On the Holy Spirit
(Part 3 of 7: Relationship Between the Father, Son and Spirit)

Historic Faith Series on Holy Spirit

VIII. An Early Christian's View of the Holy Spirit

a. The Bible is the standard regarding understanding the Holy Spirit. However, it is sometimes useful to consider how the early Christian writers understood things, to provide an early framework (and then back-check against the Scriptures to determine whether their understanding is consistent with Scripture).

b. While the Holy Spirit is mentioned throughout the early Christian writings, there is not much in the way of a thorough or systematic description of the nature and role of the Holy Spirit.

c. One early Christian writer who had interesting things to say about the Holy Spirit was Irenaeus (c. 130-200, bishop of the church in Lyons, in modern-day France). It is noteworthy that as a boy, Irenaeus had been taught by Polycarp, who had been a disciple of the apostle John. From *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, a work by Irenaeus addressed to a young disciple named Marcianus:

   i. (*From chapter 1*) "Knowing, my dear Marcianus, your inclination to walk the path of God's service (which alone brings man to eternal life), I both congratulate you, and pray that you may keep the faith in its purity and so be well-pleasing to God your Maker."

   ii. "… For the road of all those who see is a single upward path, lit by heavenly light; but the ways of those who see not are many and dark and divergent. The former road leads to the kingdom of heaven by uniting man with God, but the others bring down to death by severing man from God."

   iii. (*In chapters 6, Irenaeus recalls the <u>three foundational articles of the Christian faith</u>*) "And this is the drawing-up of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life. *God, the Father*, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all; <u>this is the first and foremost article of our faith</u>.

   iv. "But <u>the second article</u> is *the Word of God, the Son of God*, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, in the end of times, for the recapitulation of all things, has become a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish

death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man.

v. "And the third article is the *Holy Spirit*, through whom the prophets prophesied in the patriarchs were taught about God and the just were led in the path of justice, and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God."

vi. (*Irenaeus continues this discussion in chapter 7*) "Therefore the baptism of our rebirth comes through these three articles, granting us rebirth unto God the Father, through His Son, by the Holy Spirit. For those who are bearers of the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is to the Son; but the Son takes them and presents them to the Father; and the Father confers incorruptibility. So, without the Spirit there is no seeing the Word of God, and without the Son there is no approaching the Father; for the Son is knowledge of the Father, and knowledge of the Son is through the Holy Spirit. But the Son, according to the Father's good pleasure, administers the Spirit charismatically [= *according to gifts -CP*] as the Father wills, to those to whom He will."

1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, translated by J.P. Smith, Paulist Press, Mahwah NJ)

vii. Things we see in this passage from Irenaeus:

1. Irenaeus considered the *three foundational articles* of the Christian faith to be:

    a. No. 1: understanding *the Father;*

    b. No. 2: understanding *the Son, the Word of God;* and

    c. No. 3: understanding *the Holy Spirit.*

2. The baptism of our rebirth takes place in the name of all three.

3. The *Spirit* leads people to the *Son*.

    a. Note that throughout the **Book of Acts**, people are converted through the words of the prophets, which were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we can see the Holy Spirit leading people to faith in the Son.

    b. Then the *Son* brings people to the *Father*.

4. In this way, *all Three* (the Father, Son and Spirit) are seen working together in our salvation.

IX. Understanding the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the Trinity)

a. Growing up in the Roman Catholic church as a child, I accepted the idea that there was one God, consisting of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, while I accepted this on faith, if pressed I would have a hard time explaining this to an unbeliever or defending it to a critic.

   i. I could point to **John chapter 1** to support the divinity of Christ, and **Matthew 28:18-20** to link the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, beyond that I was largely at a loss to explain the concept of there being *one* God yet in *three* persons.

   ii. Several years ago, my family and I went on a mission team to Albania, which has a large Muslim population.

      1. Muslims would challenge Christians on the idea of the trinity.

      2. They would claim that they believe in one God, while the Christians believe in *three* Gods!

      3. The Muslims would then accuse the Christians of following a corrupted, heretical, polytheistic religion. Muslims would insist that unlike the Christians, they are the *true* monotheists.

      4. Muslims would also object to the idea of Jesus being the Son of God, protesting: "God *can't* have a Son."

      5. Since that time, I have found Muslims making the very same objections wherever they are located (North America, Europe and Middle East).

      6. When teaching the Bible via conference call to young Christians coming from Muslim backgrounds in the Middle East, the most common question is: "Can you please explain the trinity to us?"

b. There are over a billion Muslims in the world (one recent estimate put it at 1.6 billion), and they are trained to attack Christians on the trinity.

   i. If we want to evangelize the world, we need be equipped to understand and explain the Father-Son-Spirit relationship (the trinity), to the best of our ability!

   ii. Unfortunately, most Christians are unprepared to defend what the Bible teaches on this. Furthermore, many modern explanations are inadequate or misleading (sometimes even heretical).

   iii. When I went to Albania (and since that time, reaching out to those from Muslim backgrounds) I have taken advantage of good explanations provided by early Christian writers.

1. I used some great examples found in the *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on "Trinity".

2. Note that Bercot, the editor of the Dictionary, originally came from a Jehovah's Witness background (but later was converted to the historic understanding of the trinity), so this clearly was an area of interest in his study!

c. Early Christian explanations of the trinity are (in my opinion) much better than modern ones, for two reasons: (1) their explanations are more consistent with what all the Scriptures say, and (2) their explanations are easier to understand and communicate to others (versus popular modern attempts).

i. Their analogies were helpful to explain the one-ness of God, who is nevertheless in three persons.

1. (NOTE: They did *NOT* use the modern ice/water/steam analogy, which suggests "modalism", a heretical understanding of the trinity whereby one person can change into another!)

ii. Three critical concepts, to appreciate how the early Christians understood and explained the Father/Son/Spirit relationship:

1. Headship or order

2. Nature, substance or essence

3. Distinct personal attributes

iii. <u>Headship or order.</u> Early Christians understood from the Scriptures that the Father is *the head of* (and source of) the Son and the Spirit. Note that many modern explanations of the trinity lose all sense of the headship of the Father, and tend to emphasize the equality of the Father, Son and Spirit to the point where all sense of headship is lost (like the poor illustration of a triangle, where all corners are fully equal). Note the sense of headship or order in the following verses:

1. Jesus *came from* the Father. (**John 16:27-28**)

2. Jesus *did His Father's will.* (**John 5:30**)

3. Jesus said, "…the Father is *greater than* I". (**John 14:28**)

4. Paul said, "…the *head of* Christ is God". (**1 Corinthians 11:3**)

5. Note that we use the term "Son", in contrast to "Father", to express the idea that the Son *came from* the Father. (The Father *did not* proceed from the Son!)

iv. Nature, substance or essence. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit share (in common) the same nature or substance

1. They were *not* created beings (in that regard, they are unlike people, angels and the rest of the created universe).

2. They are eternal; no beginning nor end in time.

3. They were involved in the creation of all things.

v. Distinct personal attributes. The Father, Son and Spirit are different from each other, having distinct personal attributes. Some examples:

1. The Father "dwells in unapproachable light" cannot be seen by anyone. (**1 Timothy 6:16**)

2. The Father is unbegotten, while the Son and Spirit are begotten from the Father.

3. The Son can take on human form; and He can be seen by others.

4. The Holy Spirit can dwell within a person.

vi. Some analogies, typical of those used by early Christian writers when trying to describe the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (with the element analogous to the Holy Spirit underlined, below). All communicate both unity and order/origin.

1. The sun, a ray of light coming from the son, and the apex of the ray

a. This reminds me of what it says in the Nicene Creed regarding the Son's relationship with the Father: "God from God, light from light".

2. A fountain or spring, a river coming from that fountain/spring, and stream coming from the river.

3. The root of a tree, the tree that comes from the root, and fruit that comes from the tree.

4. Tertullian (Christian writer from North Africa, writing c. 213 AD) pointed out that the Spirit is *third from God*, as the apex is third from the sun, and as stream is third from the fountain, etc.

a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 603)

vii. For more information, also see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Trinity'.