

Questions & Answers

Do you consider the Holy Spirit to be a person, as do most Christian churches? Is He the third person of the Trinity? I have had the impression that you regard the Holy Spirit as essentially the impersonal power of God.

Your question must be answered with humility, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Peering into the heavenlies, we perceive only what the earthly words of Scripture reveal. Adequate and inspiring though they be, these words do not reduce an infinite, holy Being into simple notions for our mastery.

Father and Son, for example, are word signs that convey truth about the Divine. Familial words cannot, however, express all the truth of the Christian deity, nor are all facts about earthly fathers and sons equally true of God.

Much depends on how the word *person* is understood. Like *Father and Son*, *person* is a partial carrier of divine truth but not a complete and exhaustive one. Though not used in Scripture, it may be a good word to refer to the thinking, feeling, willing, communicating, loving being we know as God. But we must not conclude that the divine Person will conform to all attributes of the human.

In Christianity at large, *Trinity* refers to the one, true God who exists eternally in three equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our church's position dissents from orthodox creeds for the very reason you pinpoint: We do not understand Scripture to reveal the Holy Spirit as a person in the same sense that Father and Son are persons.

The previous sentence finds support in several Bible facts. The divine Father and Son are consistently mentioned in the salutations, benedictions, and doxologies of New Testament epistles; the Holy Spirit

is rarely mentioned there. The Father and Son reign on heaven's throne, as seen in vision (Acts 7:55, 56; Rev. 4 and 5); the Spirit is not depicted as reigning there. The Father and Son engage in dialogue of the "I-Thou" sort (John 12:27, 28, for example), and love for the Other is expressed (5:20; 10:17; 14:31); the Holy Spirit never enters this dialogue. The Holy Spirit is not addressed in prayer or worship as are the Father and Son, nor are we taught to worship the Spirit as a distinct divine person.

Given the importance traditionally assigned to the Trinity doctrine, these omissions are so striking that they can hardly be dismissed as arguments from silence. They suggest to us that the Deity may exist in two personality centers rather than three.

On the other hand, we perceive the Spirit as more than an impersonal influence or the extension of God's power. We note personal attributes and actions of the Spirit (intelligence, will, affection) in Scripture. Though both masculine and neuter nouns are used, the Bible refers to the Spirit with the pronoun *He*, not *it*. Although He is "another Helper" (14:16), the personal pronoun need not refer to a third person, since the Spirit seems personally indistinguishable from the Father-Son dyad. The Holy Spirit is, after all, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ.

Based on this evidence, we think of the Spirit as the personal presence of the Father and Son among and within God's people, rather than as a third person of the Trinity. Our trust is that God has bestowed salvation by His grace in the person and work of Christ and that salvation is realized in human experience through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, not by the affirmation of any extra-biblical creed.

— Elder Calvin Burrell