

## Lesson 1

# A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Spirit

## The Trinity

While *trinity* is not found in Scripture, the concept is seen throughout. *Trinity* is a theological term that was first used by Tertullian (200 A.D.). The doctrine of the trinity is that *God is one in His essential being, but in this being there are three persons*. All three are fully God, but distinct from each other.

- **God the Father** is the creator, the *architect* of providence and salvation.
- **God the Son**, Jesus, is the *executor* of all the Father's plans.
- **God the Spirit** is the *revealer* of God's will as well as the *equipper* of the Son and Christians for their work. He also specializes in *clarification*, revealing the purpose of the Son (Acts 2), the teaching of the Son (John 14.26; 1 Corinthians 2.10), providing assurance of salvation (Romans 5.5), and provides intimacy with the Father (Romans 8.15).

The New Testament features at least nine passages<sup>1</sup> that affirm the Holy Spirit as a member of the Godhead.

## Characteristics of the Godhead

All three members of the Godhead share the same qualities:

- **Eternal**, transcending time: John 1.1; Hebrews 9.14
- **Omnipotent** - nothing created can resist. Completely strong in might: Isaiah 43.13; Matthew 19.26; Genesis 18.14; Job 42.1-2
- **Omniscient** - all knowing: Psalm 44.21; 139.4; 147.4-5; 1 John 3.20; 1 Chronicles 28.9
- **Omnipresent** - transcending the universe: 1 Kings 8.27; Jeremiah 23.24; Colossians 1.17; Psalm 139.7-10.
- **Creator**: Genesis 1.1-2, 26; 2.7; Nehemiah 9.6; John 1.3; Colossians 1.16
- **Life Giver**: 1 Timothy 6.13; 1 Samuel 2.6; Psalm 36.9; John 1.1-4; 6.63
- **Arbiter over sin**: They have the power to convict, forgive, and intercede for sin: Job 9.33; Hebrews 8.6; Matthew 9.2; John 16.8; Romans 8.26-27
- **Holy**: Psalm 51.11; Isaiah 63.10-11; Matthew 1.18; Romans 1.4
- **Truth**: John 14.17; 15.26; 16.13
- **Worthy of Worship**: Matthew 2.2; John 20.28.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3.2-11, 16-17; 28.19; Acts 2.32-33; 2 Corinthians 13.14; 1 Corinthians 12.4-6; Ephesian 4.4-6; 2 Corinthians 1.21-22; 1 Peter 1.2; John 14.16, 26; 15.26; 16.7; Revelation 1.5.

## ***Actions of the Spirit***

Only God can be engaged in the following divine activities. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is God and works in perfect harmony and unity with God the Father and God the Son:

- **Creation** (Genesis 1.2; Job 26.13; 33.4)
- **Help/comfort** (John 14.16, 26; 15.26; 16.7)
- **Inspiration** (2 Peter 1.20–21)
- **Intercession** (Romans 8.26–27; cf. Ephesians 6.18; Jude 20)
- **Miracles** (Matthew 12.28; 1 Corinthians 12.9, 11)
- **Regeneration** (John 3.5–8; Titus 3.5)
- **Resurrection** (Romans 8.11)
- **Sanctification** (2 Thessalonians 2.13; 1 Peter 1.2)

## **A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit**

The first century church believed in the person and in the work of the Spirit . . . so much so that they almost took it for granted. The church fathers reference the Spirit very little, comparatively speaking, to the doctrine concerning Jesus. Second century writers, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp and Irenaeus all mention the Spirit and affirm His part in the Godhead. In the third century some attention was given to the Spirit by Tertullian and Origen. But a good summary of the age’s lack of emphasis on the doctrine of the Spirit is seen in the opening paragraphs of the Nicæan Creed<sup>2</sup> (see below).

During the second-third centuries the church was constantly engaged in the battle over the person of Christ, especially when it comes to His deity in relation to the one God as revealed in the Old Testament. The Council of Nicaea of 325 mostly resolved this dispute, by asserting the essential deity of Jesus and declaring Him to be of the same essence as the Father.

This is not to say that false teaching regarding the Spirit was nonexistent. The most serious historical heresies regarding the Holy Spirit fall into two general categories:

- The denial that the Holy Spirit is a person.
- The denial that the Holy Spirit is the eternal God.

The earliest heresy dates to the late second or early third century. It is known as **Sabellianism**. It proposed that there was one God in three manifestations. It affirmed the one person of God but denied the personhood of Christ and the Holy Spirit, thus denying the Trinity. Also known as **Modalism**, the belief asserted that the Father is also the Son and also the Holy Spirit, depending on what role God is assuming at any one moment in time. To bolster their claims, these false teachers claimed that they were protecting Christianity from polytheism.

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<sup>2</sup> The first paragraph of this creed is one sentence about the Father: “We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible.” The next paragraph is about six times longer than this and is all about Jesus. Then comes one brief sentence about the Spirit: “And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.”

In the four decades after the council of Nicaea, those who had opposed the personhood of Jesus now attacked the Holy Spirit. Thus, in 381 a council was called in Constantinople where the Nicene Creed of 325 was revised to include a stronger statement of faith in the Holy Spirit.

During the early to mid-fourth century **Arianism** appeared. It taught that at some point in eternity past God created Jesus, who in turn created the Holy Spirit. While this false doctrine affirmed the personhood of both Jesus and the Spirit, it denied their deity and also the trinity. Arianism taught that the Godhead consisted of one person with the essence of deity.

In the sixth century, the doctrine of **Socinianism** appeared. This affirmed the personhood of Jesus, while denying His deity. It also denied the same things regarding the Holy Spirit.

Around the sixth century the Athanasian Creed<sup>3</sup> came about which stressed the equality of the three Persons in the Godhead and specifically condemned those who disagreed with the doctrine. Its teaching on the Trinity could be summarized thusly:

The Father is God.

The Son is God.

The Holy Spirit is God.

The Father is not the Son.

The Father is not the Holy Spirit.

The Son is not the Holy Spirit.

There is exactly one God.<sup>4</sup>

The Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and the Athanasian creed represented the general teaching of the church for the next 1000 years. In the late sixteenth century Unitarianism was reintroduced by Socinus, who “denied that the One God could properly be spoken of as three Persons. He taught that “the Holy Spirit is nothing but God’s power and influence.” This view took firm root in England and America, not just in Unitarianism as such but also in most forms of classical Liberalism. During the eighteenth century, liberal theology challenged the idea that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person within a “trinity.” One scholar argued that the Father, Son, and Spirit are “three modes of being” rooted in “divine self-consciousness... They are not personalities, in the modern sense of the term, but are separate aspects of one personality.”<sup>5</sup>

Variations of Unitarianism are still alive today. Modern Neo-liberalism asserts that the “Holy Spirit” is simply the name applied to God as He works in the world or as we anticipate His working in the future.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For specific references to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, see v. 3-28 of the Athanasian Creed.

<sup>4</sup> Feinberg, John S. *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God. The foundations of evangelical theology.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> William Newton Clark, as quoted by Cottrell in *What the Bible Says about the Holy Spirit: Power from on High*, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Blaikie asserts “the Holy Spirit” is “God who acts in the world.” More specifically, God who acts at all times and places we call God the Father; God made known to us in the past as Jesus Christ we call God the Son. “And God here and now, God



3. Pick out one of the nine passages and explain how it proves the Spirit is a member of the Godhead.
  
4. Why does it appear the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was largely neglected during the second and third centuries?
  
5. Briefly define the ancient false doctrines of Sabellianism and Modalism.
  
6. What is Arianism?
  
7. What is Socinianism?
  
8. How have some of the ancient false doctrines concerning the Holy Spirit been repackaged for modern people?
  
9. With reference to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, what was the intention behind the writing of the Athanasian Creed?
  
10. What seems to be the reaction of those in the Restoration movement regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?