

10 Things You Should Know about the Holy Spirit

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1. If you know the doctrine of the Trinity, you already know the most important things about the Holy Spirit.

Christians confess that the one God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the classic, creedal, doctrinal way of stating what Scripture teaches about God ([Matt. 28:20](#); [John 1:1-3](#); [Gal. 4:4-6](#)), and one of its benefits is that it organizes our understanding of the Holy Spirit. When you find your mind wandering or getting lost in the details of pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit), just call back to mind the basic Christian confession that there is one God in three persons. Securely locating the doctrine of the Spirit inside the doctrine of the Trinity automatically grants you the next three things you should know.

2. The Holy Spirit is God.

The most obvious truth that emerges from locating the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is that the Spirit is fully God. He is not a mere impersonal force emanating from God, or a poetic way of talking about God in action, or a creature commissioned by God to do his work for him. Nor is the Holy Spirit a slice of God, one third of God, or part of a team that adds up to be God. He is one of the persons who fully possesses the entirety of the divine

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essence. Sound Trinitarian theology is a constant, helpful guide that keeps us from thinking unworthy thoughts about the Holy Spirit.

3. The Holy Spirit is principally from the Father.

God the Father's plan, announced in the Old Testament, was to pour out his Spirit on all flesh ([Joel 2](#)). In the fullness of time, the Spirit came forth into the history of salvation ([Luke 24:49](#), [Acts 2](#), [Gal. 4:6](#), [John 14:26](#)), manifesting the truth that he had always existed as the one who is breathed forth by the Father within the divine life. You may have heard that it is only the Eastern Orthodox churches that affirm this, but in fact the churches of the Western traditions agree about the fundamental point: "The Father is called the one from whom . . . the Holy Spirit principally proceeds," as Augustine said. The Father-Spirit connection is something that should always come to mind when thinking of the Holy Spirit. It expresses the tremendous depth and intimacy with which the Spirit lives in the heart of God, and this, in turn, resonates with the Spirit's deep dwelling in the heart of believers.

4. The Holy Spirit is also from the Son.

Though the Spirit is principally from the Father, he has never, at any level, been apart from the Son. Just as the Father and Son together send the Spirit into salvation history ([John 14:16](#), [14:26](#), [15:26](#), [16:7](#)), so the Spirit in the divine life comes from both the Father and from the Son. You may have heard that it is only the Western churches (with their *filioque* clause glossing the Nicene Creed) who affirm this, but in fact the churches of the Eastern traditions agree about the fundamental point: the Spirit eternally flows "from the Father through the Son," as Maximus the Confessor said. The Son-Spirit connection is something that should always come to mind when thinking about the Spirit. It expresses the way the Spirit comes to us as the perfect communicator of what is in the Father and the Son. Jesus said, "All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he [the Holy Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you." ([John 16:15](#))

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5. All God's actions are from the Father, through the Son, and finally reach their conclusion in the Holy Spirit.

Everything God does, God does in a unified way as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The works of God are not divided up and shared out among the persons of the Trinity, but

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are “inseparable operations” in which the Father is the source, the Son is the center, and the Holy Spirit is the end. This “from-through-in” structure of Trinitarian action means that when we encounter the Holy Spirit, we are not just experiencing the isolated action of one person of the Trinity—as if there were such isolated actions! Instead, when we meet the Holy Spirit we are caught up into the consummating work of the Spirit doing what he does from the Father through the Son. Conversely, when we approach God in the Spirit, we are moving experientially back along that same trajectory: in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father ([Eph. 2:18](#)). There is a comprehensiveness in the Spirit’s work, to which we should be alert. It stems from his place in the Trinity, and works its way out in our relation to God.

6. The Holy Spirit has several names in Scripture.

From cover to cover of the Bible, the third person of the Trinity is referred to by a wealth of different names. In the Old Testament we hear Spirit of God, Spirit of the LORD, “my Spirit,” the Spirit, Spirit of grace and supplication, and finally, “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” ([Gen. 1:2](#), [Ex. 28:3](#), [Ex. 31:3](#), [Zech. 12:10](#), [Isa. 11:2](#)). In the New Testament it is Spirit of the Father, Spirit of the Son, Spirit of Christ, Spirit of promise, Spirit of adoption, and so on. A fundamental decision of basic, biblical theology is to recognize that all these names pick out the same person. The alternative would be to populate the Bible with a dozen or so spirits all differently related to God. Instead, though, the great variety of Spirit names in Scripture is an invitation to recognize the depth and wealth of its pneumatological teaching. The Bible speaks of the Spirit differently in different contexts, drawing out his significance for different aspects of God’s work.

7. The Holy Spirit’s primary name is a canonical masterpiece.

The one name that stands out for the third person of the Trinity is the classic name “the Holy Spirit,” with the definite article, the adjective Holy, and the noun Spirit. It is by far the most common New Testament name, strikingly enshrined in [Matthew 28:20](#), “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” We only find it two or three times in the entire Old Testament, but when it does occur ([Isa. 63:11](#)), it is when God speaks through a much later prophet to account for how he was with his people in the Exodus, putting “in the midst of them his Holy Spirit.” This wonderful name thus reaches out to embrace the entire Old Testament, exodus to exile, before being taken up by Jesus and the apostles as the primary and definitive way to pick out the one who (as we have seen) has many names. And further depths of mysterious truth lie waiting in that name itself, which combines a divine attribute (holiness) with the divine substance (spirit) so consummately.

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8. The Holy Spirit has made himself known perfectly in Scripture.

When we say the Bible speaks of the Spirit in certain ways, we mean that the Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible bears witness of himself in these particular ways. He has done so exactly as he wanted to. This is worth remembering because we often find ourselves wishing that the Bible were clearer about the Spirit. We would like to hear about him more concretely, more precisely, more elaborately. We wish he were as clear and definite as Jesus, and that more pages were devoted to describing his personality and actions in sharper detail. But the Holy Spirit has made himself known in Scripture just as he wished to. Our task is not to squeeze more out of his self-revelation than is really there; our task is to adjust our expectations—and where did those expectations come from anyway, if we think we can use them as grounds for critiquing Scripture?—to fit what God the Holy Spirit has actually revealed about himself.

9. It is not necessary to talk about the Holy Spirit as much as we talk about the Father and the Son.

A particular application of the previous point is that there is no need to artificially elevate the Holy Spirit to a place as conspicuously prominent as God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Time after time in the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles are perfectly satisfied to mention the Father and the Son without going on to complete the verbal triangle by naming the Holy Spirit distinctly. It would hardly do for us to interrupt Jesus and point out to him that he failed to mention the Spirit! Perhaps we are tempted to do this because we sense that we have not reflected deeply enough or often enough about the Holy Spirit. If we do have a theological and spiritual deficit of that kind, then by all means let's overcome it. But we will overcome it by humbly following the Spirit's own lead, speaking mostly about Jesus, much about the Father, and—following the Bible's clear pattern—rather less, by volume, about the Spirit.

10. The Holy Spirit is always already at work in our coming to understand him.

If the Holy Spirit is who he says he is, then believers can rest confidently in the fact that he is the one doing the work of helping us come to real knowledge of him. He is the prevenient person, going ahead of us to prepare the way of our knowledge of him. This may give to our awareness of his presence a kind of surprising or elusive character. Our first steps in knowledge of the triune God are toward Jesus Christ, who is the way to the Father. Only when we take those steps with our attention focused on Jesus do we begin to realize that the Holy Spirit is within us, alongside us, behind us, making possible those steps and that focused attention. He dawns on us, bringing knowledge of God to its perfection.

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This article is part of the [10 Things You Should Know](#) series.

© Crossway, October 11, 2023. Retrieved October 15, 2023.

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