

# Who Is the Holy Spirit?

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**R. C. SPROUL**



Who Is the Holy Spirit?

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R. C. SPROUL

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## Contents

	Preface . . . . .	1
<b>One</b>	The Third Person . . . . .	5
<b>Two</b>	The Life Giver . . . . .	15
<b>Three</b>	The Advocate . . . . .	27
<b>Four</b>	The Sanctifier . . . . .	35
<b>Five</b>	The Anointer . . . . .	47
<b>Six</b>	The Illuminator . . . . .	63





## Preface

When I became a Christian in September of 1957, I found myself in a serious quandary. I was engaged to be married, but when I told my fiancée about my conversion, she thought I had lost my mind. That was upsetting enough, but I was also learning that I should not marry a nonbeliever, and so I began to wonder whether I would be able to marry the woman I loved. Several months passed with no resolution of this dilemma.

Finally, spring break approached. My fiancée was planning to go home to Pittsburgh from the college where she was studying, and I persuaded her to stop at my college,

## Who Is the Holy Spirit?

attend a campus Bible study with me, and then spend the night in the girls' dorm. I cannot remember anything for which I spent more time praying. I spent virtually the whole day before she arrived on my knees, praying that God would work in her life. I came to the conclusion that if she did not soon become a Christian, I would have to break the engagement, as much as I did not want to do so.

We went to the Bible study that night and she sat through the whole thing without saying a word. Afterward, I took her to the girls' dorm, and she was still very quiet. However, the next morning, when I went to meet her, she came out as if she were walking on air. She told me that she had had a hard time sleeping because something had happened to her the night before. She kept waking up in the night, pinching herself, and asking, "Do I still have it?" Each time she told herself, "Yes, I still have it," and went back to sleep. She had been converted to Christ through the study of the Scriptures the night before.

One of my clearest memories of that wonderful morning is of the moment when we were getting into my car. As she was telling me about her experience, she looked at me with great excitement and said, "Now I know who

the Holy Spirit is.” Of course, she had attended church for years. She had heard the Holy Spirit mentioned. She had heard the benediction pronounced in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But now, for the first time, she had a sense of who the Spirit really is.

That statement of my fiancée, who is now my wife, was very significant. Notice that she said, “Now I know *who* the Holy Spirit is,” not, “Now I know *what* the Holy Spirit is.” In her conversion, she made a transition from understanding Christianity in an abstract sense to understanding it as a personal relationship with God. And one of the first truths she grasped was that the Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing.

It is exceedingly important that Christians know who the Holy Spirit is and understand something of the vital role He plays in their lives. That is why I have written this booklet. Of course, the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit is far too extensive to be covered adequately in a volume of this size. My purpose in this booklet is to simply provide the most basic of answers to the question of who the Spirit is and then to touch briefly on some of the important roles He plays in the lives of believers. For

## Who Is the Holy Spirit?

a fuller treatment, I encourage you to see my book *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*.

I pray this short treatise on the Spirit will draw you into a deeper relationship with the God you love and serve, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## Chapter One

# The Third Person

As Christians, we embrace a historic formula about God's being. We say, "God is One in essence and three in person." In other words, God is triune; He is a Trinity. This means there are three persons within the Godhead. These persons are understood in theology as distinct characters. The differences among the three, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are real differences but not essential differences. In other words, there is only one essence to the Godhead, not three. In our experience as

## Who Is the Holy Spirit?

human beings, each person we meet is a separate being. One person means one being, and vice versa. But in the Godhead, there is one being with three persons. We must maintain this distinction lest we slip into a form of polytheism, seeing the three persons of the Godhead as three beings who are three separate gods.

None of us can plumb the depths of the Trinity comprehensively, but we can take some small steps to understand it better. The words *existence* and *subsistence* can help us here.

### Existence and Subsistence

One of the games I used to play with my seminary students was to ask them, “Does God exist?” They would say, “Of course God exists.” I would then say, “No, God does not exist,” and it was always fun to see the looks of horror that would appear on their faces as they began to wonder whether their professor had abandoned Christianity and given up his faith. But I quickly had mercy on them and explained that I was playing a little philosophy game by asserting that God does not exist.

The word *exist* comes from the Latin *existare*, which

means “to stand out of.” So the word *exist* literally means “to stand out.” That does not necessarily mean that if you exist you are outstanding at what you do. The obvious question is, of what does an existing being stand out?

The idea of existence has its roots in ancient philosophy, when the philosophers were very concerned with the question of being. We also are concerned with this question; in fact, when we make a distinction between God and ourselves, we identify Him as the Supreme Being and ourselves as human beings. However, that distinction is a bit misleading. Both descriptions use the word *being*, so we look to the adjectival qualifiers to find the difference between God and ourselves: He is supreme and we are human. In reality, the big difference between God and man is being itself. God is pure being, a being who has His life in and of Himself eternally. A human being is a creature, a being whose very existence from moment to moment depends on the power of the Supreme Being. God’s being is not dependent on anything or derived from anything. He has the power to be in and of Himself.

When the old philosophers talked about existence, using the Latin word meaning “to stand out of,” they were saying that to exist means to stand out of being. What does

## Who Is the Holy Spirit?

that mean? Imagine two circles that do not overlap. The first circle is “being” and the second is “non-being,” which is a fancy term for “nothing.” Now imagine a stick figure between the two circles with its arms outstretched. One arm is reaching into the circle labeled “being” and the other is reaching into the circle labeled “non-being.” This is a picture of humanity. We participate in being, but at the same time we are always just one step away from annihilation. The only way we can continue is to maintain our connection to the circle labeled “being,” for that circle represents the One in whom, as the Apostle Paul said, “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28)—that is, God. But even while we participate in that being and are sustained by that being, we are one step removed from non-being.

Our imaginary stick figure is a picture of what the philosophers had in mind when they talked about standing out of being. We might say that humans are in a state of “becoming.” We undergo change. What we are today is different from what we were yesterday and from what we will be tomorrow, if only in the fact that we age twenty-four hours in the passage from one day to the next. It is this facet of humanness, change, that defines existence. Change, generation, decay, growth, and aging are all characteristics



of our lives. God, however, is eternally constant. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

In short, when the philosophers spoke of existence, they were defining what it means to be a creature. So, when I played my little game with my seminary students, when I asserted that God does not exist, I did not mean that there is no God. I simply meant that God is not a creature. He is not bound to space and time, subject to change, generation, and decay. He is always and eternally what He is. He is the “I AM.”

When we talk about the persons of the Godhead, we typically do not use the word *existence*, but we do use the word *subsistence*. What is the difference between these words? We typically use the word *subsistence* in our normal vocabulary when we talk about someone living in poverty. We talk about a subsistence income, which is a meager wage, or a subsistence diet, which provides only the basic nutrients. Note, however, that this word includes the prefix *sub-*, which means “under.” So, subsistence is existence that is under something else. This idea is implied in the concept of the Trinity. God is one being with three subsistences, with three distinct persons. They subsist within the being of God.

## Who Is the Holy Spirit?

### The Spirit's Personal Nature

The fact that the Holy Spirit is a person is seen in a multitude of ways in Scripture. One of the primary evidences is that the Bible repeatedly and consistently uses personal pronouns to refer to Him. He is called “He,” “Him,” and so on, not “it.” Also, He does things that we associate with personality. He teaches, He inspires, He guides, He leads, He grieves, He convicts us of sin, and more. Impersonal objects do not behave in this manner. Only a person can do these things.

But the Holy Spirit is seen in Scripture not merely as personal but also as fully divine. We see this in a curious story from the book of Acts:

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not

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# Is the Holy Spirit a force? Cosmic energy? Or truly God?

The person and work of the Holy Spirit spark much interest these days—but also much confusion. Many do not fully understand who the Spirit is or how He works in our lives. Some people even claim that the Spirit speaks to them apart from the Bible.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul cuts through the confusion by going to Scripture. After explaining who the Holy Spirit is, Dr. Sproul briefly sketches His work in this world, from giving new life to unbelievers to sanctifying and empowering God's people.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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