

Genesis 1:1-2 (NIV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

John 16:7-14 (NRSV)

⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

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, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

John 20:19-22 (NRSV)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² 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 retain the sins of any, they are retained."

This week, we come to our final cluster of words in this series: wind/breath/spirit. *Ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. I've included some more information on these very important words at the end of the study.

Whether the best translation is "wind" or "breath" or "spirit" in a given verse is often determined by the context and/or the theological choices of the translations. I included the opening verses from Genesis above, one set from the NIV and one set from the NRSV. Both are valid choices, as it would be suitable to speak of the "breath of God" moving over the waters



The Dove

One of the symbols in St. Andrew's Rose Window is that of a dove. All four Gospel writers tell us that at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, God's Spirit descended like a dove upon him. Luke put it this way, "... and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:22).

Though doves appear in the Old Testament, never before in Jewish traditions had a dove been used to represent God's Spirit. The descent of God's Holy Spirit upon Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, marks out Jesus as God's "beloved Son" and prepares us for the uniqueness of Jesus and his mission. Later, returning to his hometown, Jesus would rise in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me."

This week, we are going to concentrate on the Spirit of God (the capitalization denotes the third person of the Trinity.) The best way to understand the Holy Spirit is to begin by noting that the Spirit is God's empowering presence in this world and with his people. But Christians have a difficult time really grasping the nature of the Holy Spirit.

Not long ago, the Barna Group did a survey of self-professed Christians regarding "spiritual beings." Here is a quote from a summary of the findings:

Much like their perceptions of Satan, most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a living force, either. Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." Just one-third of Christians disagreed that the Holy Spirit is not a living force (9% disagreed somewhat, 25% disagreed strongly) while 9% were not sure.

I can't say I'm surprised that a large majority of Christians understand the Holy Spirit to be a symbol not a living entity; i.e., a "what" not a "who." Still, it is disheartening and says much about the condition of theological and biblical education among adult Christians in America. That so many fail to comprehend their implicit denial of the Trinity (for I'm sure that most would automatically say "yes" if asked whether they believe in the Trinity) ought to make plain the case that, yes, doctrine matters.

So . . . here are the basics. There is one God of one substance, who exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are *persons*. All three have always been and always shall be. The Spirit is fully and completely God, though not all of God, just as Jesus is fully and completely God, though not all of God, and the Father is fully and completely God, though not all of God. The Spirit is a "who," just as Jesus is a "who" and the Father is a "who." God is not divided into three parts nor are the three persons just three roles of God. How, you surely ask, can all this be? How can there be one God, of one substance, of one nature, without division . . . and yet, there be three "distinct" persons. Well, that is the mystery we call the Trinity. But just because we can't explain something fully doesn't make it not so. Quantum mechanics has well-demonstrated that in the world of science. The FAQ's:

The Holy Spirit: Just the FAQ's

Exactly what is the Holy Spirit?

Yikes! First, the Holy Spirit is not a "what," but a "who." You too are not a "what" but a "who," a person. The Holy Spirit is a person. Look, for example, at the above passage from John 16. I've underlined all the personal pronouns that refer to the Holy Spirit, aka the Advocate.¹ The Spirit is no less a person than you and I are persons.

In the Bible, the Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens*, and is *lied to*. These are not verbs we apply to chairs or to electricity. The Holy Spirit is not akin to the Force of Star Wars; the Spirit is a person, a Holy Who! Don't be misled by the fact that the Bible uses images like doves, wind, or fire in reference to the Spirit. Such images illustrate something about the Spirit to us, but that is all. After all, Scripture refers to God as a "rock" and Jesus as a "door."

But is the Spirit more like an angel or more like God?

The Holy Spirit is not an angel. Angels are created beings that are neither human nor divine. In Scripture, God uses angels as his messengers. Like you and me, angels are persons, though not divine.

And the Spirit is not merely "like God," the Holy Spirit *is* God, fully and completely, though not all of God. The Spirit is God in exactly the same manner as Jesus is God

¹Don't get too caught up in the fact that these are all masculine pronouns. In English, we only have "he" and "she" to choose from when it comes to singular personal pronouns. Using "it" is a far worse choice, for though it avoids the gender issues, it relegates the Spirit to being an impersonal thing.

and the Father is God. These persons, the three “who’s” of the Trinity, comprise the one God, who is not divisible, for God is one.²

Does the Holy Spirit have a name?

The name most commonly used by the New Testament writers is “the Holy Spirit.” However, the Holy Spirit is also called “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” “the Spirit of the Lord,” “the Spirit of Christ,” “the *Paraclete*,” “the Spirit of Jesus,” and “the Spirit of his Son.”³

I suppose it would be easier to think of the Spirit as a person if the Spirit were named Tom or Sally. But those are names given by humans to other humans. The Spirit is a person, but not a human person. Don’t let the seemingly impersonal nature of the word “spirit” mislead you. The Holy Spirit of God is very personal indeed.

What does the Spirit do?

Gordon Fee, the most prominent Pentecostal NT scholar, came up with just the right phrase to describe the Spirit’s work. The Spirit is the “empowering presence of God.”

Jesus helps us to grasp the truth of the Spirit. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples that he was leaving, but it was ok and even better, because God would send his Holy Spirit to be with them. God would still be with them, but it would be his Spirit, not Jesus. Jesus would still be with them, but it would be his Spirit.⁴

The Spirit is God with us every day. It is the Spirit who empowers and strengthens us. It is the Spirit who comforts us. It is the Spirit who lifts up to the Father the prayers that we can’t even articulate ourselves. If you believe that God is helping you through a crisis, it is the Spirit who is the helper. It is the Spirit who opens people’s hearts so they can hear the Good News. It is the Spirit who is God-doing with us and for us every day.

It is the Holy Spirit who gathers us together for worship. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who has formed us into the fellowship that we call the Church,⁵ the holy catholic church. And it is the Spirit who sustains us in this community of believers.

The Spirit is God-present-with-us

Presence is delicious.⁶ Telephones, e-mail, texts, chats, and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are wonderful, but nothing is like actually being *with* someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn’t just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple. God’s people weren’t so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way.

²If you think you’ve figured out how three can be one, without sacrificing something of their diversity or something of their unity, I can assure you that you are wrong – at least it is still a mystery of God after these past 2,000 years.

³This Greek word is variously translated as Comforter, Advocate, Helper, and Counselor. It is a name used often by Jesus in his last talk with his disciples. Jesus was leaving but God was sending another to be with them – the Spirit, aka the Paraclete.

⁴Yes, it takes a somewhat expansive and flexible to accommodate all things Trinitarian! My advice is to pay careful attention to the words of Scripture and let them guide you.

⁵Writers often capitalize “Church” to help the reader differentiate between the universal body of Christ and the local churches, such as St. Andrew.

⁶I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, whose work underlies much of this week’s study. Dr. Fee is a highly regarded New Testament scholar. He is also a Pentecostal and, thus, keenly aware of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly then, Dr. Fee has devoted considerable efforts to helping the Christian community see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a small, still voice, but is the very presence of God in our lives.

This God-present-with-us in the Old Testament is sometimes called the *shekinah* (Hebrew for “presence”), sometimes Wisdom, and sometimes even the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., Isaiah 63:9-14). In the New Testament, this God-present-with-us is most often called the Holy Spirit, but also simply the Spirit or the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or even the Spirit of truth.

The departure of God-present-with-us

To pick up the story, by the time of Ezekiel (about 600BC), God’s temple, the dwelling place of God, had stood for more than 400 years. But rather than living as God had taught them – loving God and loving neighbor – God’s people had wrapped themselves in superficial religious trappings (Jeremiah 7:1-4). Since the Jews had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God, God-present-with-us (aka God’s Spirit), departed the temple, “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . .” (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God did not forever abandon his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

The return of God-present-with-us

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, swollen with more than 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would arrive with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus’ crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death; his resurrection had changed everything. They didn’t know what to expect, but they wouldn’t have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages” (from today’s passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power.

Paul helps us to understand that the Holy Spirit is not some impersonal power at work in the universe, akin to the “force” in Star Wars. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the very presence of God, who has returned to dwell in and with his people -- first in Jesus (remember his baptism and the descent of the symbolic dove), then in the disciples at Pentecost, then in all Christians to this very day. Using the Old Testament temple imagery, Paul reminds the early Christian communities that they, collectively, are the temple of God, in whom God now dwells. “Do you⁷ not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; see also 2 Corinthians 6:16-18). But Paul goes further, reminding individual Christians that each of them is a temple of the one true God, in whom God dwells and works. “Or do you⁸ not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

The breath of God

Surely one of the reasons that Christians so often imagine the Holy Spirit to be a force akin to electricity, is that the Spirit lacks a proper name or even a personal designation,

⁷ The “you” here is plural in the Greek. A problem in reading English translations is that there is no way to tell a singular “you” from a plural “you.” In some ways, it would be better if a plural “you” were translated as “y’all”!!

⁸ Here, the “you” is singular!

such as “Jesus” or “Father.” In the old days, we used to refer to the Spirit as the “Holy Ghost.” At least, that name captures something of the personal.

A second problem is that the biblical images of God-present-with-us, the Spirit, are impersonal – a dove, breath, wind, fire, even the “sound of sheer silence.” Yet, how else could the writers try to capture the immediacy, power, and intimacy of God’s presence? All words fall short of the reality of God; our God-talk necessarily is built on analogy and image.

Thus, we come to John’s story of the Spirit and the disciples, hearing clearly Jesus’ announcement that the time had come for the disciples to head out and comprehending the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the one Jesus had promised would arrive after he left (see John 15). As God breathed life into the man in the garden of Eden, Jesus now gives new life to these gathered disciples. This life-giving, life-sustaining breath of God is an image of the power of God’s presence – the Spirit, God-present-with us.

The Holy Spirit is the renewed presence of God among his people – collectively and individually. This ought to take our breath away! We are Christians. We place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We have all been born from above (John 3). We have all received the Holy Spirit – as the Church and as individual believers. God is always with us. If it doesn’t feel like it at times, it isn’t because God has gone anywhere, it is because we have. God’s presence, his Holy Spirit, is with us always. So . . . it shouldn’t surprise us when Paul urges us to show the fruit of God’s ever-present Spirit working in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are the people of the Spirit. We live by the Spirit and are to be guided by the Spirit. We have the “Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9), who enables us to cry, “*Abba!* Father!” (Galatians 4:6). Alleluia and Amen!

Spirit⁹

(from the Lexham Theological Wordbook, entry by Ronald Lowther)

Spirit refers to a living “intangible essence” with rational, emotional, and volitional attributes. The Bible primarily uses the concept of spirit for the non-material living essence of human beings (soul, spirit, inner life) and for the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of God.

Concept Summary

Neither Hebrew nor Greek has a word that exclusively means “spirit”; rather, the concept of spirit is primarily expressed with words that also mean “wind” (Gen 8:1; John 3:8) or “breath” (Gen 6:17; 2 Thess 2:8), such as רֹּחַ (*rûah*) or πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). In Hebrew, *rûah* can refer to the wind, the breath of a living being, or the spirit as the living essence of a creature. Context usually makes clear that a particular sense is meant, but in some passages the concepts overlap. For example, in Ezek 37:9 the breath (*rûah*) is to come from the four winds (*rûah*) and revive the dead; this touches on all three aspects of *rûah* as wind, breath, and life-essence. The Hebrew word נְשָׁמָה (*něšāmâ*) primarily means “breath” and is used both for physical breath as a sign of life (1 Kgs 17:17) and as the breath of life, meaning the animating force of a living being (Gen 2:7; 7:22). The Greek word *pneuma* can also mean “wind, breath, spirit,” but in the New Testament the meaning “spirit” predominates. This term may be used to indicate the human spirit (Luke 1:47; 2 Cor 7:1), like ψυχή (*psychē*, “soul”), but the NT also uses it to refer to various supernatural beings, including angelic beings (Heb 1:14; Rev 1:4; 3:1) and evil spirits (Mark 1:23–27). The same term can be used to refer to the

⁹ Roland J. Lowther, “[Spirit](#),” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; Matt 12:32). References to the Holy Spirit are sometimes made explicit with use of the exact phrase τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον (*to pneuma to hagion*, “the Holy Spirit”; Mark 13:11).

Theological Overview

The creation story in Gen 1 describes the Spirit of God as hovering over the formless and void earth (Gen 1:2). The creative Spirit of God (רֹאֵחַ, *rûaḥ-’ēl*), represented as the breath (נְשָׁמָה, *něšāmâ*) of the Almighty, “breathes” an inner life into mankind (Job 33:4). The OT also portrays the Spirit of God enabling people to accomplish God’s purposes through artistic skill (Exod 31:3), governance (1 Sam 16:13), and prophecy (Neh 9:30). The Spirit breathes new life into the redeemed people of God (Ezek 37:1–10).

In NT theology, Jesus becomes incarnate through the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18–20). At his baptism, he is anointed and empowered with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22, 4:18).

Faith is a gift of God’s Spirit (Eph 2:8). When people become Christians, they are “born again” of the Spirit (John 3:3–8). Through the Holy Spirit, believers receive a new life and the hope of a renewed creation. The Holy Spirit also enables and empowers holiness (Rom 8:5) and spiritual service (1 Cor 12).

Theologians debate whether the Bible presents human nature as containing three major components—body, soul, and spirit—or only two. Advocates of the bipartite view argue on theological grounds that soul and spirit cannot be clearly distinguished. From this perspective, the Greek terms ψυχή (*psychē*; “soul”) and πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) belong to the same semantic field.

Lexical Information

Old Testament

רֹאֵחַ (*rûaḥ*). n. fem. **breath, wind, spirit**. *Can refer to wind, to the breath of humans or animals, to the animating spirit of humans, or to the Spirit of God.*

As a word also used for the wind and the breath, *rûaḥ* is extremely common in the OT. The non-physical uses generally fall into three categories: an empowering force of divine origin (Judg 15:14; 1 Sam 11:6), the life-essence of a person (Zech 12:1), or the Spirit of God. God’s Spirit is frequently described as bestowing divine power or skill on people, such as Bezalel (Exod 31:3), Samson (Judg 14:6), and Saul (1 Sam 11:6). Breath is essential to life; when *rûaḥ* is taken from people or animals, they die (Pss 146:4; 104:29).

נְשָׁמָה (*něšāmâ*). n. fem. **breath, spirit**. *Primarily refers to breath; can also refer to the human spirit or to the Spirit of God.*

Like רֹאֵחַ (*rûaḥ*), *něšāmâ* can mean “breath” or “spirit”; however, unlike *rûaḥ*, it does not mean “wind.” Some passages use it in parallel with *rûaḥ*, either to refer to God’s Spirit (e.g. Job 33:4) or to refer to the spirit that he gives to people (e.g., Isa 42:5). According to Job 32:8, the *něšāmâ* of God in humans gives them insight (Job 32:8). In Gen 2:7, the breath (*něšāmâ*) of God enables Adam to become a living soul (נֶפֶשׁ, *nepeš*).

New Testament

πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). n. neut. **breath, wind, spirit**. *Can refer to wind, to the breath of humans or animals, to the animating spirit of humans, or to the Holy Spirit.*

Like Hebrew רֹאֵחַ (*rûaḥ*), *pneuma* ranges in meaning from “wind” through “breath” to “spirit”. In the Septuagint, it is the most frequent translation of *rûaḥ*, especially in the senses of “breath” and “spirit.” In the NT, the spiritual sense is by far the most common. It can refer to the inner essence of human life (Matt 27:50, Luke 8:55). It also can denote an immaterial or “spiritual” dimension of human life, in which

case it often contrasts with σάρξ (*sarx*, “flesh”; e.g. John 3:6, 6:63, 1 Thess 5:23). Spirit (*pneuma*) may also refer to an attitude of mind, or spiritual state (1 Cor 2:10–16; Eph 4:23), especially when influenced by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9). The Holy Spirit (ἅγιον πνεῦμα, *hagion pneuma*) may also be called simply “the Spirit” (*pneuma*; 1 Cor 2:10).

ψυχή (*psychē*), n. fem. **soul, inner life**. Refers to the inner life of humans.

This is the usual Septuagint translation of the Hebrew נֶפֶשׁ (*nepeš*, “soul, life”). It can refer to living beings in a holistic sense (Rev 8:9, 18:13). The NT makes a distinction between body (σῶμα, *sōma*) and soul (*psychē*; Matt 10:28). A substantive distinction is made between spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psychē*) in 1 Thess 5:23 and Heb 4:12.

However, we should be careful about distinguishing them too strongly, since words for “soul” (*nepeš*; *psychē*) and “spirit” (רוּחַ, *rûaḥ*; *pneuma*) are used in parallel in both the OT (Isa 26:9, Job 7:11) and the NT (Luke 1:46–7). In the NT, *psychē* is not used to refer to the Holy Spirit.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *2 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

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Current series: *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

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