



### **Christianity: The Basics — The Holy Spirit**

It is not unusual to think about God *primarily* by thinking of God the Father. This is, I suppose, what sustains the popularity of the view of God as an old man in the sky, calling all the shots and policing our moral behaviour. Among theologians and philosophers, this way of thinking leads to an emphasis on God's *transcendence*: God's radical otherness from creation.

Nor is it unusual to think about God primarily by thinking of God the Son. This is, I suppose, what enables many people to think of God as a comforting friend, who journeys alongside them in good times and in bad. Among theologians and philosophers, this way of thinking leads to an emphasis on God's *immanence*: God's presence in the world, being closer to us than even we are to ourselves, as St Augustine put it.

What seems less common is thinking about God primarily by thinking about God the Holy Spirit. This is at least in part because—as almost every preacher and theologian will begin by saying—we don't really know how to think about the Holy Spirit. Then again, we don't really know how to think about God at all, so this state of affairs is really not that unusual.

One of the attractions of thinking and talking about God in terms of Fatherhood and Sonship is that we know what fathers and sons are, whereas the idea of a *spirit* is much more elusive. This—the unknowability of the Spirit—is, perhaps, not a bad place to start: after all, we are told that the Spirit blows hither and thither, we know not where. It is a useful reminder, in an age that lusts after pat certainties, that God cannot be known, because God is Spirit.

Fortunately, our theological tradition does not simply leave us hanging there. The Bible is replete with mentions of and allusions to the Spirit, not least because the word for “Spirit” is the same word as that for breath and wind and air and life, and a myriad of other related things. On one hand this linguistic slipperiness makes it difficult to decide whether any given biblical passage is directly relevant to a theology of the Holy Spirit; on the other hand, it opens up the possibility that *all* uses of words like *ruach* in the Hebrew Bible and *pneuma* in the New Testament can somehow contribute to our thinking about the Third Person of the Trinity.

If the elusiveness of the Spirit serves to remind us that God resists our attempts to categorise or domesticate the divine, then the diverse testimony of the biblical tradition consistently asserts the unceasing activity of God.



*Dome of Creation, St Mark's Cathedral, Venice.*

Photo Credit: Timothy P. O'Malley

The Spirit of God is, from the beginning, hovering over the waters of chaos to bring order into the world. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Spirit equips workers for service and endows prophets with words. In the Gospels, the Spirit fills and drives Jesus, now at the baptism, now into the wilderness, and beyond. In the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit forms and guides and enlivens the Church in her ministry and mission. In the epistles, the Spirit produces both gifts and fruits.

In other words, the Bible's doctrine of divine action—of God's working in the world—is, in large part, its doctrine of the Holy Spirit, even when it comes to creation (typically appropriated to the Father) and redemption (typically appropriated to the Son). Indeed, the traditional notion that “the works of the Trinity are *undivided*” is brought home clearly here: the Spirit's involvement in the work of the Father and the Son reminds us of each divine person's involvement in all of God's activity in the world. In this way, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is also the doctrine of the oneness of God.

By considering how thinking about the Holy Spirit might affect how we think about God, we are led also to consider what it means—for us personally and corporately—to believe in the Holy Spirit.

To believe in the Holy Spirit is, as we have been exploring, to believe in God who is beyond all telling and yet closer to us than we can say. So close that when we pray—not knowing how we ought—it is the Spirit who intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words.

And to believe in the Holy Spirit is, as we noted earlier, to believe in God whose very being is unity, even as it is Trinity. Furthermore, the New Testament is insistent that it is the Spirit who brings us—leads us, and if necessary, drives us—to God. In other words, to believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe in God who compels us all to join in the unity that is the life of the Triune God.

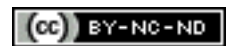
And, as we have seen, to believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe in the God who is ever at work for our sake: not just acting *for* us, as if to rob us of our own agency, but equipping us to participate in God's mission in the world. There are, to be sure, exuberant and ecstatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit's gifts: we should see no need to disparage our charismatic brothers and sisters, as we might be tempted to do. But, at the same time, it would be remiss to neglect the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit, which are, after all, also gifts from God. Indeed, we ought not distinguish too readily between

gifts and fruits: there is, for example, no reason to think that the fruits of the Spirit should be any more respectable than the more infamous of the *charismata*. There ought to be nothing *boring* about love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, generosity; faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we ever catch ourselves believing that the spiritually fruitful life is unexciting (or, indeed, without its perils), we should realise that we have misunderstood something most profoundly. In the same passage that enumerates the fruits of the Spirit, we are told that if we live by the Spirit, we ought also be guided by the Spirit. This is, of course, nothing less than a description of the life of Jesus Christ himself who was ultimately led to the cross. To believe in the Holy Spirit then, is to sign up to join him there.

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<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-holy-spirit>



### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. The word for Spirit in Hebrew is the same as the word of air, breath, and wind. Without reading *too much* into the etymologies of words, what thoughts do these linguistic links raise for you? Where in the Bible is the Holy Spirit associated with these things?
2. What are the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the Letter to the Galatians? What are the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the First Letter to the Corinthians? How do you think the Spirit's fruits and gifts are related?
3. In John 3 (which you may have discussed in Question 1), the "wind" blows wherever it pleases, which is associated with those "born of the Spirit". What does this mean? What does this mean for how we are to live as Christians?