

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Holy Spirit

Issue: What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe about the Holy Spirit? How can one respond to their claims?

Response: Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Holy Spirit is a force of God, not a Person. This belief corresponds with their denial of God as a Trinity—three Persons, but one God. One can respond to their claims by pointing to Scripture passages that suggest the Personhood of the Holy Spirit. One can also look to the writings of early Church Fathers who refer to the Holy Spirit as a Person. After doing so, three questions arise: Is one conclusion more reasonable than the other, or are they equally reasonable? Is either conclusion necessary? Given the answers to those two questions, how do we know with certainty which conclusion is correct?

Discussion: Because Jehovah's Witnesses deny the Trinity, they also deny the Personhood of the Holy Spirit. Jehovah's Witnesses maintain that the Scriptures characterize the Holy Spirit as an impersonal object: people are filled by it, baptized with it, and anointed with it (see Lk. 1:41; Acts 2:4; Mt. 3:11; and Acts

In the Scriptures, persons are sometimes described by analogy in impersonal ways just as objects are sometimes personified. The tradition of the Church, along with the testimony of Church Fathers, consistently maintains the concept of God as Trinity and the Holy Spirit as a Person of that Trinity. Because Jehovah's Witnesses deny the Trinity, simply convincing a Jehovah's Witness that the Holy Spirit is a Person is unlikely. At the same time, raising questions about the Personhood of the Holy Spirit may lead a Jehovah's Witness to ask him or herself the questions, "Why do I believe the Holy Spirit must not be a person? Is my belief truly based in the Scriptures? How did I come by my belief?"

1 Chapter 9, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace
2 No. 10, in The Faith of the Early Fathers, Vol. 1, ed. William A. Jurgens
3 Cf. Book 3, chapter 16, no. 110, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace.

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10:38). Any personal references to the Holy Spirit or His action—such as "helper," "bear witness," "speak," and "hear" (see Jn. 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:13)—are dismissed as personification (a literary device, e.g., "the sun smiles from above") (cf. Reasoning from the Scriptures, Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1989).

This explanation of the Holy Spirit does not take a holistic view of scriptural interpretation. Using the same verses, one can also conclude the opposite—that the Scriptures properly refer to Him as a Person, but by way of analogy use impersonal attributes. Analogy helps us better understand the mysteries of the Spirit. The Scriptures sometimes speak of persons in impersonal ways: David wrote in Psalm 22:14 that he was "poured out like water." Also, God the Father is referred to as a flame, yet we don't conclude that He is not personal (Heb. 12:29). Perhaps the question should be asked, "If the Holy Spirit is presented in Scripture in both personal and objective ways, why must one conclude that He is not a Person?"

The following are passages from Scripture that indicate that the Holy Spirit is a Person:

For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11).

When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come (Jn. 16:13).

...even the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you (Jn. 14:17).

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (Jn. 14:26).

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 18:19).

From these passages, it seems that one can reasonably conclude that the Holy Spirit is

a Person.

Discussion note: when talking about Scripture, a Jehovah's Witness might question first the interpretation and then the translation of the Scripture passage before conceding a point. You might respond to this by admitting that neither of you are qualified to judge the accuracy of a translation. In fact, there is no one translation without error.

Not only does the evidence from Scripture favor the interpretation of the Holy Spirit as a Person, but the early Church Fathers testify to this teaching as well. In *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian (c. AD 155-240) refers to "the Person of the Paraclete" ("Paraclete" being another name for the Holy Spirit). 1 St. Athanasius (c. AD 295-373), in *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* and *Against the Arians*, writes: "For it is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Who is Lord of hosts. For the Godhead is one, and there is one God in three Persons." 2 St. Ambrose (AD 340-97) wrote an entire work entitled *On the Holy Spirit* in which he refers to the Holy Spirit as a Person and maintains that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are Three Persons but one God. 3