

## 16. IS THE HOLY SPIRIT REALLY GOD?

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1. One of the problems of the word *GOD* is that we use it without thinking much about whether we really know what it means and what it entails.
2. Since the beginning of Christianity
  - 2.1. there was a broad consensus that the Son and the Holy Spirit were ‘divine’.
  - 2.2. The issue was whether they could be seen as *God in exactly the same way* as the Father.
3. And the reason for this was simple: Christianity is the belief in one God. Monotheism is non-negotiable. Thus, without being aware of the implications of their assertions, many Christians had two tendencies
  - 3.1. Some would speak of the one God presenting himself alternatively under the guise of the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit (like an actor who impersonates different characters in a movie). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit should be seen as *modes of appearing or acting* of the one God (*Modalism*).
  - 3.2. Others considered that that the Son and the Holy Spirit were *real* but saw them as *inferior or subordinate* to the Father, as lesser gods (*Subordinationism*).
4. These are not really heresies. They can be seen as the spontaneous way we tend to speak of the Son and of the Holy Spirit until we become aware of what are the implications – until we become aware, that is, that by so doing we undermine the whole Christian meaning of revelation and of salvation and we contradict the testimony of Scripture.
5. This is why the question is not whether the Holy Spirit is God – but whether she/he/it is *really God* – whether there are compelling reasons for confessing and worshipping the Holy Spirit to be God.
6. Let us start by acknowledging that there are many reasons why believing that the Holy Spirit is God is problematic:
  - 6.1. As we have seen in our previous talk, both in the Old Testament and in most of the New Testament the Spirit of God is described not as a personal entity but as a power, as the *breath of God*, the *love of God*, the *gift of God* etc...

a. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> “There were a number of reasons why the personhood of the Holy Spirit took longer to acknowledge than the Son: i) the term *pneuma*, breath, is neuter in general and impersonal in ordinary meaning; ii) the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit, influencing the believer, does not necessarily seem as personal as that of the Father and in addition, those who saw the Holy Spirit as a Person, were often heretical, for example, the Montanists; iii) many of the early theologians attributed to the Logos or Word, the revelatory activity later theologians saw as the special, personal work of the Holy Spirit”, Cf. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy*, p. 140, quoted by Eirini Artemis, “The Divine Personhood of the Holy Spirit in the Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus”, *Vox Patrum* 37 (2017) t. 68. 1

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- 6.2. The very name by which she/he/it is known is ambiguous: “Holy” is an attribute and “Spirit” that is ‘something which is supposed to belong to someone’.
- 6.3. In most of the writings of the New Testament other than the Gospels (Paul’s letters, Acts of the Apostles), it is often difficult to distinguish
  - i. the presence and action of the Holy Spirit
  - ii. from the presence and action of the Risen Christ.
- 6.4. True, there are passages in the Acts of the Apostles where we see the Holy Spirit acting as a subject, speaking, taking the initiative (see our previous talk on the Holy Spirit). But the weight of the passages in which the Holy Spirit is described more as a power is greater – and it is only natural to have a tendency to see him more as a *divine thing* than as *personal God*.
- 6.5. Most important of all, there are no passages in Scripture which states openly and clearly that the Holy Spirit is God (it is true that Jesus too never refers to himself plainly as God, although others say this of him in the NT).
7. This explains why it took over three centuries for Christianity to confess unambiguously that the Holy Spirit is God in exactly the same way as the Father and the Son
  - 7.1. The earliest instance is found in the *Fifth Theological Oration* of Gregory of Nazianzus (delivered in 379 CE)
  - 7.2. And the full divinity of the Holy Spirit was sanctioned by the Council of Constantinople only in 381 CE which added this sentence to the Creed:

“And [I 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 worshiped** and glorified, who spoke by the prophets”.
8. The problem up to that moment was not so much the understanding of who the Holy Spirit is, but of who God is, and how he reveals himself, how he acts in history.
9. To understand this point, let us start with a thought experiment: **what does Christianity look like if we believe that only the Father and the Son are God but not the Holy Spirit?**
  - 9.1. We believe that in Jesus God has made himself known and has acted decisively in history.
  - 9.2. He is now risen and is not physically present among us any more.
  - 9.3. The continuation of God’s action is made possible in many ways:
    - i. We have the successors of the Apostles, Bishops and priests, who have a mandate to teach and guide in Jesus’ name.
    - ii. We have the Gospels which are the written testimony of the words and actions of Jesus.
    - iii. All we have to do is join the Church guided by the successors of the Apostles, receive and confess the right teaching, and put this teaching into practice.
    - iv. Now that Jesus is gone, the coming of the Kingdom of God depends on us, on what we do with Jesus’ legacy.
    - v. Baptism is seen more as a rite of initiation.

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- 9.4. We believe that God helps us, gives us his grace – but in fact we do everything as all depended on us.
- 10. This seems a caricature but in fact it is how Christianity has had a tendency to operate for most of its history. Many disputes about doctrine and sacraments in fact were ways of disputing who really *has* God, who can claim to be authorized to *speak* and *act* in the name of God – and the main answer has been
  - 10.1. Those who can prove that their authority comes directly from the Apostles (and from Jesus) by the so called “Apostolic Succession”
  - 10.2. Those who can prove that their interpretation of Scriptures is the most compelling.
  - 10.3. Those who confess the right doctrine.
- 11. A model in which the Holy Spirit is not God, or the belief in his divinity is not operative, becomes
  - 11.1. Top-down
  - 11.2. Authority based
  - 11.3. Knowledge based
  - 11.4. Anthropocentric: it is not about what God does, but about what *we* do.
- 12. How does this picture change when the Holy Spirit is fully part of the equation? Let us start by seeing what the role of the Holy Spirit is in the life of Jesus.

### The Holy Spirit and Jesus

- 13. The very way in which God becomes a human being is the result of the action of the Holy Spirit
  - Luke 1: 35 “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.
  - 13.1. The act of faith is inseparable from the physical conception
  - 13.2. God becomes one of us, enters in our history as a human being like us, not just through biology and physical presence, but first of all by being received ‘spiritually’.
- 14. The title "Christ" means "anointed". Indeed at the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit anoints him (or better it becomes clear that Jesus has always been the ‘anointed’ one):
  - Mt 3:16 [16](#)And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; [17](#)and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”
  - 14.1. There is a connection between Jesus’ ability to be ‘pleasing’ to the Father and the fact that he is anointed by the Holy Spirit.
  - 14.2. Jesus’ identity and mission depend on his relation to the Holy Spirit.
- 15. Jesus presents his mission as made possible by the Holy Spirit being “upon him”:
  - Luke 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has **anointed** me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the

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captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

16. The Holy Spirit is mentioned constantly as ‘leading’, ‘guiding’, ‘empowering’ Jesus in his ministry

Mt 4 [1](#) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Lk 4:14 Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country.

Mt 12:28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

17. Refusing to believe in Jesus’ mission and authority is not a refusal of him but of the Holy Spirit

Mt 12: 31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

17.1. This is not a refusal to forgive on God’s part

17.2. It is a refusal to receive forgiveness on our part because the Holy Spirit is forgiveness.

17.3. Forgiveness is *reconciliation*, that is ‘re-union’ with God – and because the Holy Spirit is

i. The union between the Father and the Son

ii. The union between the Son and Jesus (this is the ‘anointing’)

iii. So she/he/it is the union between us and Jesus and, through Jesus, to the Father.

18. Jesus’ mission is presented mainly from the prophetic viewpoint, that is of him being he who speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

Luke 4: [24](#) And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown”.

19. Interestingly, referring to his death Jesus presents it as a baptism

Luke 12: [50](#) I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

19.1. This implies that it is yet another moment of his being anointed by the Holy Spirit

19.2. Yet another step in manifesting his union with the Father and in realizing our union with him.

20. His death is presented as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit

John 19:30 "he gave up the Spirit" (paredoken to pneuma)

20.1. After this gift of the Spirit to us, Jesus’ Father also becomes *our* Father:

John 20: Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to

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the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'".

21. His resurrection is in the power of the Holy Spirit

Romans 8: [11](#)If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.
22. The risen Christ gives the Holy Spirit to his disciples

John 20: [22](#)And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23](#) If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

  - 22.1. Again forgiveness, that is 'union with God' is the work of the Holy Spirit.
23. All this has profound implications in the way in which we understand how Jesus is God
  - 23.1. Since Jesus was fully God why did he not act on and of his own?
  - 23.2. We understand why the judges, kings, and prophets of the Old Testament needed to be guided, inspired, and empowered by the Spirit of God: they were simply human, fallible, they did not know God.
  - 23.3. But what about Jesus? Being the Son of God he had the knowledge and power of God.
24. At the very least, the life of Jesus shows that 'being God' is not something one 'owns', like a superpower, or a special knowledge and skill – rather it is something that needs to keep flowing, has to be constantly received – it is a continuous exchange.

Philippians 2 :6 Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God a thing that should/could be grasped (owned, possessed, claimed, contained).

  - 24.1. Jesus himself could and would not 'grasp', 'own', 'have' God
  - 24.2. How much more *we* cannot 'own', 'have' God!
25. So from the life of Jesus we understand the real way in which God gives himself both in the Trinity and in his relation to us:
  - 25.1. The Father does not give himself to the Son once for all
  - 25.2. And the Son does not receive the Father once for all
  - 25.3. But their life, their unity, their 'communion' is a relation, a flow of constant giving and receiving
  - 25.4. And this continuous 'giving and receiving', this gift of 'communion', this union is the Holy Spirit.
26. This means that there is no authority, doctrine, teaching, nor Scripture that in and by themselves can 'give' us God. This is why Jesus says

John 16: [12](#)"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. [13](#)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.

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27. Belief in the Holy Spirit completely changes the way in which we conceive God and our participation in the life of God.
- 27.1. Whatever we think that we ‘have’, ‘know’ of God is not God.
  - 27.2. It is like someone who puts some water from the sea in a jug and thinks she ‘has’ the sea. And even if instead of a jug one had a container that could hold all the water of all the oceans, the moment the water is ‘contained’ is not the sea any more.
28. This is the meaning of the word *Lord*:
- 28.1. “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14) means that there is no way God can give his name, that is himself
  - 28.2. John says that “Nobody has ever seen/known God” (1:18)– in the sense that nobody can ever know or see him.
  - 28.3. And when John adds “but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father’s side, has made Him known” (1:18), he does not mean a knowledge handed over once for all, but something that we continuously need to receive from the Son, and in which we need to be continuously introduced by the Holy Spirit.  
  
1 Corinthians 2:9 As it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—  
10these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. 13And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.
29. The Son has to be God because
- 29.1. only God can reveal God,
  - 29.2. only God can give God.
  - 29.3. But what about **receiving God?**  
  
Back to the image of the jug and the sea: no container, however big can receive the sea. Only the sea can receive the sea.
30. The Holy Spirit is the gift the Son gives us
- 30.1. to make us ‘recipients’ of God,
  - 30.2. to enable us to become ‘temples of God’
  - 30.3. and since only God can receive God, the Holy Spirit can allow us to receive God only because he is fully God himself.
31. In conclusion let us go back to our thought experiment: **what does Christianity look like if we believe that the Holy Spirit is God in exactly the same way as the Father and the Son?**

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<b>Without the Holy Spirit</b>	<b>With the Holy Spirit</b>
<p>32. We believe that in Jesus God has made himself known and has acted decisively in history.</p>	<p>33. We believe that the revelation and action of God in history works only to the extent that, like Jesus, we let ourselves to be continuously guided, inspired, and empowered <u>and disrupted</u> by the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>34. Jesus is now risen and is not physically present among us any more.</p>	<p>35. The Risen Jesus remains among us in the power of the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>36. The continuation of God's action is made possible in many ways:</p> <p>37. We have the successors of the Apostles, Bishops and priests, who have a mandate to teach and guide in Jesus' name.</p>	<p>38. The people who receive a mandate to guide and teach (whether by apostolic succession or in other ways) draw their ability to do so only to the extent that they constantly let themselves to be led and inspired by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did. No power or authority in the Church works by simple appointment or ordination, or authorization.</p>
<p>39. We have the Gospels which are the written testimony of the words and actions of Jesus.</p>	<p>40. Scripture is not the Word of God. Scripture <i>can become</i> "God who speaks to us now" (the Word) only if the same Spirit who inspired the authors of Scripture also inspire those who read it.</p>
<p>41. All we have to do is join the Church guided by the successors of the Apostles, receive and confess the right teaching, and put this teaching into practice.</p>	<p>42. Structures, teaching, doctrine, and activities are powerless unless the Church becomes a <i>sign</i> of God's love thanks to the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>43. Now that Jesus is gone, the coming of the Kingdom of God <u>depends on us</u>, on what we do with Jesus' legacy.</p>	<p>44. The coming of the Kingdom of God remains fully <i>God's</i> action still now. Nothing of what we do can contribute to the coming of the Kingdom unless it is inspired, led, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is why the main role of pastors should be to rely on the gifts (charisms) of the Holy</p>

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	Spirit in Christian community, acknowledge them, even when (which is often the case) they seem <i>disruptive</i> .
45. Baptism is seen more as a rite of initiation.	46. We are baptized in the Father, the Son <i>and the Holy Spirit</i> : Baptism is a new creation (this is why in the Creed we confess that the Holy Spirit is “the giver of Life”), it our ‘anointment’ (like Jesus’ anointment): it is by the Holy Spirit that we are ‘immersed’ in God and we can act <i>from</i> God.
47. We believe that God helps us, gives us his grace – but in fact we do everything as all depended on us.	48. We believe that without the presence and action of the Holy Spirit we can do nothing. This is why the most important activity of the Church is discern where the Holy Spirit is guiding us.
49. <i>A model in which the Holy Spirit is not God, or the belief in his divinity is not operative, becomes</i>	50. <i>A model in which the Holy Spirit is God, and the belief in his divinity is operative, becomes</i>
51. Top-down	52. Bottom up (because based on recognizing and allowing the gifts or ‘charisms’ given by the Holy Spirit to all Christians)
53. Authority based	54. Participatory
55. Knowledge based	56. Love based
57. Anthropocentric: it is not about what God does, but about what <i>we</i> do.	58. Based on the belief that it is all about what God keeps doing and enables us to do.