

Fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead, on the Festival of Pentecost, which was also ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit on his disciples, as he had promised to do. We still celebrate this event, and use it as an opportunity to review who the Holy Spirit is and what he does. That's also what we want to do today in this devotion.

Let's listen to John 15:26, one of the places where Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit.

JOHN 15:26. (EHV)

“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father—he will testify about me.”

When we ask, “Who is the Holy Spirit?”, we can answer that question by looking at how the Scriptures define him and by looking at the names the Scriptures give him.

On the one hand, the Scriptures identify the Holy Spirit as one with God (Acts 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 3:16–17), and of course God is only one being or essence (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 45:5). On the other hand, the Scriptures identify the Holy Spirit as a distinct person within the Godhead, separate from the Father and the Son. (What we mean by a *person* in this context, by the way, means that which subsists by itself—that is, it is not created by someone or something else and is not a parasite that derives its existence from a host creature.) For instance, when Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, he told them to baptize people “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). In the passage I just read from John 15, Jesus told his disciples the Spirit is someone he would send to them, that he proceeds from the Father, and that he would testify about Jesus. On the basis of these and other passages (John 14:26; 16:7; Rev. 22:1), we say that he proceeds from the Father and the Son. Yet since he is God, he eternally proceeds from them; he does not derive his existence from them.

He is called the Spirit, because just like any other spirit, he does not have flesh and bones or a physical form (Luke 24:39). In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for *spirit* is also the word for *wind*, and this is not a coincidence, because there are similarities in the invisible way both the Spirit and the wind operate (John 3:8). The apostle Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. Indeed, who among men knows a man's thoughts except the man's spirit within him? So also, no one else knows God's thoughts except God's Spirit.” These are the reasons this person of the triune God is called the Spirit.

But from this, we could possibly get the impression that the Holy Spirit is simply some sort of impersonal force or movement from God, or is just an aspect of God like our spirit is an aspect of our existence, not a separate person from us. But the Bible speaks against this idea in many places, not only by putting him on an equal plane with the Father and the Son, while at the same time distinguishing him from both, but also by ascribing personal actions to him. For instance, the Holy Spirit teaches (John 14:26); he testifies (John 15:26; Rom. 8:16); he intercedes (Rom. 8:26); he gives instructions (Acts 8:29; 10:19–20); he reminds (John 14:26); he hovers (Gen. 1:2); he gives rest (Isa. 63:14); he gives life (John 6:63); he sanctifies or makes holy (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2); he gives new birth and makes new (Titus 3:5); he unites (Eph. 4:3); he produces spiritual fruits and virtues (Gal. 5:22–23); and on a couple occasions he took his own distinct form, once as a dove (Mark 1:10) and on Pentecost in the form of a sound like violent wind and in tongues of fire resting on Christ's disciples (Acts 2:2–3).

So the Holy Spirit is one with God and is 100% God, but is also a person within God distinct from God the Father and God the Son, and he proceeds from both the Father and the Son. This defines who the Holy Spirit is on a sort of technical level, but we can get a more personal look at him by considering some of the names that Scripture gives him. I have to give credit to the sixteenth century pastor Johannes Brenz for cluing me in to the fact that all of these names are used in contrast to the devil.

For instance, his most common name, the Holy Spirit, is used to contrast him with all evil spirits and with *the* evil spirit. The Holy Spirit always thinks and acts righteously; his entire existence is set apart from sin. The devil and the evil spirits always think and act wickedly and are steeped in sin (Eph. 2:2). He is also called the Holy Spirit because, as we noted before, his job is to make people holy.

Hebrews 9:14 calls him the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14), which is used to contrast him with all other spirits, both evil spirits, the demons, and good spirits, the angels, and the spirits or souls of humans—all of which have a beginning. The Holy Spirit, since he is God, has no beginning, so he is the eternal Spirit. He exists from eternity to eternity.

In a couple places, including the passage I read at the beginning, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit a word that can be translated Counselor, Comforter, or Defense Attorney (John 15:16; 15:26), which is used to contrast him with the devil's name Satan. Satan means the opposite of Comforter or Defense Attorney; it means adversary or accuser or prosecutor. The so-called comfort Satan gives is a misleading comfort, meant to make us secure in our sins, so that he can eventually accuse and terrify us. Satan "comforts" us by telling us, for example, that our sin isn't a big deal, that the punishment of hell isn't as bad as some people make it out to be, that hell is reserved for people who are much worse than we, or that hell does not exist at all—in short, that God's word is lying about sin and its punishment to one degree or another. But once Satan has lured us into sin in this way, his comfort evaporates like steam. With the help of our conscience, he shakes his finger at us and accuses us and tells us that we are horrible sinners who must give up any hope of being loved by God and being saved.

The Holy Spirit, the Counselor or Comforter, operates the exact opposite way. He also terrifies us, by using God's law to make us aware of the great number and seriousness of our sins. But he does this only so that he can give us the best and surest comfort. And he gives us this comfort precisely by testifying about Christ, focusing our attention on his life, death, and resurrection for us, by which our sins are paid for and forgiven.

In several places, including the passage I read at the beginning, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6), which is used to contrast him with Satan's name the devil. *Devil* means *someone who accuses falsely* or *liar*. In fact, Jesus once said that the devil speaks his native language when he lies and that he is the father of lies (John 8:44). Think about this, in light of the devil's name Satan or Accuser: Satan tells us that we are sinners whom God can never and will never forgive. Yet even though Satan's accusations always ring true and fit the activity of our hearts, hands, and mouths to a T, the Spirit hears what he says and calls him *the devil*, that is, the *false* accuser! In effect, the Spirit is saying to us, "Don't listen to what he's saying about you; he's lying. On Good Friday, when Christ offered up his perfect life to the Father and, in exchange, took your sin on himself, paying for it all with his own blood, God declared you as perfect and holy as Christ himself." So the fact that Jesus calls him "the

Spirit of truth” is just a different way of saying the Spirit is our counselor and comforter.

He is also called the Spirit of wisdom, revelation, and understanding (Eph. 1:17; Isa. 11:2), which is used in contrast with the devil who sows and promotes folly, secrecy, and confusion (Col. 1:13).

He is also called the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2; John 6:63), which is used in contrast with the devil who is a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44) and who seeks nothing more than the death of all humans.

He is also called the Spirit of adoption, because through his work we are adopted as God’s sons and become free members of his household. This is further proof that we are not God’s sons by nature, but need to be reborn spiritually and adopted as his sons through faith in Jesus. This name is also used in contrast with the devil, who is the spirit of slavery, not of adoption as sons (Rom. 8:15).

This is not an exhaustive list of the Spirit’s names, but this sampling gives us a much closer and more personal look at who he is and what he does.

This leaves us with the question: How do we receive the Holy Spirit, so that we benefit from his work and receive his blessings? On Pentecost, the apostle Peter called the Holy Spirit a gift. In other words, we cannot receive him by doing something and working for him. He must be given to us by God as a gift. The Bible says that God does that through the gospel of Jesus in Word and sacrament, namely through the gospel preached and taught, and through the gospel received in baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:38–39; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; John 6:63; 15:26). In other words, we don’t receive the Spirit by focusing on the Spirit. As Jesus said in the passage I read at the beginning, the Spirit testifies about Jesus. We receive the Spirit by focusing on Jesus. That’s why the Spirit is sometimes called the silent member of the Trinity. When we receive the gospel of Jesus and believe it, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and with him, his holiness, his comfort, his truth, his wisdom, revelation, and understanding, his life, his adoption, his heaven. Amen.