

Bible Class: Holy Spirit

Session 1: The Spirit of God

Winter 2022

Introduction

“Your life and the world you live in will never be the same.”

—the character “Trinity,” from the film *The Matrix*

Trinity. Christians hear this word so often they may sometimes fail to appreciate its true meaning.

Coequal, coeternal: Christians use these words so little that they may not even know what they mean! The Holy Trinity is, to be sure, a great mystery. What’s more, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, may be the most mysterious.

1. In your own words, describe the person and work of the Holy Spirit. What is His relation to the Father and Son? To the Christian? To the Christian church?

A Personal Being

2. Read Psalm 139:7–10 and 1 Corinthians 2:10–11. What attributes do these passages ascribe to the Holy Spirit? What does this tell you about the nature of the Spirit?
3. What does Jesus profess in John 4:24 and what does Paul declares even more clearly in 2 Corinthians 3:17?
4. Many people, when hearing the word *spirit*, think of an impersonal energy or “life force.” Read Isaiah 63:10 and Romans 15:30. Compare Acts 13:2 and 1 Corinthians 2:13; 12:11. Rather than an impersonal energy, how do the biblical authors describe the Spirit?
5. But what exactly does it mean to use the term *person* in reference to the Holy Spirit? **The authors of the Athanasian Creed confessed that “there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.” Commenting on this and other testimonies of the early Christian church, the Lutheran Reformers insisted that “the term ‘person’ [should be used] as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself ” (AC I). That is, the Spirit is not merely a part of God or God’s energy; He is God Himself.**
6. Read Acts 5:3–4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; and Matthew 28:19. How do Peter, Paul, and even Jesus Himself confess the Christian belief that the Holy Spirit is truly God, yet a person distinct from both the Father and the Son?

Given the mystery of the Trinity, it is not surprising that there was much argument in the early church about the exact nature of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Much of the debate focused on terms such as *begotten* and *proceeds*, words we know today from the creeds formulated during those early controversies.

7. Though it is impossible for human reason to understand how three persons are one God and one God is three persons, Scripture is not silent about this mystery. Read John 15:26. Compare Matthew 10:20 with Galatians 4:6. What do such passages say about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son from eternity and within the Trinity itself?

The Bible not only describes the relationship of the Spirit to the Father and Son with regard to their essence and being; it also describes this relationship as it applies to their work in the world and for the world. It is common, and certainly not incorrect, to classify the work of the Father as creation, that of the Son as redemption, and that of the Holy Spirit as sanctification (see, for example, Luther's introduction to the Apostles' Creed in his Large Catechism). It would be an error, however, to *limit* the work of the three persons of the Trinity to these works, possibly giving the impression that the work of each is unrelated to the work of the others.

8. Read and compare John 1:18 and John 16:14. How is the work of the Spirit related to that of the Father and the Son?
9. Jesus explains to the Samaritan woman that God must be worshiped according to His nature. Because "God is spirit," Jesus explains, He must be worshiped "in spirit." Likewise, because God and His Word—both the written and incarnate Word (cf. John 14:6 and 17:17)—are truth, God is to be worshiped "in truth." Read John 4:23–24. On the basis of the above passages, how would you describe worship that takes place "in spirit and truth"?

A Personal Faith

10. Christians do not merely believe in "spirit," but in *the* Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, God Himself. This biblical faith offers the believer great comfort. What comfort can be found in knowing that the Holy Spirit is not merely a spiritual substance or energy, but a divine person?
11. When tempted by the spirits of the world, we are reassured to know that the Spirit of God never ceases His work of creating and strengthening faith, bringing forgiveness in Word and Sacraments, and directing our lives in accordance with the will of God. As you reflect on your personal faith, worship, and life, what consolation and encouragement does the adjective *holy*, as applied to God's Spirit, provide?

Mystery and Revelation

12. The mystery of the holy Trinity is incomprehensible to human reason. Nevertheless, it is true, as God's true Word declares. Though we are unable to comprehend the "how," we joyfully confess the "who" of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In what ways can you, in your personal devotional life, more frequently and consciously confess the divinity of the Holy Spirit?

Comparisons

Proceeds from the Father and the Son: Christians of the western tradition teach that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque* in Latin). They tend to emphasize the coequal divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Proceeds from the Father: Eastern Orthodox churches have never accepted the *filioque* statement added by western churches to the Nicene Creed. They contend that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son, emphasizing more of a hierarchy among the persons of the Trinity.

Pseudo-Christian Beliefs: A variety of groups reject the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses regard the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force. The United Pentecostal church teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all manifestations of the same person ("Jesus only"). Mormons hold that the Holy Spirit is a spiritual god alongside the Father and the Son, who are gods with physical bodies.