

A UNITARIAN VIEW OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

by Sean Finnegan
sean@KingdomReady.org

Trying to nail down a biblical definition for the word “spirit” is like trying to give a cat a shower—it can be done, but only with great difficulty, and one is never sure when he has thoroughly completed the task. It is my intention to put forth a scriptural definition of the holy spirit in an unbiased manner. I realize that avoiding one’s own doctrinal blind spots is extraordinarily difficult so I welcome criticism.¹ My previous background in the holy spirit was from a charismatic non-trinitarian perspective. I considered the holy spirit to be an “it” which was given by God to the new convert for use on a daily basis. It was as if God had a large thing called spirit from which he broke off equal size pieces and implanted into each new believer upon confessing Jesus as Lord. I had thought of the spirit as an empowerment, like a battery pack which could be utilized by the saint at will. I have never believed the spirit to be a person although I have always considered God’s essential nature to be comprised of spirit. Through the past few years, I have been searching for a better understanding of the holy spirit. It is my intention to present a biblical definition of the holy spirit. First, the OT will be examined, followed by the Synoptics, the Gospel of John, and then the rest of the NT. Lastly I will express the reasons why I do not believe the spirit is a person.

The challenge

Pneumatology is a frontier of inquiry to the unitarian community. There is much work to be done in defining the holy spirit apart from the historical straight jacket imposed upon it by the Cappadocians² who in AD 381 declared that the spirit was “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son, he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets...”³ It is remarkable that nearly 300 years had to pass before the personality of the spirit was dogmatized in the Constantinopolitan Creed. The Apostles’ Creed did not mention the spirit and the Nicene Creed mentioned it almost as an afterthought in the phrase: “and in the holy spirit.” Thus, it is likely that the formula worked out by these Greek thinking Christians of the 4th century was a development rather than apostolic in origin. Therefore, I will proceed as if we were living in a time before belief in the holy spirit as a person had been chiseled into stone. We shall limit our inquiry to the biblical documents themselves.

-----The spirit in the OT-----

In order to begin our inquiry into the Biblical data we shall initially restrict ourselves to the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew word most commonly translated as “spirit” is *ruach*. Below is a table enumerating the different ways in which *ruach* is translated in the NASB.

air.....	2	points.....	1
anger.....	1	side.....	4
blast.....	2	sides.....	2
breath.....	31	Spirit.....	76
breathless.....	1	spirit.....	127
cool.....	1	spirits.....	3
courage.....	1	strength.....	1
despondency.....	1	temper.....	2
exposed.....	1	thoughts.....	1
grief.....	1	trustworthy.....	1
heart.....	1	wind.....	98
inspired.....	1	winds.....	7
mind.....	3	windy.....	2
motives.....	1	wrath.....	1

¹ Please send all kind-hearted criticism to sean@kingdomready.org (everything else can be sent to my press agent disgruntled@yourunorthodoxbeliefs.com)

² Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus

³ The Constantinopolitan Creed

Ruach is a fairly flexible word encompassing the meanings: spirit, wind, breath, and even matters of the mind (emotions etc.). All of these words denote something unseen and unexplained. “When used of living beings, *ruach* refers to the essence of the life and vitality in **both human beings and animals** that is manifested through **movement and breathing** (Genesis 2.7; 6.17; 7.15; Numbers 16.22; Ezekiel 10.17). Just as “spirit” was considered the essence of human life, so analogously the term “spirit” was used of the **presence, activity and power of God**, that is, characteristics that demonstrate that God is truly a “living God” (Deuteronomy 5.26; Joshua 3.10; 1 Samuel 7.26; Isaiah 37.4; Daniel 6.20; Matthew 16.16; Revelation 7.2).”⁴ Another Bible dictionary says of the spirit: “At its heart is the *experience* of a mysterious, awesome power—the mighty invisible **force of the wind**, the mystery of **vitality**, the otherly **power** that transforms—all *ruach*, all manifestations of **divine energy**.”⁵ The spirit is a manifestation of God’s “living” energy.⁶ A noted biblical scholar sees OT spirit as follows: “There can be little doubt that from the earliest stages of pre-Christian Judaism ‘spirit’ (*ruach*) denoted *power*—the awful, mysterious **force of the wind** (*ruach*), of the **breath** (*ruach*) **of life**, of ecstatic **inspiration** (induced by divine *ruach*)...In other words, on this understanding, *Spirit of God is in no sense distinct from God*, but is simply the power of God, *God himself acting powerfully in nature and upon men*.”⁷ Consider the following usages of *ruach* found in the Hebrew Bible:

The spirit of God may be taken from one and distributed to others (Numbers 11.17), cause the one it rests upon to prophesy (Numbers 11.25, 29; 24.2-3; 1 Samuel 10.6, 10; 1 Chronicles 12.18; 2 Chronicles 15.1; 20.14; 24.20), provide the means by which God speaks to people (2 Samuel 23.2), lead someone to a different location (1 Kings 18.12), transport people from one location to another (2 Kings 2.16), be defined parallel with the anointing of Yahweh (Isaiah 61.1 cp. Acts 10.38), be how God speaks through the prophets (Nehemiah 9.30; Zechariah 7.12), empower leaders to judge/rule the people (Judges 3.10), impart warlike energy/confidence (Judges 6.34; 11.29; 14.6, 19), supply supernatural strength (Judges 15.14), cause righteous anger (1 Samuel 11.6-7), impart regeneration/peace (Isaiah 32.15), give the Messiah wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, the fear of Yahweh, and ability to judge justly (Isaiah 11.2; 41.2), endow artisans with skill (Exodus 31.3; 35.31); and be defined parallel with the presence of God (Psalm 139.7).⁸

Each of these listed functions of the spirit refers to the action of the one God, Yahweh. The spirit of God is one of the primary ways of talking about God’s involvement in His creation. Most scholars agree as James Dunn has already noted that the Hebrew Bible does not teach a literal distinction between God and His spirit. Often times the writers of the Hebrew Bible would employ literary metaphors when speaking of Yahweh’s deeds (particularly when poetic style is in use). For example, one may say “the word of Yahweh came to me” or “the spirit of God came upon him” or “the world was established by His wisdom.” These are ways of referring to the almighty, transcendent God in His mode of acting within creation. In effect, it was God who spoke to the prophets, God who empowered the heroes of old, and God who created the world. However, these literary devices are able to preserve the “otherness” of the greatest conceivable being and yet make plenty of room for His immanence in our world without raising any complicated questions.

“If one combs through standard Bible dictionaries, it is obvious that ninety-eight percent of the biblical data is satisfied if we define the Spirit as **God in effective action, God in communication**, His power and personality extending their **influence** to touch the creation in a variety of ways...Is the Spirit really anything

⁴ Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green editors, Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period ©1996, Hendrickson Publishers, page 298

⁵ JDG Douglas, New Bible Dictionary (second edition) ©1962, ed. By JD Douglas, FF Bruce, JI Packer, N Hillyer, D Guthrie, AR Millard, DJ Wiseman, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., pages 1137

⁶ one’s spirit is also their current state of mind (1 Corinthians 2.11) which is often expressed through words (Proverbs 1.23; John 6.63)

⁷ James DG Dunn, Christology in the Making (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 133.

⁸ For a more exhaustive list see The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon pages 924-6.

other than **God's energy**, inspiring human beings to perform extraordinary feats of valor, endowing them with special artistic skill or miraculous powers, and especially communicating divine truth?"⁹

Can we conclude that the spirit is a mere impersonal power? A sort of empowerment given to the creatures He favors like a battery pack? Certainly not. Is it a mere communication device, like a radio transceiver which can send and receive messages from God? Certainly not. The spirit of God is a way of referring to Yahweh in action. Thus, to criticize His spirit is to criticize God Himself. It would be like saying that written communications are impersonal. The letter carries the message, intention, and emotions of the author to the reader. Of course, the mail is not a person but it is the very expression of the person. One experiences the distant person as near through the letter. God is so holy that if we were to see His face we would immediately expire (Exodus 33.20). Until our sins are completely removed (i.e. resurrection), we are unable to be in His immediate presence. Even so, He longs to communicate with us and have a relationship with us. He interacts with us through His spirit, His word, His empowerment, His wisdom, etc. Yet still, even at the close of the Hebrew Canon, there is no indication of individuality regarding the spirit of God. "But *of the Spirit as an entity in any sense independent of God, of Spirit as a divine hypostasis, there is nothing.*"¹⁰ Thus, we conclude (in regards to OT pneumatology) that God's spirit is not a person though it is very personal—it is the self-expression of Yahweh.

-----The spirit in the Synoptics-----

When one flips the page entitled, "The New Testament" and enter the territory of Matthew chapter one the definitions gained from the OT do not suddenly disappear. The NT does reveal, expand upon, and clarify many great truths conveyed previously but that does not mean we should throw out what the first portion of Scripture had to say. Remarkably we find that in the Gospels, the spirit of God (or holy spirit) is used very consistently with what has already been defined—God in action.

The holy spirit caused the generation of life in the virgin Mary (Matthew 1.18, 20; Luke 1.35), it is spoken of in parallel to water as something one can be immersed in (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16), it descended upon Christ at his baptism (Matthew 3.16; Mark 1.10; Luke 3.22), it drove Jesus to go into the wilderness (Matthew 4.1; Mark 1.12; Luke 4.1), it gives the disciples words to speak when on trial (Matthew 10.20; Mark 13.11; Luke 12.12), it enables Christ to proclaim justice (Matthew 12.18), it empowered the Messiah to cast out demons (Matthew 12.28), it is the source of David's inspiration (Matthew 22.43; Mark 12.36), it causes prophetic utterances (Luke 1.41, 67), it was upon Simeon (Luke 2.25), it reveals truth about the future (Luke 2.26), it empowered Jesus (Luke 4.14), and it is given by the Father to those who ask (Luke 11.13).

The spirit of God is His influence, presence, and power to accomplish His will in the universe in general and in His people. This empowerment made possible the miracles recorded throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in the Gospels. Jesus confessed that his power to drive out demons was a result of the holy spirit. In order to demonstrate this compare these two verses:

"But if I cast out demons by **the spirit of God**, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Matthew 12.28)

"But if I cast out demons by **the finger of God**, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." (Luke 11.20)

This simple equation, the spirit of God = the finger of God, marvelously supports what we have already found, that the spirit is the means by which God acts, much like a body. I interact with the world through my body. God interacts with the world through His spirit—like a finger. All of what Christ was able to do was a result of the anointing of God's spirit given to him without measure:

⁹ Anthony Buzzard, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* ©1998, International Scholars Publications, page 226.

¹⁰ James DG Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 136.

“For he whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the spirit without measure.” (John 3.34).

“You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the holy spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by devil, for God was with him.” (Acts 10.38)

We conclude, that in the synoptic Gospels, there has been no change in how the holy spirit is spoken about from what we have already seen in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹¹ Jesus saw himself as a man who was inspired by the spirit of God to speak and perform miracles and healings just like the prophets of old.

-----The spirit in John 14-16-----

In the first portion of the Gospel of John, the holy spirit is spoken of as something descending from heaven to remain upon Jesus (John 1.32-33), as a medium into (or through) which one must be born (John 3.5), as an enablement for Christ to speak the words of God (John 3.34), as a medium through which one may worship the Father (John 4.23), as the essential nature of God (John 4.24), as a life giver (John 6.63), and as something to be received by the disciples (John 7.39).

It is clear from these examples that the essential character and functionality of God’s spirit had not changed. However, the claim that John 7.39 makes seems to contradict everything we have discovered by saying “that the spirit was not yet given.”

“But this he spoke of the spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for **the spirit was not yet given**, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7.39)

Obviously, the spirit had been given in OT times, to Jesus, and to the disciples who were able to go out performing miracles and healing people. Nonetheless, there must be some essential difference between the spirit that we have described up to this point in our inquiry and that, which is described in detail in chapters 14, 15, and 16 of John in order to warrant the phrase “the spirit was not yet given.”

Our Lord explained the coming presence of the *parakletos*¹² (paraklete, comforter, helper, advocate). The chain of events would be {1} the disciple demonstrates love for Jesus by keeping his commandments (John 14.15) {2} Jesus will ask the Father to send the paraklete (John 14.16; 15.26; 16.7) {3} the paraklete will be sent in Jesus’ name to abide in the believer forever (John 14.16, 26). The paraklete is “the spirit of truth” (John 14.17), which will teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus has said (John 14.26), testify about Jesus (John 15.26), be more advantageous to the saint than the presence of Christ on earth (John 16.7), convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16.8-11), guide them into all truth by speaking only what “he” hears (John 16.13), and disclose Christ to the disciple (John 16.14-15).

-----Excursus: What about all those personal pronouns?-----

Nearly all modern translations have adopted the standard of using personal pronouns in reference to the holy spirit. However, the word “spirit” is neuter in Greek and when pronouns are used in reference to spirit, they should have been translated without gender as the KJV does. Although it is often the case that masculine and feminine Greek pronouns are translated in English as “it” or “which,” neuter words in Greek are virtually never translated into English using personal pronouns except when referring to the spirit. Immediately this should grab our attention as a potential area of bias in translation.

¹¹ A possible exception could be the foreshadowing demonstrated by interchanging the spirit (Mark 13.11) for Jesus himself (Luke 21.14-15).

¹² *parakletos* is found on 5 times in the NT (John 14.16, 26; 15.26; 16.7; 1 John 2.1)

“Now it turns out that both “masculine” and “feminine” Greek nouns can be used for impersonal things as well as persons. But **“neuter” nouns are used only for impersonal things**, such as objects, animals, forces, abstract principles, and so on. The same holds true for “masculine,” “feminine,” and “neuter” pronouns...But even though the “personal” category is larger in Greek than in English, the “Holy Spirit” is referred to by a “neuter” noun in Greek. Consequently, **it is never spoken of with personal pronouns** in Greek. It is a “which,” not a “who.” It is an “it,” not a “he.” This is the case, then, where the importance of the principle of following primary, ordinary, generally recognized meaning of the Greek when translating becomes clear. To take a word that everywhere else would be translated “which” or “that,” and arbitrarily change it to “who” or “whom” when it happens to be used of “the holy spirit,” is a kind of special pleading. In other words, it is a biased way to translate. And because this arbitrary change cannot be justified linguistically, it is also inaccurate.”¹³

However, there is also another issue that requires examination—the word translated “comforter” or “helper” is masculine in Greek. However, grammatical gender is entirely different from sexual gender. For example, in Greek, the word “city” is feminine and the word “treasure” is masculine. As a result, when the NT refers to a city, feminine pronouns are used and when treasure is represented by pronouns, masculine ones are used. How does this translate into English?

example of feminine pronoun being translated as neuter

“When he approached, he saw the **city** [feminine] and wept over **it** [feminine]” (Luke 19.41). The word translated into English “it” is literally the Greek word for “her.” Yet, the translators still used an impersonal pronoun because that is how English works.

example of masculine pronoun being translated as neuter

“The kingdom of heaven is like a **treasure** [masculine] hidden in the field, **which** [masculine] a man found...” (Matthew 13.44). Why isn’t the word “which” translated “who” if it is masculine? Because in English we never designate non-persons with masculine and feminine pronouns.¹⁴

Thus, a word’s grammatical gender does not (in most cases) imply sexual gender.¹⁵ If it did, then one would be quite confused about the gender of the holy spirit. In Hebrew *ruach* is feminine, in Greek *pneuma* is neuter and *parakletos* is masculine. Thus if grammatical gender implied sexual gender, what pronouns should we use: “she,” “it,” or “he?” The only way to determine how to translate the pronouns is based on the belief of the translator concerning whether or not the word in question is a person. This process works fine in most cases except when the theological bias of translators dictates personhood. In these cases (“word” in John 1.1-3 and “holy spirit” throughout the NT), the translators over literalize the grammatical gender by breaking their own consistency and then do not even leave a footnote. Then, students of the Scriptures see that masculine pronouns are used in reference to the spirit (along with capitalization—an equally biased invention) and then claim **because of this** that the spirit is a person. This is circular reasoning.

The word “spirit” is neuter, therefore the pronouns referring to “spirit” should be translated accordingly as “it,” “which,” etc. If modern translators followed this standard there would be little question about the holy spirit. At least until the reader gets to John 14.16 in which the word “helper” is masculine and may thus be referred to in that verse by a masculine pronoun (although we have already stated that this is not necessary). The determining question (as to whether we use masculine or neuter pronouns) “is the paraklete a person?” needs to be answered based on the context.

“...He will give you another **helper**, that he may be with you forever; that is the **spirit of truth**, whom the world cannot receive...” (John 14.16-17)

¹³ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation* ©2003, University Press of America, page 140.

¹⁴ that is, unless a figure of speech called personification is taking place. For example, ships & cars are sometimes represented in English with female pronouns but all understand that they are impersonal objects.

¹⁵ We have already noted that if a Greek word is neuter then it does reflect that in English the word should use impersonal pronouns.

“These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the **helper**, the **holy spirit**, whom the Father will send in my name...” (John 14.25-26)

“When the **helper** comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the **spirit of truth** who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me,” (John 15.26)

“I have more things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. But when **he**, the **spirit of truth** comes, he will guide you into all the truth...” (John 16.13)

The helper is the holy spirit (or spirit of truth). We have already noted that the word translated “spirit” *pneuma* is neuter, therefore, it is not a person. Furthermore, if in the other 65 books of the Bible the spirit is not a person (and the helper is equated to the spirit) then we must conclude that the helper (although represented by a masculine noun and masculine pronouns) should also be translated without gender. The only reasonable exception would be if personification is in use.¹⁶

~~~~~  
 End Excursus  
 ~~~~~

So, the comforter is no more of a person than the spirit of truth, but what is being taught here that warrants the claim made by John 7.39? Some interesting language switches that occur in the last supper teaching deserve our attention. In some places Jesus tells them that he will send the paraklete in others he says, “I will come to you,” note below:

Texts in which the paraklete will come

“He will give you another helper, that he may be with you forever”	John 14.16
“the helper, the holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you”	John 14.26
“when the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father...”	John 15.26
“if I do not go away the helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you”	John 16.7
“when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth”	John 16.13

Texts in which Jesus will come

“I will come again and receive you to myself”	John 14.3
“I will come to you”	John 14.18
“you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you”	John 14.17
“he who loves me...I will love him and will disclose myself to him”	John 14.21
“if anyone loves me, he will keep my word...and we will come to him and make our abode with him”	John 14.23
“I go away, and I will come to you”	John 14.28
“‘a little while, and you will see me;’ and, ‘because I go to the Father’”	John 16.17

The holy spirit is coming AND Christ is coming. How can this confusion be resolved?

“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever he hears, he will speak; and he will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of mine and will disclose it to you.” (John 16.12-14).

Jesus would come to his disciples through the paraklete. “The work of Christ’s Spirit as Comforter, Advocate, and Helper was nothing other than the work of Christ Himself as Comforter, Advocate, and

¹⁶ Personification would not be unusual because this technique is often used to express truth in Scripture (for example, wisdom is personified as a lady in Proverbs 8). Also, note that Jesus himself said “these things I have spoken to you in figurative language...” (John 16.25).

Helper through that divine power.”¹⁷ It was through the paraklete that Christ and the Father would come and dwell within the saint (even while he is in heaven). Jesus is not literally in each member of the family of God, but through the spirit his mind is projected into us to comfort, reveal truth, aid in times of temptation, and guide us to follow him. “He had been with them for a short time, but the ‘other paraklete,’ his *alter ego*, would be with them permanently, and not only with them but in them.”¹⁸ Therefore it is evident that the spirit which inspired Jesus during his ministry on earth would now enable him to be present within his disciples in a new and advantageous way.

-----The spirit in the rest of the NT-----

Is this concept of Christ indwelling the believer through his spirit unique to John or can it be substantiated in other NT documents? How do the rest of the Greek Scriptures speak about spirit? Before we go any further and look at Paul (who has much to say on the subject), it is necessary to recall the chief prediction of John the Baptist: “I baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the holy spirit” (Mark 1.8; Matthew 3.11; Luke 3.16; John 1.33). This prediction was reinforced by Jesus after he had spent forty days with his disciples in his resurrected body:

“Gathering them together, he commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” he said, “you heard of from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the holy spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1.4-5)

Then after just a few days of anticipation the disciples were in the temple at the hour of prayer when the sky started making strange noises, into the building rushed a violent wind accompanied by fire. Suddenly they found themselves in a state of ecstatic inspiration in which they spoke foreign languages unlearned as the spirit gave them utterance. Note carefully, Peter’s explanation of this event:

“This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the holy spirit, he [Jesus] has poured forth this which you both see and hear.” (Acts 2.32-33)

Jesus is seen as the dispenser of the spirit. Not only is he the greatest prophet inspired by the spirit of God, not only is he the anointed by God of the spirit (to preach the gospel and heal people), but he is also the lord of the spirit who baptizes his followers in the spirit of God. Even so, this is still not all. Paul picks up where John left off and further develops the connection between the ascended Jesus and the spirit. Consider the chart below which enumerates some of the places that Paul speaks of the spirit:

spirit dwells in the believer	Romans 8.9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3.16; 6.19; 2 Corinthians 1.22; Ephesians 2.22; 5.18
spirit of Christ dwells in the believer	Romans 8.2, 9; 2 Corinthians 3.17 ¹⁹ ; Galatians 4.6; Philippians 1.19
Christ dwells in the believer	Romans 8.9-10; 2 Corinthians 13.5; Galatians 2.20; Ephesians 1.23; 3.16-17; Colossians 1.27

Paul freely switches between these phrases as if they were synonymous. In order to demonstrate this, consider the texts below:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be **strengthened with power**

¹⁷ Alva Huffer, Systematic Theology ©1960, The Restitution Herald, page 92.

¹⁸ F.F. Bruce, The Gospel & Epistles of John ©1983, Eerdmans Publishing Company, page 302

¹⁹ It may be the case that the Lord here is Yahweh depending on how one views 2 Corinthians 3. JDG Dunn has suggested that it is a midrash of Exodus 34. If this is true then this reference should be move down to the next category.

through His Spirit in the inner man, **so that Christ may dwell in your hearts** through faith...” (Ephesians 3.14-17)

One of the functions of the spirit is to empower the Christian to have Christ dwell within them. The two (spirit & Christ) are intimately linked to each other in the experience of the NT saint.

“However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed **the Spirit of God** dwells in you. But if anyone does not have **the Spirit of Christ**, he does not belong to Him. **If Christ is in you**, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if **the Spirit of Him** who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through **His Spirit** who dwells in you.” Romans 8.9-11

This is remarkable. It is as if the spirit of God, the spirit of Christ, and Christ himself are all equivalent ways of speaking about the same essential truth. Paul does not focus on the ontological distinctions rather he sees the spirit primarily in functional terms in the experience of the Christian. From this perspective the spirit is Jesus. “The Spirit is now definitely the Spirit of Christ²⁰, the other Counselor who has taken over Jesus’ role on earth.²¹ This means that Jesus is now present to the believer only in and through the Spirit,²² and that the mark of the Spirit is both the recognition of Jesus’ present status²³ and the reproduction of the character of his sonship and resurrection life in the believer^{24, 25}.”

Therefore, we conclude that the spirit is not a person but the projection of a person—the risen Christ—within the heart of the believer. Christ is the one “who searches the minds and hearts” (Revelation 2.23). He is the head of the body (Colossians 1.18) who is able to cause “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4.16). The risen Christ is with us always (Matthew 28.20) and in the midst of two or three gathered in his name (Matthew 18.20). Yet at the same time, he is still a man (1 Timothy 2.5) seated at the right hand of God (Mark 16.19; Hebrews 12.2; etc.) in heavenly places (Ephesians 1.20; 1 Peter 3.22; etc.). So how can Christ be intimately involved in working within his church even while he is in heaven? As the disciples asked, how could he disclose himself to them without the world seeing him (John 14.22)? Christ is present through the spirit. The spirit which proceeds from the Father connects Christ to his body like a nervous system—making him aware of what is going on and allowing him to coordinate his body. The spirit fully represents Christ and so to me the spirit is Christ in me.

“...These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1.19-23)

Therefore, the holy spirit is God in action (as we have seen from the OT and the Synoptics) PLUS the new added “comforting” aspects (presented in John) distributed under the auspices of the Father by the ascended Messiah in order to benefit the Church by allowing Christ to dwell within each believer.

²⁰ (Scripture references were not originally footnoted) Acts 16.7; Romans 8.9; Galatians 4.6; Philippians 1.19; also 1 Peter 1.1; cf. John 7.38; 19.30; 20.22; Acts 2.33; Hebrews 9.14; Revelation 3.1; 5.6

²¹ John 14.16; cf. 1 John 2.1

²² John 14.16-28; 16.7; Romans 8.9f; 1 Corinthians 6.17; 15.45; Ephesians 3.16f; cf. Romans 1.4; 1 Timothy 3.16; 1 Peter 3.18; Revelation 2-3

²³ 1 Corinthians 12.3; 1 John 5.6-12

²⁴ Romans 8.11, 14-16, 23; 1 Corinthians 15.45-49; 2 Corinthians 3.18; Galatians 4.6f; 1 John 3.2

²⁵ JDG Douglas, New Bible Dictionary (second edition) ©1962, ed. By JD Douglas, FF Bruce, JI Packer, N Hillyer, D Guthrie, AR Millard, DJ Wiseman, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., pages 1140-1

-----The Spirit is not a Person-----

Surfing through the Internet, one could easily conclude that it is a capital crime to deny defining the holy spirit as a person that is co-equal, co-eternal, and co-essential with the Father and the Son. An overwhelming number of anathemas are being proclaimed against people who hold a nonorthodox understanding of the spirit. Furthermore, almost all modern Bible translations push their belief that the holy spirit is a “he” by translating ambiguous pronouns as such, for instance “which” as “who” and “it” as “he,” etc. Add to this the fact that my word processor will not allow me to write the words “holy spirit” without angrily underlining it in a jagged red electronic ink to indicate that I have transgressed the rules of grammar by not capitalizing a proper noun. In light of this enormous pressure to conform to orthodoxy, I thought I should list out some of the reasons why I choose to be a heretic and say the holy spirit is not a person.²⁶ Following are a number of reasons:

Name

In the Bible, one’s name meant more than what people said to get someone’s attention. Rather, one’s name encapsulated all that a person stood for, and it was believed that there was a strong connection between what one’s name meant and his or her nature. For example, God’s proper name, Yahweh, is derived from the Hebrew verb “to be;” thus, the statements, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3.14) and “[He] who was and who is and who is to come” (Revelation 4.8) reflect the meaning of His name. To be Yahweh is to be the existent one—the one who must exist. Jesus’ name means “Yahweh is salvation,” which makes sense when one stops to consider that Jesus was the implement of Yahweh’s salvation for all mankind. Consider the statement about Jesus, “For there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12). Yet, the holy spirit is given no proper name. This is astounding if the holy spirit were truly a person equal with, yet distinct from the Father and Son. In fact, it was considered severe punishment to strike one’s name from the record, yet this must have been the case if the holy spirit were indeed a person.²⁷

Greetings

At the beginning of each of the thirteen letters written by Paul, all of them include in the first few verses some variation of the following benediction: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁸ This consistency is remarkable. Paul wishes upon the readers grace and peace from God and Jesus, but never from the holy spirit. If the spirit were a person distinct from the Father and Son, then why does the spirit never send grace and peace in Paul’s letters? In addition, the letter of James opens with “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...” Apparently, James considers himself a lifetime slave to the Father and the Son, but no mention is made concerning the holy spirit. Furthermore, the first letter of John begins with the following statement of fellowship: “...indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1.3). Again, it would not make sense to leave out the holy spirit from fellowship with the believers if it were an independent person.

Spirit is owned by God

The phrase “spirit of God” appears twelve times in the New Testament. In Greek, the phrase “of God” is one word, *theou*, which is in the genitive case. This is the possessive case and can be translated into either English using the preposition “of” or the apostrophe “s” designation. For example, if Spot is the dog of Grace, then Spot is Grace’s dog—Grace is Spot’s owner. Thus it is with the spirit. It is God’s spirit—

²⁶ Person means that the being in question has a mind (emotions, intellect, and will). Person does not mean a human being. God the Father is a person. Jesus is a person.

²⁷ It is not my intention to “put down” the holy spirit or to diminish its influence in our lives by the statements made in this article. If what I have said bothers you, please email me (sean@kingdomready.org)

²⁸ Romans 1.7; 1 Corinthians 1.3; 2 Corinthians 1.2; Galatians 1.3; Ephesians 1.2; Philippians 1.2; Colossians 1.2; 1 Thessalonians 1.1; 2 Thessalonians 1.2; 1 Timothy 1.2; 2 Timothy 1.2; Titus 1.4; Philemon 1.3

Yahweh is the source and possessor of the spirit. It goes where He sends it and does what He wants it to do. The spirit is not independent of God, but it is His influence and presence.

Not prayed to

Jesus gave explicit instructions for prayer in the Sermon on the Mount and then again at the last supper. He always instructed his disciples to pray to the Father. Then at the last supper, he told them to pray to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ. This is especially noteworthy because the teaching contained within John 14-16 primarily concerns the future coming of holy spirit. Why not ask the spirit directly to come into the new believer? Instead, Jesus says, "...if you ask the Father for anything in my name, He will give it to you" (John 16.23) and "...but if I go, I will send him [the helper] to you" (John 16.7). Furthermore, John the Baptist prophesied that one would come after him who would baptize in holy spirit (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33). This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when Jesus poured forth what the people saw and heard—the holy spirit (Acts 2.33). If the spirit were a person, then why does it not have a say about its own sending? The chain of events is clear, the convert or evangelist prays to God in the name of Jesus to receive spirit, and then Jesus baptizes the new believer in the spirit which proceeds from God.

Left out of key passages

Jesus confirmed the time-honored creed of the Jewish people when he declared, "...Hear, O Israel! the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12.28-29). Jesus held to the belief of strict monotheism that the Hebrew Scriptures taught.²⁹ Why is the holy spirit left out if it were also God?

When Jesus walked on this earth, he had an incredible oneness with His father (John 10.30). He lived in a state of perpetual communion, always doing the works,³⁰ obeying the will,³¹ and speaking the words³² of his Father. In fact, several times God speaks audibly to Jesus, and others hear what He says (Luke 3.22; Mark 9.7; John 12.28). This oneness is wonderfully encapsulated in Matthew 11.27: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*." No one really knows the Son except the Father. No one really knows the Father except the Son. No one can know the Father unless the Son reveals Him. There is a great deal of exclusivity expressed in this text. Why is the holy spirit left out if it were also God?

The Olivet Discourse is the teaching during which Jesus explained what would happen just before the Kingdom comes (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). After expressing to his disciples that they should be able to tell when the end is near, he clarifies by saying, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24.36). It is evident that in Jesus' mind, the potential beings who may have end times knowledge include humans, the angels, himself, and the Father. Why is it that only the Father knows when the end will come? If it were also God, why is the holy spirit left out twice (once from those who potentially could know, but don't; and once from those who do know)?

Several of the prophets had visions of Yahweh on His throne (1 Kings 22.19; Isaiah 6.1; Ezekiel 1.26; Daniel 7.9; Revelation 4.2). Jesus has been promised the throne of David (Luke 1.32). Until then, he is seated with the Father on His throne (Revelation 3.21). What about the holy spirit's throne? Why is the holy spirit left out if it were also considered to be God?

²⁹ Yahweh alone is God (Deuteronomy 4.24, 25-39; 5.1-7; 6.4; Isaiah 43.10-13; 44.6-8; 45.5-7, 18-22; etc.)

³⁰ John 8.29; 10.25, 32, 37; 14.10; 17.4

³¹ John 3.34; 5.30; 6.38; 14.31; 15.10

³² John 7.16; 8.26, 28, 38; 12.49-50; 14.24; 17.8, 14

What about the phrase “the holy spirit says?”

Several texts have been used to support the belief the holy spirit is a person because the holy spirit speaks (2 Samuel 23.2; Matthew 22.43; Mark 12.36; Acts 1.16; 28.25; Hebrews 3.7; 9.8). Although it is certainly an indication of personhood to communicate (i.e. speak one’s mind) this is not necessarily the case for these texts.

“for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the holy spirit spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1.21)

God speaks through holy spirit. This is how we came to have the Scriptures. They were a result of God’s inspiration of the writer through the medium of His spirit/word. It is a well-known fact that the Jews have regularly used other words in an effort not to pronounce the divine name. For example, “heaven,”³³ “blessed,”³⁴ “holy One,”³⁵ “Lord,”³⁶ etc. are ways of referring to Yahweh without uttering and thus making common His name. In like manner, the phrases “word of God,” “spirit of God,” “breath of God,” “wisdom of God,” “glory of God,” “power of God,” etc. are mere circumlocutions for God’s activity in the world. In affect, this literary method does no damage to God’s supremacy and transcendence but expresses His activity.

“As for the rabbinic formula (‘The Holy Spirit says’), is this any more than what we might call a *literary hypostatization*? —that is, a habit of language which by use and wont develops what is only an apparent distinction between Yahweh and one of these words and phrases used earlier to describe his activity towards men (here particularly in inspiring scripture). Have we in all these cases any more than a personification, a literary (or verbal) device to speak of God’s action without becoming involved every time in a more complicated description of how the transcendent God can intervene on earth? —in other words, simply a useful shorthand device (‘Spirit of God,’ ‘glory of God,’ etc.) which can both express the character of God’s immanence in a particular instance and safeguard his transcendence at the same time without more ado.”³⁷

What about the intercession of the holy spirit?

The following text is quoted to prove that the holy spirit is person because “he” intercedes on behalf of the saints and has a mind:

“In the same way the spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the spirit is, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8.26-27)

“Romans 8.26 means, as the whole context shows, nothing other than this: ‘although we have no very definite conception of what we desire, and cannot state it in fit language in our prayer but only disclose it by inarticulate groanings, yet God receives these groanings as acceptable prayers inasmuch as they come from a soul full of the Holy Spirit.’”³⁸ The mind of the spirit could be a way of speaking about the thoughts of the person. “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2.11). If this is the case here, then verse 27 could be paraphrased: “Christ who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the man’s spirit is, because Christ’s job is to intercede for the saints according to the will of God.” Regardless it is clear from a few verses later that “Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Romans

³³ Matthew 19.23-24; Mark 11.30; Luke 15.18, 21

³⁴ Mark 14.61; 1 Timothy 6.15

³⁵ 2 Kings 19.22; Job 6.10; 1 John 2.20

³⁶ Virtually every OT quotation in which Yahweh had appeared has been rendered Lord *kurios*

³⁷ James DG Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (second edition) ©1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 134.

³⁸ Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* ©1977, Mott Media, page 522

8.34). Christ is the intercessor and the spirit is Christ to the believer (Romans 8.9-11). It is not at all unexpected to see a blurring of categories here; this is common in Paul's letters.

What about blasphemy against the holy spirit?

Some have inferred that the spirit must be a person and to deny this fundamental belief is blasphemy against the holy spirit. A demonized man was healed by Christ and the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Christ pointed out the absurdity of "Satan casting out Satan" and then confessed that it was by the spirit of God that he casted out demons. Then he made the statement, "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the holy spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12.32).

Blasphemy against the holy spirit is observing God in action through his human Messiah and declaring that the source of his power was demonic rather than divine. In essence, they were calling God the prince of demons. This sort of unrepentant, hardhearted, intentional blasphemy against God at work in His Messiah is unforgivable.

-----**Conclusion**-----

Jason BeDuhn has noted that "Later Christian theology also applied the technical status of a "person" on the Holy Spirit, which has lead modern translators and readers to think of the Holy Spirit in human terms as a "who," even a "he," rather than as an "it" that transcends human measures of personhood.³⁹" This intentional cloudiness has been injected into the modern translation in order to "honor" the spirit as God and "help" people to "rightly" understand the Scriptures. Yet, is it more honoring to change the meaning of someone/something or to represent it as it truly is? Certainly if the Bible teaches unequivocally the spirit is a person, then God doesn't need the translators' help to teach this doctrine by tweaking pronouns in favor of orthodoxy. However, if one's doctrine is only as secure as the translation he or she favors then it is time to shed dogma in replace it with a spirit of inquiry.

³⁹ Jason David BeDuhn, Truth in Translation ©2003, University Press of America, page 136.