

Who is the Holy Spirit?

June 21, 2020

Tony Blair and Jo Ann Kunz

Happy Father's Day!... to all who have had fathers, all who have been fathers, and all who are spiritual parents of any kind to others! We honor who you are, what you do, and how much you emulate our Father in heaven when you do it. How do we emulate the Father? By being formed in the character of his Son and living in the life of his Spirit...individually and together. Our world is a better place... and don't we want our world to be better than it is?... when we emulate among ourselves the love and oneness they share as Trinity, as One God.

That's why we've been focusing since Easter on how Jesus transforms us, and in our last two messages on how the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost to do that work of transformation in us... not from outside, the way many humans try to change us, but from inside, living in us and transforming us at our very core to look and act and love more like the three-in-one God who made us. But who is this Spirit who has come to live within us? Many Christians do not fully understand this GIFT that is living inside of them!

Let's first look at what the Holy Spirit is NOT:

The Holy Spirit is not a Ghost. You don't need to call Ghostbusters to deal with the spirit of a dead person haunting you. :) "But he's the Holy Ghost, right? Isn't that what we were taught?" Yes, that's because some of our old Bible translations used that word... and it wasn't wrong then. It's just that the English language has changed. 400 years ago what we call a ghost was called a spirit, and vice-versa. The words have changed meanings over time. The best word to use in this generation is Spirit. It's not only more accurate but also far less scary. :)

Second, the Holy Spirit is not a Force. If real life is not Ghostbusters, neither is it Star Wars. Did you hear about the Star-Wars-loving priest that started a church service with "May the force be with you"... and the congregation responded with "And also with you!" Sometimes the theologians have made this harder on us by describing God in very impersonal ways. And so, surprisingly, a recent survey revealed that a majority of Americans really do believe that the Holy Spirit is some kind of force, energy field, or spiritual power socket. Not true, spiritual jedi! :)

Finally, the Holy Spirit is not a second-class God. You might get this impression from church history...here's a medieval image that has the Father and Son as two larger circles on one level and the Spirit as a smaller circle beneath them. That hasn't been a good thing for the Church. But from the earliest days until the present orthodox Christians have agreed that there is one God in three persons, with different functions, but equal to each other. The Holy Spirit, says the Nicene creed, eternally "proceeds"...it's a word that means to move outward, like water from a fountain...from the Father and the Son"... why? in order to move us too... to move us back into relationship with himself.

That's some of what the Holy Spirit is NOT? But who IS the Holy Spirit? As Tony just said, the Holy Spirit is God... the Holy Spirit is also:

A Person... The Holy Spirit is not a thing or an idea... The Spirit is not an It... but an I... a living being... a Person. Yet, so much of the confusion about who the Spirit is is based in this reality that the Holy Spirit is a Person unlike any other Person we have ever experienced before. Jesus called the first Member of the Trinity "Father," and since we have fathers, there is something familiar there. And, of course, Jesus is God in human form... and we have biblical accounts of His life, death, and resurrection. Again, there's something we can connect to there. But the Holy Spirit? How are we supposed to connect with a Person who is invisible, intangible, eternal? A Person who is utterly different from us?

Well, all we have is our human experience and the physical world we live in... so we compare indescribable things to what we do know... we use similes and metaphors to try to communicate that this person I love, or that experience of wonder, is like something we know tangibly. For example... the poet Robert Burns wrote this about his beloved:

*O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.*

Although his love might have smelled good, she likely did not have thorns. :)

Today is Father's Day, so how might you describe your father? Some might say, "He is like the strength of a mountain... or is trustworthy like sunrise... or calm like still water." Others may use different comparisons, but the point is that we humans often need these comparisons to describe what is indescribable. God knows this about us, which is why the scriptures are full of similes and metaphors... and they are abundant in reference to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is like a dove, but is not actually a feathered bird... is like fire, water, and wind...but will not physically burn or drown you, or mess up your hair. :) The Holy Spirit is a Person who, although very difficult to describe, can nonetheless be experienced because, first...

The Spirit Lives -- The Holy Spirit is alive... a Being with thoughts, feelings, intentions, will and choice... and the Spirit also relates -- The Spirit is not only relational but is actually relationship itself. It's hard to describe the trinity in human terms, but the earliest Christians sometimes called the Spirit "the go-between God" who held the Father and the Son together in perfect love. God is relationship at the core...and has created us humans to be relational as well. We consider it very tragic to see a person who is unable, physically or psychologically, to connect with other human beings. It is the Spirit that gives us the ability to be so intimately connected with each other and with God that we actually become One. The Bible assures us that ***whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit (I Cor 6:17 NIV).***

So the Spirit does what we relational beings do....and even better than we do! The Spirit loves unconditionally and desires good things for those he loves. The Spirit communicates with us, and listens when we communicate in response. The Spirit is present with us, at all times and especially in our hard times. And the Spirit tends to our relationships with each other and with God... giving us tremendous capacity to heal divisions, restore relationships, and make peace.

The Spirit Acts -- The Holy Spirit is present and active throughout the entire biblical story from the first chapter of Genesis where in the beginning, as the Breath of God, the Spirit was hovering over the unformed void... to the last chapter of Revelation, where both **“the Spirit and the Bride (Church) say ‘Come.’” (Revelation 22:17).**

The Spirit was also present and active throughout Jesus’ whole life and ministry...
...overshadowing and conceiving Jesus within His mother, Mary’s, womb...
...appearing in blessing at His baptism and then...
...leading Him out into the wilderness to be tempted...
...from which Jesus returned full of the Spirit’s power and began His public ministry, which included:
...Spirit-anointed teaching and prophetic knowledge, healings, deliverances from demonic possession, and raising the dead to life...
...The Spirit was with Jesus during the crucifixion (Hebrews 9:14)
...and Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:9).

Then, with His coming to dwell within us at Pentecost, the Spirit has continued to be present and active ever since... in at least six broad ways. Let’s look at them...

First, the Spirit provides all that we need to live the life of the Spirit. Scripture says that **His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life (II Peter 1:3 NIV).** And he’s not stingy about it either! Sometimes preachers make it sound like we have to beg and beg to get God to do a good thing. Jesus disagreed. In fact, he got pretty emphatic about it!... **Do you know of any parent who would give his hungry child, who asked for food, a plate of rocks instead? Or when asked for a piece of fish, what parent would offer his child a snake instead? If you, imperfect as you are, know how to lovingly take care of your children and give them what’s best, how much more ready is your heavenly Father to give wonderful gifts to those who ask him?” (Matt 7:9-11 TPT).** So the Spirit is far better than Santa Claus! The Spirit continually pours out on us gifts from God for this life we get to live in him.

What gifts? Let’s start with the gift of the new birth! Jesus said, **No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:5-6 NIV).** And, then, when we are living in that new birth, the new life, the Spirit gives us everything necessary to live it.
...Like comfort! Jesus called the Spirit “the Comforter” and, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, **the comfort we have to give each other and others is the same comfort we have received from God (II Corinthians 1:4)**

...And how about wisdom for living? It's hard sometimes to know what we should do in the messiness of this world, even if we're committed to loving like God does. But do not fear... Paul prayed for the Ephesians for what he knew God already wanted to give them... **"the riches of the Spirit of wisdom (Eph. 1:17 TPT)**. And, as the epistle of James assures us, God is generous in giving us wisdom **(James 1:5)**.

...The Spirit even gives us special, even supernatural, abilities that we call "spiritual gifts" **(I Corinthians 12)**.

But these gifts...and everything else that the Spirit provides us... are given not only for ourselves, but also so we can give them to the Church and the world. Paul told the Corinthians, **A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other....It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts (I Cor. 12:7, 11 NLT)**. And that is why we have something to offer the world now...because of the Spirit of living inside us and providing us with extraordinary gifts for life and godliness, far beyond our own capacity for goodness.

Second, The Spirit Prepares... The Spirit/Breath of God who was present and active at the beginning in the Creation of life... is the same Spirit who BOTH "inspired"... "in-breathed"... the writers of scripture with God's words of Life **(II Timothy 3:16)**... and ALSO enables those who read those words of life to understand them...

Jesus was faithful to preach and teach the radical good news of the Kingdom of God... yet He also knew that His followers would need help to understand it... so, before He died, He promised that a Helper would come: **"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear (understand) them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth (I like TPT here... he will unveil the reality of every truth within you) for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:12-13 NRSV)**

The Holy Spirit is the Helper Jesus promised. The root of the word Jesus used here is a picture of a teacher who shows the way by guiding someone along the journey. The Holy Spirit does not simply download information and doctrine into our heads! Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will be with you... with us... every step of the journey through life... showing us how to actually apply these spiritual realities to our everyday lives. :)

So, the Holy Spirit prepares us for Life in every way... revealing, illuminating, teaching, guiding... so that we are prepared not only with head knowledge... but also with heart wisdom ... so that we are ready to act in alignment with what God wants in every moment of our lives.

There is so much freedom here for us! We don't have to worry about remembering every detail of everything we learn about God... because the Holy Spirit is always in us... and never forgets... so we can trust the Spirit to bring to our memory whatever we need to know in any given moment! And it gets even better... because if you just relax and trust the Spirit... you may even find yourself saying things that you hadn't really thought about before, as the Spirit moves you. Thank God for this... because it happens all the time when we're preaching! And it's happened to you, too...

when you don't know what to say to a friend and suddenly, you hear just the right words coming out of your mouth. Yes... the Spirit of Truth prepares us, indeed. :)

Third, the Spirit protects. Isn't it wonderful to know that when the world gets scary we're not left to our own cunning, our own instinct for self-protection and self-survival to make it through life? And doesn't that change everything when we see on the news things that disturb us? My goodness there's been enough of that in recent months, hasn't there?

Now let's not misinterpret the protection that the Spirit gives us, like some have done. It's not that bad things never happen to us. Jesus never said that...and, by the way, he was crucified. The New Testament epistles never say that. And if we can let go of that expectation... that need to think that external circumstances always have to be hunky-dory for us to live out our faith... we can find tremendous courage in the kind of protection the Spirit does offer us.

So, for instance, the Spirit goes ahead of us and often warns us of what is coming... sort of like an early alert system. Paul referred to this when he said that ***I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me (Acts 20:23)***. But the Spirit is more than a fire alarm... the Spirit goes with us into those hard times and is present with us... actively present, not just hanging out in the room...giving us what we need when we need it.

That's why Paul could also say that ***when I'm surrounded with troubles on every side and face persecution because of my love for Christ—I am made yet stronger. For my weakness becomes a portal to God's power (II Cor. 12:10 TPT)***. He knew that he didn't have to worry about losing his relationship with God in the midst of hardship because he was ***marked with a seal (Eph. 1:13)***, which is the Spirit himself... protected by the ***sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17)*** which is everything God has revealed to us... everything that is true about us.

So do not fear... you are held secure by the Spirit in the midst of both the good and bad of life, and all those circumstances are used by the Spirit to continue his good work of transformation in you. :)

Fourth, the Spirit Prays... This action of the Spirit is so tender and reassuring. I love the Message paraphrase of ***Romans 8:26-28: Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting (Paul has been talking about how all Creation, including God's people, is like a pregnant woman awaiting the fulfillment of God's Kingdom to come into the world), God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.***

So beautiful, isn't it? Even at those times when we want to pray but can't find the words... or are so discouraged from praying without yet seeing an answer... or so weary that we just can't pray at all... the Holy Spirit is within us, praying for us. Such grace... that prayer is not something we

have to do on our own in order to get God to do something. Like everything else in our Christian lives, even prayer is something we share with God. And when we are struggling to pray... the Spirit gives us the gift, the grace, of praying within us and for us.

Have you ever been so tired you couldn't pray? I've been there many times, and I think so many of us are there right now in response to the ongoing struggle with coronavirus... the hatred and violence in our world... the seeming incapacity of many people to treat each other with basic courtesy. Sometimes all we can do is groan inside. If you're there, this is very good news for you today... the Holy Spirit is constantly praying within you... turning your wordless groans and unfulfilled hopes and endless exhaustion and deepest desires into shared prayer to God... which God answers by, somehow, working it all into something good, even though it may take some time for us to see it. So, be encouraged today... no matter how you are praying... with words or without... with hope or without... with energy or without... you are praying with the Holy Spirit... and God is receiving it... and goodness will come of it. Just wait and see. :)

Fifth, the Spirit provokes. I (Tony) like to use this word with my students in its original sense, which is "to call forth" from them something deeper than the simple answers, something they may have already known to be true on one level but hadn't yet brought to the surface. That's much like what the Spirit does when he provokes our conscience. Because so much of American Christianity has been fixated on sin, we've sometimes interpreted this provoking in moral terms... that the Spirit calls us out when we do wrong. And that's true, on one level. But the Spirit is more than our inner cop... what the Spirit is doing in provoking us is calling forth what is true about us that is deeper and different than our surface behavior.

So, for instance, when we lash out at a brother or sister on Facebook or somewhere else, the Spirit doesn't just say, like we do to a pet, "Bad dog!" The Spirit reminds us that we are one with that brother or sister... that we share a common identity and, indeed, a common Spirit... and that any harm done to them is harm done to all, including myself. The Spirit provokes me toward love... not by slapping my hand but by causing me to see who I truly am... and who the other truly is. That's just one example. There are many more.

And the provoking of the Spirit is not just for individuals... sometimes it's for churches or the Church... like when the seven churches in the book of Revelation were praised or admonished for how they were dealing with their own hard times: ***Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 3:22 NIV).***

And sometimes the provoking of the Spirit is for the whole world. Jesus said that when the Spirit comes, ***he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8 NIV).*** Isn't that actually encouraging? That God sees what's wrong with the world even better than we do? That the Spirit is at work in the world, calling things out and calling us forward toward the kingdom of God? And that's the same Spirit at work in me and you, provoking, calling us forward toward living fully in that kingdom ourselves, which is the life of the Spirit.

Sixth, The Spirit Prompts... “nudges” is the word we like best to describe this action of the Holy Spirit... because it often feels like a gentle divine elbowing... for example, to act in some way that would continue developing the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 2:22-23**) in your life. I (Jo Ann) can hear the song from Vacation Bible School... “The fruit of the Spirit’s not a coconut... if you want to be a coconut.. you might as well hear it.. you can’t be a fruit of the Spirit... because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness... gentleness, and self-control.” :))

Sometimes the Spirit nudges us to worship... as Jesus says, in Spirit and Truth. And sometimes the nudges are a subtle but persistent prompting to call a friend, and when you do, you find she really needed that call... or to pick up an odd item at the store, only to find out later that someone needs that very thing... or to take a different route home, only to either avoid an accident or come upon someone on the roadside in need of help. These nudges from the Spirit are such a common and significant way that the Spirit guides us that we are going to talk a lot more about them next week. :)

We’ve given you some foundational teaching today so we can live based on what is really about us and God. And did you notice that we referred to a lot of Scripture? :) That’s because we want you to know that this is the truth of God, and not just our own... particularly on a topic that sometimes gets confused or confusing. We have tried to cut through the clutter and get to the heart of it, so that Pentecost isn’t just a story in the Bible for us, and the Holy Spirit isn’t just a doctrine of the Church. This is real life. And the life of the Spirit is the good life.

We said earlier than the Holy Spirit gives us gifts, which is true. The Spirit is Gift himself... God giving himself to us, to not just live among us but to live within us, to experience life with us, every step of the way. There’s a tendency still among even those of us who know this to think of God as “out there” somewhere. This is the good news that God has come inside, and not merely as an occasional guest, but to be one with us forever. It’s sort of like a marriage, Scripture says, and sort of like an intimate friendship. We’re going to talk next week about how to develop that relationship more fully... how to hear and discern the voice of the Spirit in our lives in very practical ways....so we can experience that intimacy in every moment.

For today, we’re going to close with a video prayer...it’s posted on the webpage....that asks the Spirit to do what the Spirit already wants to do for us, with us, and in us. The Spirit waits, in love, for us to want him to do these things we’ve been talking about today. This prayer is our opportunity to say yes to the Spirit. Watch it, and pray along with the words on the screen, remembering what the rest of us pray it with you. Amen!