

The Person of the Holy Spirit
in Pauline Literature

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Introduction

Throughout ecclesiastical history, various ideas have been advanced about the nature of the Holy Spirit. In the third century, Sabellius taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only roles or modes manifested by the one God. The Spirit was viewed as personal and divine but not distinct from the Father or the Son. Arius (ca. 250-336) taught that the one eternal God generated the Son, who in turn created the Holy Spirit. Although Arius accepted the personality of the Spirit, he denied both the eternality and deity of the Spirit.¹ Lelio Socinus (1525-62) denied both the deity of Christ and the personality of the Spirit.² Instead, Socinianism defined the Holy Spirit as an impersonal energy eternally flowing from God.

In the fourth century, Christianity reacted to these heresies by affirming the essential unity of God, as well as, the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This formulation avoided tritheism on the one hand while maintaining the distinctness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it has also formed the backbone of theological thought to this day.

When faced with these various alternatives, Christianity has had to examine the unique theological contributions of each biblical author and synthesize them into a coherent and balanced framework concerning the nature of God. The purpose of this paper is to examine Paul's contribution to this process by analyzing his teaching concerning the personal nature of the Holy Spirit.

Definitions

Semantics is a vital part of any theological endeavor; therefore, several important terms must be clarified before proceeding. This includes defining the scope of Pauline literature and the meaning of the terms *person* and *spirit*.

For the purposes of this study, Pauline literature includes all of the epistles traditionally ascribed to Paul with the exception of the Book of Hebrews. While the author of the Book of Hebrews was clearly among the Pauline circle (Heb 13:23), he has no direct experience with the Lord (Heb 2:3). Stylistic considerations also militate against Pauline authorship, and the testimony of the early church was divided.³

Because God's nature is unlike human nature, the term *person* must be understood in a theological context that is unavoidably ambiguous. While one must avoid reading later theological concepts back into Paul's writings, one cannot ignore the fact that a considerable amount of discussion has occurred over the centuries on this topic. As Swete noted, the idea that God exists in a threefold manner and in a threefold relation does not correspond with the nature of human existence; precise terms like "hypostasis" and "persona" do not adequately express the essence of God's nature, yet for the time being, these imperfect terms represent eternal truths based on God's revelation of Himself.⁴

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1954), 8.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 220-221, 388.

³ Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 374-377.

⁴ Henry B. Swete, "The Person of the Holy Spirit" in *The Official Report of the Church Congress held at Exeter* (London: Bemrose & Sons, 1894), 693.

Although God and humans are significantly different, humans were made in God's image and share certain basic attributes of personhood with God. In this regard, Torrey cogently noted the term *person* often causes people to think of an individual with a head, torso, arms, legs, hands, and feet; however, these are not the marks of personality but of corporeality. The marks of personality are knowledge, feeling and will, and any being who knows, thinks, feels, and wills is a person whether he has a body or not.⁵ Similarly, Carter writes, "The essential notes of a person—that is, those characteristics without which personhood would be unthinkable and impossible—include spiritual essence, intelligence or rationality, volition, emotions, and moral responsibility."⁶

Lastly, the term "spirit" (*pneuma*) must be understood in its original linguistic and historical context. The semantic range of *pneuma* is quite broad, which can create ambiguity and difficulty in translation. Thus, while *pneuma* can refer to wind (John 3:8) or breath (2 Thes 2:8), it can also refer to angelic or demonic spirits (Eph 2:2). It can refer to the rational spirit of human personality (1 Cor 2:11) or to a mental disposition or influence (Rom 8:15, 11:8). However, the most frequent reference in the New Testament is to the Holy Spirit (more than 250 times).⁷

Grammatical Issues

While Paul used many different expressions for God's Spirit, he always spoke of the Spirit in the singular. Paul referred to the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God, yet he used these expressions interchangeably without any indication of plurality (1 Cor 12:3). This is consistent with the overall testimony of Scripture; biblical authors used the plural when referring to angels, demons, or human spirits.⁸ Paul clearly affirmed that there is only one divine Spirit (Eph 2:18, 4:4).

Secondly, Paul's choice of pronouns when referring to the Spirit is not proof that the Spirit is or is not a person. The Greek term *pneuma* is a neuter noun; therefore, biblical authors usually used neuter pronouns when referring to the Spirit. For example, in Romans 8:16, the pronoun "Himself" in the New King James Version is literally "Itself" in Greek (*auto to pneuma*) just as the Authorized Version reads.⁹ The phrase "as He wills" (referring to the Spirit) is literally "as wills" (*kathos bouletai*) in the original Greek (1 Cor 12:11). The verb requires a third person singular pronoun (he, she or it) to finish the thought and the translator must choose based on the context.

Although the original Greek text usually calls for a neuter pronoun, translators usually choose to use a masculine pronoun. This is because neuter pronouns in Greek do not necessarily imply personhood or nonpersonhood. For example, the Greek word for demon (*daimonion*) is neuter, yet demons are considered persons. In addition, the Greek word for child (*paidion*) is

⁵ Reuben A. Torrey, *The Holy Spirit* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1927), 16.

⁶ Charles Webb Carter, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 22.

⁷ J.D.G. Dunn, "Spirit, Holy Spirit" in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d. ed.

⁸ One possible exception involves "the seven Spirits of God" mentioned in the Book of Revelation (e.g., Rev 3:1, 4:5). These appear to be ministering angels (Rev 1:4, 5:6). Zechariah 6:5 refers to "four spirits of heaven" in a similar fashion. Everywhere else in the Book of Revelation, John referred to the Spirit in the singular (cf. Rev 2:7, 11, 17).

⁹ Scriptures are quoted from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

also neuter, yet this term is translated using masculine personal pronouns to keep with the rules of English (Matt 18:2).¹⁰ Thus, an overly literal translation would appear very awkward in English. This illustrates the fact that every translation contains some elements of interpretation.

There is one possibly significant exception to this rule, but the evidence is not convincing. There are places where a masculine personal pronoun was used to refer to the Holy Spirit; while this may seem to contradict the rule given above about nouns and pronouns agreeing in gender, it is actually a figure of speech known as heterosis.¹¹ Walvoord suggests that Paul used a masculine relative pronoun when referring to the Spirit in Ephesians 1:13-14.¹² However, Ryrie notes that the pronoun “who” in verse 14 may refer to the word “guarantee” (“earnest” in the Authorized Version), which is also masculine.¹³ In addition, Comfort notes that the earliest manuscripts (P46, B) contain a neuter pronoun while the later manuscripts have the masculine pronoun.¹⁴ Therefore, the neuter was probably the original reading, and scribes who wanted to personalize the Spirit probably changed the text later.

Descriptive Attributes

Paul’s description of the Spirit is more revealing. Often, Paul referred to “the Spirit” (fifteen times) without any further description. However, Paul also referred to “the Holy Spirit” (sixteen times), “the Spirit of God” (eight times), or even “the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30) making a connection with God. Paul also mentioned “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9), “the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:17), “the Spirit of His Son” (Gal 4:6), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:19) making a connection with Jesus Christ.

Paul clearly linked the Spirit of God with God’s presence. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Later, he said, “. . . your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God” (1 Cor 6:19). Paul’s analogy depends on the fact that, in ancient times, people believed that gods inhabited the temples that were built for them. This is also probably an allusion to the appearance of God’s glory at the dedication of the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-35) and of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8:1ff). In Paul’s mind, the believer is “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:22).

This association has roots in the Old Testament. Dunn observes, “In the early days, ‘the Spirit’ had been one of the chief ways of speaking about the presence of God” (cf. 1 Sam 16:13ff with 18:12, and Isa 63:11ff.).¹⁵ This association is seen throughout the Old Testament (Pss 51:11, 139:7, Hag 2:4-5). Fatehi concludes, “The Spirit is portrayed as standing for God himself in his presence among and action upon his people, both individually and corporately”¹⁶

¹⁰ Tim Martin, *The Watchtower and the Wholly Other, Holy Spirit*. (Watchman Fellowship, Inc., 2000) <http://www.watchman.org/jw/watchtowerholyspirit.htm> (accessed 5/15/2000).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 7.

¹³ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 220-221, 344.

¹⁴ Philip Wesley Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 153-154.

¹⁵ Dunn, *New Bible Dictionary*.

¹⁶ Mehrdad Fatehi, *The Spirit’s Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 201.

Similarly, Paul also linked the Spirit with Christ's presence. In Romans 8:9-10, the Spirit of Christ and the presence of Christ are synonymous. Indeed, "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17). He also called the risen Christ "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:21). For Paul, "the Spirit clearly functions as the medium of the risen Lord's presence and activity *in the same way* that it functions in relation to God in the Old Testament and Judaism as a whole."¹⁷

Just as Paul presented Jesus as God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim 3:16), in like manner, he portrayed God and Christ as present in and working through the one, divine Spirit. Swete rightly concluded that the Spirit is God proceeding from God, not the Father or the Son, but the Spirit of both.¹⁸

Occasionally, Paul used the term *spirit* in the sense of an influence or attitude; however, this does not mean that he was referring to the Holy Spirit and does not justify depersonalizing the Spirit. For example, Paul spoke of "the Spirit of adoption" (Rom 8:15) "a spirit of stupor" (Rom 11:8) or "the spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph 1:17).

As noted earlier, the term "spirit" (*pneuma*) has a broad semantic range, which can lead to ambiguity in translation, as well as, an intentional double entendre on the part of the author (Rom 8:15, Gal 4:6). To reflect this uncertainty, some translations do not capitalize the term *spirit* (cf. Rom 8:15 NASB with NKJV above).

The context provides translators and interpreters with evidence as to which meaning Paul intended. For example, in English, the statements "nurse your patient back to health" and "nurse your newborn every two hours" have completely different meanings; however, the context helps determine which sense is meant. Restricting a term to a single definition leads to humorous results and unwarranted eisegesis.

Thus, passages not referring to the Holy Spirit cannot be used to conclude that the Spirit is merely an influence or attitude. For example, Paul told Timothy that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim 1:7). In this passage, Paul was referring to the results of divine regeneration. To be sure, the Spirit is influential in producing godly attitudes; but so are Christian parents, yet they are not thereby depersonalized.

Personal Activities

Not surprisingly then, Paul ascribed all the elements of personality to the Spirit, which include knowledge, feeling, and will. The Spirit "knows" the thoughts of God, which also implies omniscience and divinity (1 Cor 2:11 NASB). Christians are not to "grieve" the Holy Spirit of God (Eph 4:30); this is an allusion to Israel's wilderness rebellion and again links the Spirit with God's presence (Pss 78:40, 95:10, Isa 63:10). Spiritual gifts are distributed in the church as the Spirit "wills" (1 Cor 12:11); this same verb (*boulomai*) is used of the Father (Lk 22:42) and the Son (Lk 10:22) to express desire, purpose and intention. In Romans 8:27, the Spirit is distinguished from God by virtue of communicating with Him; the term "mind" (*phronema*) indicates that the Spirit has thoughts and intent.

The Spirit participates in communication. Paul wrote that the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:16), indicating that the Spirit is just as personal as the human spirit. Similarly, Paul wrote, "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of

¹⁷ Fatehi, *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul*, 202.

¹⁸ Swete, *The Person of the Holy Spirit*, 693.

His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal 4:6), again linking the Spirit with the presence of the risen Christ.

The works of the Spirit also demonstrate the elements of personality. The Spirit leads and guides the sons of God (Rom 8:14). The Spirit “helps” (*sunantilambanomai*) as an Advocate by making intercession for Christians in prayer (Rom 8:26), which points to the Johannine Paschal Discourse (John 14:16). An influence or power cannot intercede for someone in a personal activity like prayer. The Spirit searches out and reveals knowledge (1 Cor 2:10); while a photograph, a book or an experiment may “reveal” information, they do not search out knowledge. The Spirit teaches (1 Cor 2:13), works (1 Cor 12:11), and foretells the future (1 Tim 4:1).

Personification

Although Paul clearly presented the Spirit in personal terms, the possibility of personification must also be considered. Although personification appears extensively throughout the Bible, the best known example occurs in the Book of Proverbs where wisdom is personified as a woman (Prv 1:20ff). Personification is usually easy to identify because it involves something well known and clearly impersonal. However, God must reveal the nature of the Spirit because human senses cannot perceive the heavenly realm.

Overall, the evidence does not favor the use of personification. First, an author usually makes only limited use of a particular personification; however, the passages in question span Paul’s entire ministry. Second, with the exception of Jude, all other biblical authors also refer to the Spirit in personal terms. Borrowing on this scale seems most unlikely; such extensive use of personification would raise the possibility that God, Jesus, or Satan were also personifications. Third, in 1 Corinthians 2:11, Paul compared the cognitive aspects of the human spirit with those of the Spirit of God; authors use similes to illustrate relationships among real entities not imaginary personifications.

Impersonal References

In the final analysis, the only way to prove that these references are personifications is to prove, from the Scriptures, that the Holy Spirit is literally impersonal. At first glance, several passages might appear to prove this notion.

First, Paul often associated the Spirit with power. For example, Paul wished that Christians would “abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,” and he performed “mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God” (Rom 15:13, 19).

However, these passages do not say that the Spirit is power but that the Spirit has power and is the agency by which signs and wonders are accomplished. An agency can be personal or impersonal as the following examples illustrate. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul metaphorically described Christ as “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Other passages refer to “the power of the Egyptians” (Exod 3:8), “the power of darkness” (Col 1:13), and “the power of death” (Heb 2:14).

In addition, Paul differentiated the Spirit from power. He wrote, “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance” (1 Thes 1:5). This reference does not fit the pattern of Hebrew parallelism. If the Spirit was synonymous with power, this reference was redundant (cf. 1 Cor 2:4).

Restricting the nature of the Spirit to a mere power is overly simplistic. Dunn notes that the Hebrew term for “spirit” (*ruah*) had various meanings (i.e., wind, breath, divine power), all more or less equally prominent in early Hebrew thought:

These should not be treated as a set of distinct meanings; rather we are confronted with a spectrum of meaning where different senses merge into each other...It also becomes immediately evident that the concept *ruah* is an existential term. 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 *ruah*, all manifestations of divine energy. In later usage the meanings human spirit, angelic or demonic spirit, and divine Spirit predominate and are more distinct.¹⁹

Secondly, as with other biblical authors, Paul referred to the Spirit using several liquid analogies. For example, both Isaiah and Joel wrote that God would “pour out” His Spirit (cf. Isa 44:3, Joel 2:28-29 with Titus 3:6). John the Baptist spoke of baptism with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). Jesus compared the Spirit to “rivers of living water” (John 7:37-39). Thus, Paul clearly appears to have drawn on earlier biblical imagery.

For example, Paul admonished the Ephesians not to be drunk with wine but to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18), which emphasizes that Christians should be “under the influence” of God’s direction. Ironically, people today still refer to liquor as “spirits” because of its invisible ability to influence people. Paul also wrote that Christians “have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13).

However, all these references are clearly metaphorical; Christians then, as now, do not literally pour or drink the Spirit. Under normal circumstances, one cannot be filled with a person, but God is not an ordinary person. As noted earlier, there is a difference between personality and corporeality. Paul himself noted that Christ dwells in the believer through the Spirit (Rom 8:10) and that Christ has “ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Eph 4:10).

Thirdly, Paul also referred to the Spirit as a seal and as a guarantee; however, these metaphors do not prove that the Spirit is impersonal. For example, in Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul said Christians “were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (cf. 2 Cor 1:22, 5:5, Eph 4:30). The Greek verb for “sealed” (*sphragizo*) has several meanings. In Matthew 27:66, it referred to the seal placed on Christ’s tomb, while in John 3:33, it referred to authenticating the testimony of Jesus Christ in a metaphoric sense. Since Christians do not receive a literal mark or seal at conversion, Paul obviously meant certification or authentication. Similarly, the Spirit is a guarantee of the promised redemption of our bodies, which occurs at the resurrection to immortality²⁰ and not a literal down payment in a purchase made by God (Rom 8:23, 2 Cor 5:4).

Metaphoric language is common throughout the Scriptures and requires careful exegesis. For example, Jesus declared that He was living bread and that His disciples would eat His flesh (John 6:51); this caused many disciples to stumble while many Romans thought that Christians were cannibals. If Christ can be the Lamb of God (John 1:29) given by the Father for the

¹⁹ Dunn, *New Bible Dictionary*.

²⁰ David K. Lowery, “A Theology of Paul’s Missionary Epistles,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, Ed. Roy B. Zuck, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 275.

redemption of many, then passages like this do not prove that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal down payment.

Lastly, Paul also likened the Spirit to fire. He told the Thessalonians not to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thes 5:19); the verb usually meant to extinguish a flame. Since the Spirit is not literally a flame, Paul was using the term as a metaphor meaning “to suppress or stifle” just as faith “quenches” Satan’s hostile attacks (Eph 6:16). Paul told Timothy “to stir up the gift of God” (2 Tim 1:6). The Greek verb literally means “to kindle or inflame,” however, “the gift of God” could refer to the Spirit or a spiritual gift.²¹

These fire analogies probably arose out of earlier, biblical symbolism and do not prove that the Spirit is impersonal. For example, God spoke to Moses from the midst of a burning bush (Exod 3:1ff); associating God’s presence with fire does not make Him any less personal. Indeed, the manifestation of the Spirit as tongues of fire (Acts 2:1ff) also indicated God’s indwelling presence (1 Cor 3:16). Elsewhere, God and the angels were both compared to fire without rendering them impersonal (Heb 1:7, 12:29).

Triadic Expressions

At times, Paul mentioned the Spirit in conjunction with God and Christ. For example, he associated the Spirit with God and the Lord in relation to the church (1 Cor 12:4-6); but he made no explicit statement concerning the personal nature of the Spirit. He also associated the grace of the Lord, the love of God, and “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14 NASB). However, Schroeder says that this refers to the fellowship of the saints, which is made possible by the Spirit; he notes that John omitted the Spirit when speaking of fellowship with the Father and Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).²²

At other times, Paul omitted the Spirit. For example, the Spirit is not mentioned in any of Paul’s salutations (e.g., Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:3, 2 Cor 1:2). Paul affirmed that there is one God and one Lord but again omitted the Spirit (1 Cor 8:6). This absence is viewed as evidence that the Spirit is not a person,²³ but that is simply an argument from silence.

This behavior may be related to how Paul viewed the Spirit. For Paul, the ministry of the Spirit created the capacity to have a relationship with God.²⁴ In other words, “Christians find themselves at the base of a dual relationship to God as Father and to Jesus as Lord in and through the Spirit.”²⁵ Thus, Paul appears to mention God, Christ, or the Spirit according to their function and relationship with the community of the believers and not as a theological statement concerning personhood.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to consider the personal nature of the Spirit as revealed by Paul. The evidence shows that although Paul spoke of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, and the

²¹ Mark L. Baily, “A Theology of Paul’s Pastoral Epistles” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, Ed. Roy B. Zuck, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 348.

²² John R. Schroeder, *Who Is God?* (Cincinnati: United Church of God, 2001), 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁴ Lowery, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 264.

²⁵ Fatehi, *The Spirit’s Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul*, 333.

Spirit of Christ, he used these expressions interchangeably and explicitly stated that there is only one divine Spirit. While Paul's use of pronouns does not prove that the Spirit is or is not a person, he clearly associated the Spirit with the presence of God and Christ. In addition, while Paul reaffirmed his monotheistic faith, he also taught that the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are distinct yet divine.

While obviously not corporeal, the Spirit nevertheless displays all the attributes of personhood, which includes thinking, feeling, and will. Passages that refer to the Spirit in personal terms cannot be dismissed as mere personifications. On the other hand, passages that describe the Spirit using impersonal terms are only analogies and are not diagnostic. In the final analysis, Paul clearly presented the Spirit as mediating the presence of God and Christ at work in the world and in the church yet speaking with a single, divine voice.

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