On the Holy Spirit
(Part 2 of 7: Nature and Character of the Spirit)

Historic Faith Series on Holy Spirit

IV. The Meaning of the Word 'Spirit'

a. The Greek word translated "spirit" in the New Testament, as well as in the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek language Old Testament generally quoted by Jesus, the apostles, and the early church writers), is: pneuma / πνεῦμα.

b. The word "pneuma" can be translated: *wind*, *spirit*, or *breath*.

c. The word "pneuma" is used throughout the Scriptures, and can refer to:

   i. wind or breath,

   ii. an evil spirit,

   iii. the Holy Spirit of God, or

   iv. the non-material part of a person that might include their feelings, will, and/or their spiritual being.

d. Our English word "pneumatic", which comes from this Greek word, may be familiar to us from some common examples, such as:

   i. Pneumatic tires (on bicycles, cars, and trucks, where the air inside provides a cushion effect).

   ii. Pneumatic tools (such as a jack hammer or drill, where the power to the tool is provided by air pressure rather than by electricity).

   iii. Pneumatic controls for actuators that open and close valves (as opposed to electric or hydraulic-powered actuators).

      1. These are often used in explosion-proof areas where an electric spark would be dangerous.

      2. They also are used in remote locations where no electric power available; generally, involves an air compressor and air storage tank.

e. Since the word "pneuma" has multiple meanings, whenever the word appears in Scripture, the translators need to determine *from the context* which sense of the word is intended by the writer.

i. Note that the old Greek manuscripts are in all-capital letters. The "capital-S'" versus "lower-case-s'" distinction is applied by modern translators.

ii. As David Bercot discussed in his audio lesson *"The Difference Between the Spirit and the Soul, and Why It Matters"* (available from Scroll Publishing), early Christian writers understood "spirit/Spirit" in New Testament letters as referring to *our own spirits* within us (as opposed to "capital S" Holy Spirit), for example in **Galatians 5**.

f. Jesus' comment about "the *wind* blows where it wishes" in **John 3:8**, provides a play on words, since "pneuma" can mean either *wind* or *Spirit*.

g. Note that in **Exodus 15:8-10**, recounting the parting of the Red Sea, it says in the LXX that *the wind* (or is it *the Spirit?*) blew back the water.

i. Sometimes it is not 100% clear *which meaning* of the word is intended!

h. Terms used in Scripture to refer to the Holy Spirit include:

i. Spirit of God

ii. Holy Spirit (in older Bible translations: Holy Ghost)

iii. Spirit of Christ

1. "searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." (**1 Peter 1:11**, NKJV)

iv. Spirit of truth

1. "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you." (**John 14:17**, NKJV)

V. Understanding the Nature of the Holy Spirit

a. For most of us, it is easier to grasp the nature of Father and Son (Jesus) than the nature of the Holy Spirit.

i. God, the Father

1. The concept of God as "our Father" gives many a framework to start from.

2. He dwells in unapproachable light; He cannot be seen by human eyes. (**John 1:18**, **1 Timothy 6:16**)

3. He is unbegotten, created all things, and is the source of the Son and the Spirit.

ii. Son of God (the Word of God)

1. He was begotten of the Father, before all ages. (see **John 1**, **Hebrews 1**, **Colossians 1**)

2. He was seen (made appearances) in the Old Testament.

a. Consider **John 12:37-41** in connection with **Isaiah 6:1-10**.

b. Since it is impossible to see God (the Father), when someone "saw God" in the Old Testament, early Christians commonly understood that they must have seen the Son of God (who also is divine, and God).

i. For more on this, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs,* ed. David Bercot, article on 'Theophany'.

3. He became flesh in Jesus. (**John 1:14**)

iii. Holy Spirit

1. How are we to understand the nature of the Spirit? For most of us, this is much harder than grasping the nature of the Father and the Son.

2. Perhaps we should imagine the Spirit to be somehow similar to wind, breath or something that flows like air. (Consider **John 3:8**, and the meanings of the Greek word "pneuma".)

3. Also, recall that the Spirit came in the form of a dove, a white bird, at baptism of Jesus. (**John 1:32**) What do we make of that?

b. What early Christian creeds state regarding the Holy Spirit:

i. Two very early Christian creeds, basic statements of faith, are the Apostles Creed, and the original (325 AD) Nicene Creed. Both simply state:

1. "I believe in the Holy Spirit,"

2. (Nothing more is said on those creeds regarding the Spirit).

ii. Early Christian writers (pre-Nicene) frequently mention the Holy Spirit; but *do not provide a systematic, detailed explanation*.

1. Many of their writings are apologetic or deal with controversies they faced; and apparently the Holy Spirit was not a controversial subject in the early church.

iii. Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD) updated the original (325 AD) Nicene Creed to provide a fuller explanation of the Holy Spirit. An Orthodox version of the N-C Creed follows, in English:

1. "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

2. "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made: Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man; And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; And ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

3. "And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;

4. "And we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, And the life of the age to come. Amen."

iv. Of course, the Bible is the standard here, not what the early Christians thought. However, statements from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD), are supported by Scripture.

1. This creed provides an important summary of the Holy Spirit, one that is fully consistent with Scripture.

a. I do not see anything innovative or unscriptural in this creed.

b. Note that the term "*catholic* church" here refers to the one "*universal* church".

2. "Proceeds from the Father"

a. Note that the words, "*and the son*" were added to this phrase later, but only in the Western Church.

3. "Lord and Giver of Life"

    a. The Spirit was present in **Genesis 1:2** at the creation of the world, represented as hovering over the waters.

    b. God "breathed into" the first man, Adam, "the breath of life". (**Genesis 2:7**)

        i. "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." (**James 2:26**, NKJV)

    c. Valley of Dry Bones (read **Ezekiel 37:1-10**)

    d. Conception of Jesus

        i. "Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" (**Luke 1:34–35**, NKJV)

    e. Jesus pointed to the Spirit as the giver of life.

        i. "(Jesus said) It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing..." (**John 6:63**, NKJV)

    f. Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, who will give life to us as well!

        i. "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." (**Romans 8:11**, NKJV)

        ii. The same Spirit dwells in us; and will raise up our bodies from the dead as well!

        iii. "…for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (**2 Corinthians 3:6**, NKJV)

4. The Spirit is worshiped and glorified, as God (divine).

a. "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.'" (**Acts 5:1–4**, NKJV)

5. The Holy Spirit "spoke by the prophets".

a. "So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers," (**Acts 28:25**, NKJV)

b. "Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." (**1 Peter 1:10–11**, NKJV)

c. "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (**2 Peter 1:20–21**, NKJV)

c. Let us note the 'fluid' nature of Spirit: associated with breath, wind, water, and fire.

i. Yet the Holy Spirit is *not* an impersonal force (like gravity).

ii. The Holy Spirit has a personality and a will (Ananias *lied to* the Spirit).

iii. The Holy Spirit is divine (proceeds from Father, not created like us).

VI. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Unity and Divinity

a. The Holy Spirit is one of the persons of the Father-Son-Spirit. This relationship (three distinct persons in one unity, all sharing the same divinity) is often described by Christians with the word "trinity"; although that term is not found anywhere in Scripture.

i. This is something critical for us to be able to explain to others, especially when reaching out to the approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world.

ii. Muslims are taught to challenge Christians on the trinity, to assert that they believe in one God, while we believe in three gods!

iii. I have found the early Christian explanations of the Father-Son-Spirit to be much better than typical modern explanations. (The early Christian explanations are generally more in line with *all* the Scriptures, and easier to explain to others as well)

b. All three (the Father, Son and Spirit) are mentioned *together* in several passages of Scripture. A few examples include:

i. In the creation account in **Genesis 1**

1. God (the Father) creates all things in the beginning (**Genesis 1:1**)

2. The Spirit is hovering over the water (**Genesis 1:2**).

3. In **Genesis 1:26** God says, "let <u>*Us*</u> make man in <u>*Our*</u> image" (using the plural; He does *NOT* say, "let *Me* make man in *My* image"). Early Christians saw this as including the Word of God (the Son of God) in creation, as stated in **John 1:1-3** and **John 1:10**.

a. Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyon in Gaul/France, writing c. 180 AD:

i. "For with Him were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, "Let *Us* make man after Our image and likeness... (**Genesis 1:26**)"

ii. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 20; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 487–488)

ii. In **Isaiah 42:1** it says, "<u>I</u> will put <u>My Spirit</u> upon <u>Him</u>...", where:

1. "I" refers to the Father;

2. "My Spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit; and

3. "Him" refers to the Son of God, Jesus.

iii. In the Baptism of Jesus

1. The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels.

2. At this baptism, the Father says to Jesus, "You are my beloved Son." (**Mark 1:11**, **Luke 3:22**)

3. The Spirit descends and rests on Jesus, in the form of a dove, in fulfillment of the prophecy of **Isaiah 11:1-2**.

iv. In the Great Commission, **Matthew 28:18-20**

1. Jesus instructs the apostles to baptize "in the name of *the Father*, and of *the Son* and of the *Holy Spirit*" (**Matthew 28:19**, NKJV)

2. In the early church, triple-immersion was the most common mode of baptism, once in the name of each Person of the trinity. All three persons of the trinity being involved in the rebirth; they were baptized in the name of all three.

v. In **Hebrews 9:14**

1. "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (**Hebrews 9:14**, NKJV)

VII. Character of the Holy Spirit

a. Some may be inclined to start with "fruit of the Spirit" in **Galatians 5**; however, this may be referring to *our spirit* (note the contrast with *our flesh*).

i. Recall that there is no 'capital-S' versus 'lower case-S' distinction in the ancient Greek text of the New Testament. This distinction was added later, by the translators, based on their own judgment.

b. In my opinion, a great place to start in understanding the character of the Holy Spirit is **Isaiah 11:1-3**. This contains a prophecy that was fulfilled in the baptism of Jesus, an event recorded in all four gospels. Here is that passage, from a translation based on the Septuagint:

i. "There shall come forth a rod from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall grow out of his root. The Spirit of God shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and godliness. The Spirit of the fear of God shall fill him…" (from **Isaiah 11:1-3a**, LXX, OSB)

1. Note that this is from a translation based on the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), a Greek translation of the Old Testament made by Jewish scholars, in Egypt, 200-250 years before the birth of Jesus.

    a. When Jesus and the apostles quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, the LXX is generally the version they are quoting from.

    b. For that reason, the LXX was the Old Testament predominantly used by Christians for the first 300+ years of the church.

    c. Most modern Bibles use the Masoretic Text, from Hebrew manuscripts that go back to the 10^{th}-11^{th} century AD.

ii. Note the *seven* characteristics of the Holy Spirit, in the passage taken from the LXX. Early Christian writers point to this *seven-fold* description; and note the importance of this description of the Holy Spirit.

1. In Bibles based on the Masoretic Text it only mentions *six* characteristics.

2. You may recall that in several places in **Revelation** it speaks of the "Seven Spirits of God", an expression which is sometimes translated, "the *seven-fold* Spirit of God".

    a. For example, the Lamb of God on the throne has seven eyes "which are the seven Spirits of God" (**Revelation 5:6**).

    b. The three-fold greeting at the start of the book suggests the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

        i. "John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood," (**Revelation 1:4–5**, NKJV)

    c. Regarding the Septuagint (LXX) vs. the Masoretic Text (MT), note that when Jesus Himself in **Revelation 2:27**

quotes from **Psalm 2**, He is quoting from the LXX (the entire point of his quote is not supported by the MT).

i. He assumes that His readers are following the LXX, not the MT.

3. This reference to "seven eyes" also reminds me of the prophecy of **Zechariah 3:9**, where it says that the Lord put before Jesus/Joshua one stone with "seven eyes" (meaning seven facets).

a. Cyprian, early Christian bishop from Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 250 AD, pointed to this as one of many prophecies where Christ is referred to as "a stone": in this case a stone with seven "eyes"! (See Cyprian, *Treatises, Treatise No. 12- Testimonies Against the Jews,* book 2, chapter 11; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 522)

4. Early Christian writer Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD in *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* chapter 9 (not in the Ante-Nicene Fathers series) wrote about the **Isaiah 11:1-3** passage and the seven "gifts or measures" of the Spirit mentioned there:

a. "For after this pattern Moses received the seven-branched candlestick always burning in the sanctuary..."

iii. Today in many churches there is a dangerous tendency to focus only on *certain aspects* of the Lord while *ignoring other critically important aspects* of His character.

1. For example, many prefer to focus on Jesus' love and mercy, rather than His judgment and His strong call to repentance.

2. In **Romans 11:22** Paul encourages a more balanced approach when he reminds us to consider *BOTH* the goodness (kindness *AND* severity (sternness) of God.

3. Similarly, the challenge for us in approaching the Holy Spirit is to embrace *ALL aspects* of His character: to seek a clear and complete picture.

iv. The most challenging aspect of the Holy Spirit, from among all of those mentioned in **Isaiah 11:1-3**, may be the last one: the *fear of God*.

v. **Challenge:** How many of these six or seven characteristics of the Holy Spirit do *you* seek? Which of them do you ask God to give to you more of? On the other hand, are there any that you tend to neglect or avoid?

1. Jesus promised to give *the Spirit* to his followers after He rose from the dead.

c. Prior prophets had been given the Holy Spirit *with limits* (they received only certain of the seven characteristics) Justin Martyr in his debate with a Jewish man named Trypho, in *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160 AD), commented on the meaning this passage from **Isaiah**:

i. (*Trypho the Jew, challenges Justin*) "Tell me, then, how, when the Scripture asserts by Isaiah, 'There shall come forth a rod from the root of Jesse; and a flower shall grow up from the root of Jesse; and the Spirit of God shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and piety: and the spirit of the fear of the Lord shall fill Him:'

ii. "… 'now you admitted to me', continued Trypho, 'that this referred to Christ, and you maintain Him to be pre-existent God, and having become incarnate by God's will, to be born man by the Virgin. How can He be demonstrated to have been pre-existent, who is filled with the powers of the Holy Spirit, which the Scripture by Isaiah enumerates, *as if He were in lack of them*?'

iii. "(*Justin replies*) 'You have inquired most discreetly and most prudently, for truly there does seem to be a difficulty; but listen to what I say, that you may perceive the reason for this also. The Scripture says that these enumerated powers of the Spirit have come on Him, not because He stood in need of them, but because they would rest in Him, i.e., would find their accomplishment in Him, so that there would be no more prophets in your nation after the ancient custom: and this fact you plainly perceive.

iv. "For after Him no prophet has arisen among you. Now, that [you may know that] your prophets, each receiving some one or two powers from God, did and spoke the things which we have learned from the Scriptures, attend to the following remarks of mine.

v. "Solomon possessed the spirit of wisdom, Daniel that of understanding and counsel, Moses that of might and piety, Elijah that of fear, and Isaiah that of knowledge; and so with the others: each possessed one power, or one joined alternately with another; also Jeremiah, and the twelve [prophets], and David, and, in short, the rest who existed among you. Accordingly He rested, i.e., ceased, when He came, after whom, in the times of this dispensation wrought out by Him among men, it was necessary that such gifts should cease from you; and having received their rest in Him, should again, as had been predicted, become gifts which, from the grace of His Spirit's power, He imparts to those who believe in Him, according as He deems each man worthy thereof.'"

1. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 87; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1. p. 243)

vi. Justin makes the point here that Jesus alone, unlike the prophets who came before Him, was given the full measure of the Holy Spirit *without limit*.

1. Recall: "For He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure." (**John 3:34**, ESV)

2. Jesus, being the Son of God, had no need personally for these characteristics to be *added to* Him. The Spirit came down on Him to fulfill the prophecy of **Isaiah 11:1-3** (that the Spirit would "rest upon" Him).

3. Jesus came last; and had the full measure of the Holy Spirit (all characteristics).

    a. The spirit "rested on" Jesus. After that time, the Spirit did not come to any more Jewish prophets as He had done up to that time.