

The Holy Spirit and the Godhead

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Some in our church are teaching that the Holy Spirit is neither a person nor a member of the Godhead. Is that true?

Some Adventists have discovered that practically all of our pioneers were anti-Trinitarian and have concluded that the church today should reject the doctrine of the Trinity. The truth is that the Lord guided this movement to a more biblical understanding of God. Today, based on the Bible, we affirm the truth of one God in a plurality of Persons. I mention here just some of the biblical support available.

1. The Spirit as Power. The opinion that the Spirit is not a person is partially based on the fact that very often He is described as a power coming from God, falling on people, and enabling them to do certain tasks (e.g., Judges 3:10; Acts 2:4). Moreover, the Greek word for “spirit” (pneuma) is neuter, that is to say we can refer to the Spirit as “it,” implying that He is not a person. But that is a phenomenon of Greek grammar that doesn’t necessarily have any theological significance.

2. The Spirit and Jesus. With the coming of Jesus our understanding of the Godhead was greatly enriched. Because Jesus was God in human flesh (John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13), distinct from the Father (Matt. 3:17) yet one with Him (John 14:10), His followers began to realize that there was in the mystery of God a plurality of persons. The mystery increased when Jesus described the Spirit not as something but as Someone, who would take His place in the experience of the disciples: “I [Jesus] will ask the Father, and he will give you another counselor . . . the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16, NIV).

Jesus introduced His disciples to the mystery of a Godhead that consisted of three distinct Persons: Jesus, the Father, and the Counselor/Spirit. In this particular passage the Spirit is not described as an impersonal power but as a person. Jesus refers to Him as “another [Greek *allos*] Counselor,” one who intercedes for someone else. He is called “another” because Jesus is also a counselor (1 John 2:1). Only a person can function as a counselor.

But there’s more to it. If the Spirit was going to continue the function of Jesus as counselor, then, He had to possess the same nature Jesus had, that is to say, He had to be divine. Jesus said that “no one [*allos*] else” could do the work He did (John 15:24, NIV), but He clarifies that there is One who, like Him, will be a new counselor. When Jesus refers to the Spirit as counselor using the masculine pronoun (He), Jesus is identifying Him as a person: “He will testify about me” (verse 26, NIV). Hence the Holy Spirit is both divine and a person.

3. *The Apostles and the Spirit.* When the disciples received the Holy Spirit they experienced Him as a power poured out on them by God (Acts 2:33); but they also recognized Him as the divine Person promised to them by Jesus.

In the narrative of Ananias and Sapphira we find a clear view of the disciples' understanding of the nature of the Spirit. Peter confronted the guilty couple with their sin by saying to them, "You have lied to the Holy Spirit. . . . You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3, 4, NIV). We have here two important pieces of information. First, the Spirit is a person because we can lie only to persons, not to things. Second, He is divine, because lying to Him is the equivalent to lying to God.

Throughout the New Testament we find clear evidence that the apostles believed the Spirit was a person at par with the Father and the Son. They knew that the Spirit speaks (Acts 21:11), exercises His will (Acts 16:6), sends messengers (Acts 13:4), reflects theological truth (Acts 15:28), can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), apportions gifts (1 Cor. 12:11), intercedes (Rom. 8:26, 34), gives joy (Rom. 14:17), etc. These are all characteristics of persons that allow us to definitively refer to the Spirit as a person. By mentioning Him in conjunction with the Father and the Son the biblical writers were testifying to the unity of the three Persons (2 Cor. 13:14; 1:21, 22; Rom. 15:30; Eph. 2:18; 1 Peter 1:2; Rev. 1:4, 5). As a church we simply proclaim the biblical teaching without attempting to explain the mystery of God's unity.