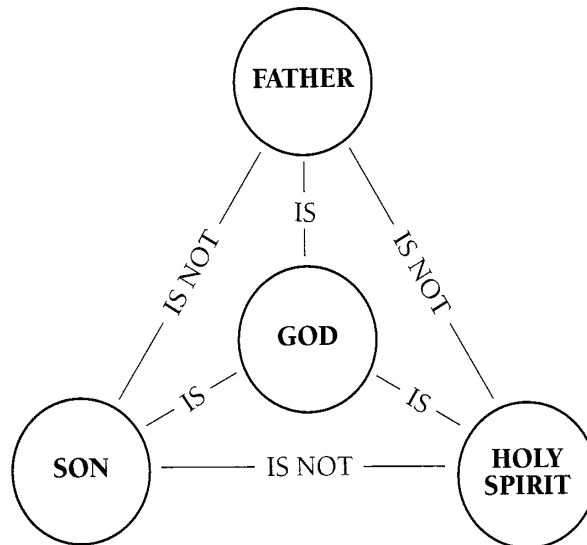


THE SPIRIT IN THE TRINITY

Theme: The Holy Spirit shares full essential deity in the Trinity; but with a distinction of role. (All Scripture is taken from The New King James Version, unless otherwise indicated.)

In our last two studies, we established two important biblical propositions about the Holy Spirit. First, we established His full personhood; and second, we established His full deity. He is one of the three divine Persons of the triune Godhead. B.B. Warfield gave this very helpful definition of the Trinity; that it is “the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence.”¹ As the diagram below² illustrates, the Holy Spirit exists in unity of divine being with the other two Persons; but He exists in individual personhood in distinction from them.



In this study, we will think a little more deeply about this distinction; and why it's important to us as believers. There are two helpful ways to think about the Holy Spirit's distinction of personhood:

I. THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ONTOLOGICAL DISTINCTION.

The word “ontological” is taken from the Greek word for “being”. The particular significance to us of the Holy Spirit's “ontological” distinction of personhood has to do with His essential divine being as shared by all the members of the Trinity.

- A. The Bible teaches us that the Holy Spirit exists as fully God. When we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, we do not have simply one-third of deity dwelling in us, but rather

all of deity dwelling in us. (See last week's notes [Lesson 3] for more on the biblical support for His full deity.) But as is true of all members of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit exists in this shared unity of divine being as a distinct Person. Perhaps this is best expressed to us in John 14:16-18. When Jesus told His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit, He called Him "another Helper"—a distinct Person. But John, in quoting our Lord, didn't use the Greek word for "another of a different kind" (*heteros*), but rather the word that distinguishes "another of the exact same kind" (*allos*). Just as the Father and the Son are "one" yet distinct (John 10:30; 14:9), so the Holy Spirit shares a perfect unity of divine being with the Father and Son—so much so, in fact, that He is "another Helper" of the exact same kind as Jesus. But He shares that unity in complete distinction of individual personhood (as truly "another" Person in distinction from Jesus).

- B. We need to be as careful to define the nature of this relationship in the same way that the Bible itself does. An early church heresy taught that Jesus the Son was merely of "like substance" with the Father; but not the same in essence with Him. It also taught that the Holy Spirit was a creation of the Father and the Son. In 381 A.D., at the Council of Constantinople—where the full deity of the Son was reaffirmed by the church, and the doctrine of the Trinity officially affirmed—the following statement was formulated about the Holy Spirit:

*We believe ... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is jointly worshiped and jointly glorified, Who spoke through the prophets ...*³

You'll notice in this carefully worded statement that both the deity and the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit is affirmed; but you'll also notice that an important qualification is made regarding the nature of His relationship to the other Persons of the Trinity. It says that He "proceeds from the Father". This is taken from John 15:26; where the Lord Jesus said, "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me." Jesus didn't say that the Holy Spirit "proceeded" (past tense) from the Father (which would imply that He was 'created'), but rather that He "proceeds" (present tense) as an ongoing state of being. The Dutch Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof referred to this as "spiration" (as opposed to "generation", which would only be true of the Son's relationship with the Father), and described it as "that eternal and necessary act of the first and second persons in the Trinity whereby they, within the divine Being, become the ground of the personal subsistence of the Holy Spirit, and put the third person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation or change."⁴ This is not meant to imply any inferiority of the Spirit to the Father or the Son (because, otherwise, they would not all three be the same in essential being); but rather only speaks of the logical order of the Spirit's being as a distinct Person with respect to His relationship with the other Persons of the Trinity.

- C. The Holy Spirit relates to us and acts toward us in wonderful submission to this logical order of being. As Jesus told His disciples concerning the Spirit,

"He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but

whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13b-15).

II. THE HOLY SPIRIT’S ECONOMIC DISTINCTION.

When theologians speak of the “economic” distinction of the Holy Spirit, they're not using the word 'economy' in the way we're used to (that is, in reference to money and markets). Rather, they are referring to the administration of His specific works and functions with respect to the other Persons.

- A. We’ve already encountered one great affirmation of the Spirit's economic distinction in the passage we just quoted—that is, John 16:13-15. It was there that we were told about the Spirit’s submission to His role in acting on the Father’s authority and revealing the things of the Son to us. Another great passage is Ephesians 1:3-14, where the Holy Spirit’s work in our salvation is distinguished from that of the Father and the Son. In all of it, the Spirit—as a distinct Person—fulfills His specific role with respect to our salvation; but does so in perfect unity of purpose with the Father and the Son.
- B. Perhaps no better or more beautiful attempt has ever been made by any human being to describe this than that of the great London preacher Charles Spurgeon when he preached on the eternal covenant (that is, agreement) that existed between the three Persons. In a sermon early in his ministry, he said;

On the Father’s part, thus runs the covenant. I cannot tell you it in the glorious celestial tongue in which it was written: I am fain to bring it down to the speech which suiteth to the ear of flesh, and to the heart of a mortal. Thus, I say, ran the covenant, in lines like these: “I, the Most High Jehovah, do hereby give unto my only begotten and well-beloved Son, a people, countless beyond the number of the stars, who shall be by him washed from sin, by him preserved, and kept, and led, and by him, at last, presented before my throne without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. I covenant by oath, and swear by myself, because I can swear by no greater, that these whom I now give to Christ shall be for ever the objects of my eternal love. Them will I forgive through the merit of the blood. To these will I give a perfect righteousness; these will I adopt and make my sons and daughters, and these shall reign with me through Christ eternally.” Thus ran that glorious side of the covenant.

The Holy Spirit also, as one of the high contracting parties on this side of the covenant, gave his declaration, “I hereby covenant,” saith he, “that all whom the Father giveth to the Son, I will in due time quicken. I will show them their need of redemption; I will cut off from them all groundless hope, and destroy their refuges of lies. I will bring them to the blood of sprinkling; I will give them faith whereby this blood shall be applied to them; I will work in them every grace; I will keep their faith alive; I will cleanse them and drive out all depravity from them, and they shall be presented at last spotless and faultless.” This was the one side of the covenant, which is at this very day being fulfilled and scrupulously kept.

As for the other side of the covenant this was the part of it, engaged and

*covenanted by Christ. He thus declared, and covenanted with his Father: "My Father, on my part I covenant that in the fullness of time I will become man. I will take upon myself the form and nature of the fallen race. I will live in their wretched world, and for my people will I keep the law perfectly. I will work out a spotless righteousness, which shall be acceptable to the demands of thy just and holy law. In due time I will bear the sins of all my people. Thou shalt exact their debts on me; the chastisement of their peace I will endure, and by my stripes they shall be healed. My Father, I covenant and promise that I will be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. I will magnify thy law, and make it honorable. I will suffer all they ought to have suffered. I will endure the curse of thy law, and all the vials of thy wrath shall be emptied and spent upon my head. I will then rise again; I will ascend into heaven; I will intercede for them at thy right hand; and I will make myself responsible for every one of them, that not one of those whom thou hast given me shall ever be lost, but I will bring all my sheep of whom, by thy blood, thou hast constituted me the shepherd—I will bring every one safe to thee at last."*⁵

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Is there anything more beautiful than these two glorious truths together?—the essential unity of divine being and perfect cooperation of purpose that exists between all the members of the Trinity; and, at the same time, the distinction of each Person in their individual roles? How wonderful it is to think about! And what's more, how particularly grateful we should be for our Helper and Friend—the Holy Spirit—in touching our lives with this divine unity and perfect diversity!

How hopeless and helpless we would be without His glorious being, or without His gracious indwelling!

¹*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, ed., p. 3012.

²Taken from Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), p. 63.

³Cited in Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1983), p. 122.

⁴L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), p. 97.

⁵Charles Spurgeon, *The Park Street Pulpit, Vol. 5*, published in 1859; here from *The Charles Spurgeon Collection* (Albany, OR, AGES Software Version 1.0, 1997), pp. 719-20 (paragraphing added).