

# What Does the Bible Reveal About the Trinity? – Part 5

by Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

## Do early Church doctrine and the Bible together declare the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit?

Religious groups who deny the Trinity characteristically deny not only the person and work of Jesus Christ, but also the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses teach that "the holy spirit is the active force of God. It is not a person but is a powerful force that God causes to emanate from himself to accomplish his holy will."<sup>[1]</sup> Victor Paul Wierwille, founder of The Way International, declared, "One of the most misunderstood fields among Christians today is that of the Holy Spirit."<sup>[2]</sup> Wierwille believed that the Holy Spirit is merely a synonym for the one person of the Godhead, that is, the Father who alone is God. Thus, whenever Wierwille uses the term "Holy Spirit," in his writings (with capital letters), he is merely using a synonym for God. But whenever Wierwille uses "holy spirit" (with small letters), he means the spiritual gifts given by God the Father. In Wierwille's theology, therefore, the *biblical* Holy Spirit does not even exist.<sup>[3]</sup> Wierwille, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others also claim that the early Church never believed the Holy Spirit was God.

Although the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was theologically less refined in the early Church than the doctrine of Jesus Christ, there was still recognition that the Holy Spirit was both personal and God. Athenagoras (170-80) wrote that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Christians declared "both their power in union and their distinction in order."<sup>[4]</sup> According to noted theologian Harold O. J. Brown, "Tertullian [160-230] was the first to speak plainly of the Holy Spirit as God and to say that he is of one substance with the Father."<sup>[5]</sup> Tertullian stated, "Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete [Holy Spirit], produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These three are one essence."<sup>[6]</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that the "Holy Spirit is *honored together* with the Father and the Son *and is fully included* in the holy Trinity. We are not preaching three Gods, so let the Marcionites hold their peace. We do not divide up the holy Trinity, as some do, nor, like Sabellius, do we coalesce it into one. Great indeed is the Holy Spirit, and in his gifts, *omnipotent* and wonderful."<sup>[7]</sup> Athanasius wrote that "The Holy Spirit *cannot* be a creature, and it is impious to call him so."<sup>[8]</sup> In speak-

ing of the Holy Spirit as a gift to the church, Augustine wrote, “And therefore the Holy Spirit, *God though He is*, is most rightly called also the gift of God...”[9] Basil of Caesarea wrote, “The Lord has delivered to us as a necessary and saving doctrine that the Holy Spirit is to be ranked *with the Father*.”[10] Origen wrote, “For if [He were not eternally as He is...] the Holy Spirit would never be reckoned in the Unity of the Trinity, i.e., along with the unchangeable Father and His Son, unless He had always been the Holy Spirit.”[11]

We re-emphasize that the early Christians concluded the Holy Spirit was God because this was the scriptural testimony and the only thing they could do. If we examine what the Scripture teaches about the Holy Spirit, we find that the traditional Trinitarian view is clearly upheld. (Again, for those who have never done so, looking up these scriptures during their personal Bible study will be a rewarding learning process.) First, the Holy Spirit is distinguished from both the Father and the Son, as many scriptures prove (Isa. 48:16; Matt. 28:19; Luke 3:21; John 14:16, 17; Heb. 9:8).

Second, the Holy Spirit is clearly not an impersonal force, as Jehovah’s Witnesses claim, but a real person. He loves (Rom. 15:30); convicts of sin (John 16:8); has a personal will (1 Cor. 12:11); commands and forbids (Acts 8:29; 13:2; 16:6); speaks messages (1 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 2:7); intercedes (Rom. 8:26); comforts, teaches, and guides into truth (John 14:26); and can be grieved, blasphemed, and insulted (Eph. 4:30; Mark 3:29; Heb. 10:29). Thus, once it is established that the Holy Spirit is a person, it is easy to see that the terminology in Scripture, such as His “filling us,” or “being poured out,” is not meant to imply the Holy Spirit is impersonal, but rather illustrates the intimacy of the believer’s relationship to Him.

The Holy Spirit is deity because He performs the functions of God, and because He is called God in Scripture. He has the attributes of deity, such as omnipresence (Psa. 139:7,8); omniscience (1 Cor. 2:10,11); eternity (Heb. 9:14); omnipotence (Job 33:4); and He gives eternal life (John 3:3-8). He is also the Creator (Job 33:4; Gen. 1:2). It goes without saying that no impersonal force (Jehovah’s Witnesses) or finite god (Mormonism) has the personal and divine attributes Scripture assigns to the Holy Spirit.

It is also clear from Scripture that the Holy Spirit is God by the divine functions He performs and the divine associations He has. He indwells all believers (John 14:23; 1 Cor. 6:19 with 2 Cor. 6:16); strives with all men and convicts the whole world of guilt (Gen. 6:3 with John 16:8); divinely inspires (2 Pet. 1:21 with Luke 1:67 with Acts 1:16, 28:25; Isa. 6:1-13; Heb. 10:15-17); sanctifies (2 Thess. 2:13 with 1 Thess. 4:7,8); and sends forth laborers (Matt. 9:38 with Acts 13:2-4) (cf., Psa. 95:6-9 with Heb. 3:7-9; Rom. 5:5 with 1 Thess. 3:12,13; 2 Thess. 3:5). The Holy Spirit is also called God. In Acts 5:3-4, the one lied to is first said to be the Holy Spirit, who is then immediately identified as God. He is called “the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Hebrews 10:15, 16. In Isaiah 6:8, 9 and Acts 28:25, 26, one passage says God is speaking to Isaiah, whereas the other passage declares that the Holy Spirit is speaking the same message to Isaiah.

There is only one eternal sin spoken of in all the Bible: the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:32). All sins ever committed against the Son of God will be forgiven. But blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of God can never be forgiven. How can this be if the Holy Spirit is merely a creature or an impersonal force? Thus, resisting the Holy Spirit's conviction of the need to believe in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins can never be forgiven. Why? Because one refuses to place faith in Christ—which alone brings this forgiveness. Thus, unbelief to the point of death is the only eternal sin. This is indeed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and against His testimony of Jesus (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit then, must indeed be God because one can only commit eternal sin against an eternal God.

The Holy Spirit, whose job is to glorify Jesus Christ, has been given His rightful place in the Trinity by the historic Christian church. Sadly, He has not been given the honor due Him by the cults. Indeed, the scriptural testimony to the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit is far more abundant than any cursory reading of Scripture would indicate.[12]

For those who desire more study, there are many good books conclusively proving the biblical doctrine of the Trinity in great depth. We especially recommend Dr. Robert Morey's book *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*.[13]

## Notes

- 1 Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, *Reasoning from Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985), p. 381.
- 2 Victor Paul Wierwille, *Jesus Christ Is Not God* (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1975), p. 127.
- 3 Ibid., Appendix A; cf. Victor Paul Wierwille, *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today* (New Knoxville, OH: American Christian Press, 1986), chap. 1.
- 4 E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1984), p. 53, citing Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, Vol. 2, p. 133, *A Plea for the Christians*, p. X.
- 5 Dr. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Doubleday, 1984), pp. 140-141.
- 6 Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, p. 25, cited in Brown, *Heresies*, p. 145.
- 7 Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lecture," 16, paragraph 4, in Maurice Wiles and Mark Santers (eds.), *Documents of Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 82.
- 8 Athanasius, "Third Letter to Serapion," I, in Wiles and Santers, p. 85.
- 9 Augustine, "On the Trinity," VX, xvii, 32, in Wiles and Santers, p. 94.
- 10 Basil of Caesarea, "The Book of Saint Basil on the Spirit," chap. X, para. 25 in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicean and Post-Nicean Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. 8* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 17.
- 11 In Beisner, *God in Three Persons*, p. 64, citing Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, p. 253; *de Principis* I.iii.4.
- 12 See Edward Henry Beckersteth, *The Holy Spirit: His Person and Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1967), for an excellent scriptural study on the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.
- 13 Other good titles include Edward Beckersteth, *The Trinity* (Kregel, 1980); and Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Baker, 1995).