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## IS THE HOLY SPIRIT A PERSONIFICATION?

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Personification—ascribing personal action or characteristics to a nonpersonal thing—is a prevalent figure of speech in the Bible. From the blood of Abel that cries from the ground (Gen. 4:10) to the tongues of the arrogant that strut through the earth (Ps. 73:9), biblical writers use personification often. Rivers clap their hands (Ps. 98:8), God’s light and truth guide pilgrims to the temple (Ps. 43:3), Babylon is a prostitute (Rev. 18), and money is a rival deity (Matt. 6:24).

Certain biblical passages have been misinterpreted because interpreters have failed to recognize when writers were using personification. The classic instance is Proverbs 8. Overlooking that wisdom here is a personification of one of God’s attributes, some interpreters have concluded that wisdom here is really Christ, which produces the false conclusion that Christ is a created being (Prov. 8:22–26). This is the usual problem—that interpreters fail to recognize instances of personification in the Bible.

You can imagine my surprise, then, to learn that the United Church of God (which adheres to the teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong) goes awry in the other direction—by seeing personification where it does not exist. They claim that passages that speak of the Holy Spirit as a person should be understood as personification rather than as indicating that the Holy Spirit is a real person.

In a column defending the United Church of God’s view of the Trinity, the editor of their magazine, *The Good News*, argues that when the New Testament writers portray the Holy Spirit as a person, they are “ascribing activity to it as though it were a person,” even though “*it is not a person*” (emphasis in original). More generally, he says, “the Holy Spirit is the agency through which God...acts.” For example, “The reference to the Holy Spirit as a Counselor or Advocate is a personification that provides a good analogy of part of the Spirit’s function in the lives of true Christians.” In particular, the editor argues, it is God’s power that is personified in references to the Holy Spirit: “Many passages show the Spirit as the power of God, not a separate person.”<sup>1</sup>

In place of the usual question of how to tell when personification is being used, we here face the opposite question: how can we tell when personification is *not* being used?

**When the Literal Is Possible.** The starting point for answering this question is simply to recall what ordinarily signals the presence of personification. When a passage that ascribes personal characteristics or action to a thing cannot be interpreted literally, then the passage is using personification. Personification is an example of poetic license: saying something that ordinary logic tells us is impossible. If this ordinary signal is absent, it stands to reason that the passage is not using personification. For example, a martyr’s blood does not literally cry out from the ground. Tongues do not literally strut. Rivers do not literally clap their hands. Light and truth are not literal travel guides to a sacred site. Money is not a literal god.

When we turn to the New Testament passages that describe the person and work of the Holy Spirit, however, this ordinary signal is absent. There is nothing in these descriptions that cannot be true of an actual spiritual (i.e., nonphysical) being. For example: “If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7); “The Spirit himself intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:26); “The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10).<sup>2</sup>

None of these passages states any *personal* characteristic or action that is impossible for a spiritual entity to possess or to perform.<sup>3</sup> The usual signpost that says “personification” is absent. There is nothing in these passages that puts them into the company of valleys that sing (Ps. 65:13) and stones that cry out (Hab. 2:11).

**When the Figurative Doesn’t Fit.** There is a second interpretative principle that also comes into play: does personification fit the context? When we try to interpret the descriptions of the Holy Spirit as mere figures of speech, the attempt fails. The contexts of the passages do not fit the premise that the Holy Spirit is not a person.

Consider this example: “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness” (John 15:26–27). Note that Jesus says the Spirit will bear witness just as the disciples will bear witness (“you also...”). Jesus regards the Spirit (the Helper) as being just as much a person as each of the disciples, and speaks of them in the same terms. Beyond that, the actions He attributes to the Spirit—coming, being sent, proceeding, bearing witness—do not fit a mere personification of some aspect of God.

Here is a second example:

If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you...I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 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. (John 16:7–13)

Throughout these passages in John 15 and 16, Jesus ascribes the same or similar personal actions to the Holy Spirit as He does to the disciples or even Himself (e.g., I will go/He will come; I have things to say/He will speak). It would be very strange to ascribe these personal actions in the same way and in the same statement to real persons and to a personification.

The author of the *Good News* column repeatedly uses the word *agency* in arguing that the Holy Spirit is a personification of some aspect of God: merely the means through which God acts. Agency is a common element of all narratives, however, and in most instances, the agents are persons. For example, God defeated the Midianites through the agency of Gideon, but that does not make Gideon anything other than a person. In other words, we should not be misled by the attempt to make the Holy Spirit impersonal by the use of the impersonal language of *agency*. In place of the editor’s formula, “The Holy Spirit is the agency through which God...acts,” we could much better speak of the Holy Spirit as the *agent* or the *one* through whom God acts.

**When the Description Isn’t Localized.** There is a third interpretive principle to consider: personifications are always localized or limited to a specific passage; they are never elaborated into a coherent system that extends across a whole span of texts. The examples cited above illustrate this point. The personified blood in the story of Cain’s murder of Abel in Genesis 4 does not show up in other biblical passages dealing with blood. Tongues strut in a satiric portrait of the arrogant wicked in Psalm 73, but there is no systematic personification of tongues throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The only place in the Bible where money is a personified god is the famous passage in which Jesus claims that we cannot serve God and mammon (Matt. 6:24).

Proponents of the personification view want us to believe that all of the New Testament references to the Holy Spirit are really personifications. This is utterly without precedent in the Bible and other literature. *Symbols* such as light and darkness can become systematized across works of literature, but personifications do not take on that quality. They are *ad hoc* figures of speech; that is, they are uniquely created for, and limited to, the passages in which they appear.

**When the Literal Makes Sense.** A final refutation of the theory that the New Testament references to the Holy Spirit are personifications involves a broader principle of interpretation that is referred to as *the plain sense of Scripture*. It means that we should interpret statements in the Bible in their straightforward, literal sense unless we have good reasons to interpret them figuratively.<sup>4</sup>

If we look at the New Testament passages that deal with the Holy Spirit as a person, there is nothing to distinguish them from statements that deal with the Father and the Son as persons. The plain sense of these passages is that the Holy Spirit is a divine person. The Holy Spirit is described as dwelling in believers (John 14:17), being lied to (Acts 5:3), searching (1 Cor. 2:10), washing and renewing believers (Titus 3:5), interceding (Rom. 8:26), and being grieved (Eph. 4:30). These passages ascribe personal actions to the Holy Spirit in the same plain manner that other passages ascribe personal actions (often the same actions) to the Father and the Son.

**The Trinity.** It is true that the New Testament does not explicitly *teach* the doctrine of the Trinity as the creeds formulate it; even so, there are clear indications that the New Testament writers *assume* the doctrine of the Trinity. We might speak of Trinitarian *formulas* in the New Testament, such as the following: “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” (Matt. 28:19); “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14); “Pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (Jude 20–21).

Is the Holy Spirit a personification? Well, did that possibility ever occur to you until it was suggested by someone? The plain meaning of the passages is that they describe a divine person. There is nothing in the passages to signal that they are figurative rather than literal. They do not obey the ordinary rules of personification. In fact, to read them as personifications is beyond most people’s power of comprehension.

— Leland Ryken

## NOTES

1. “Questions and Answers,” *The Good News*, March–April 2005, 29–31 (<http://www.gnmagazine.org/issues/gn57/questionsanswers57.htm>).
2. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.
3. A purely spiritual being can possess or perform *personal* characteristics or actions, but not *physical* ones, since it is not a physical being.
4. A good reason would be, for example, that a literal interpretation would entail an impossibility, such as when the Bible speaks of God (a nonphysical being) having physical attributes (eyes, ears, arms, etc.).