

Person of the Holy Spirit, I

Welcome to this course titled, “Spirit, Church, & Last Things.” A main text I will refer to throughout this course is Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*. For each topic of the class, I will refer to what Berkhof says along with one more book. Louis Berkhof was the professor of systematic theology at Calvin Seminary in Michigan for many years and this is a very standard book. I jokingly refer to having “patron saints,” one of whom is “Saint Louis”—that means Berkhof. The other is “Saint Anthony,” who is Anthony Hoekema, who wrote the book, *The Bible and the Future*, which we also refer to in this course. Dr. David Jones, my colleague at Covenant Seminary, calls Berkhof’s book “the common coin of the realm among the reformed and conservative theological seminaries in this country.” It is that, but the book is dated and we need a new book to serve as a standard systematic theology. Berkhof’s book is over 60 years old now.

Since we do not have a more up-to-date book, we will use other books to supplement on various topics. For instance, on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit we read a book by Morris Inch, who teaches at Wheaton College, called *Saga of the Spirit*. It is a good book on the person of the Holy Spirit and some of His ministries as it traces those topics through the Bible and the history of the Christian church as well as looks at some of the matters from a more systematic perspective. On the doctrine of election, R.C. Sproul has written a helpful book, *Chosen by God*. No matter what your background is, I think you will find it a fair treatment of the issues. For the doctrine of the church and the sacraments, or ordinances of the church, I use Edmund Clowney’s book, *The Church*. Concerning last things, which is a neglected topic from an academic perspective, Anthony Hoekema has written *The Bible and the Future*. Remember he is one of my “patron saints” and he followed Louis Berkhof at Calvin Seminary teaching systematic theology. Hoekema did not write much while he was teaching, but after retiring from active classroom work he gave us three wonderful books. *Created in God’s Image* is one of the most helpful books that I know of on the doctrines of man and sin. *Saved by Grace* is the best book I know of on the subject of the application of salvation, or the way God’s grace actually touches our lives. Yet *The Bible and the Future* is his best book. For once we have a Bible-believing book on the topic of the last things in which a man advocates his own view on the issues but he treats those who disagree with him in a Christian manner. Unfortunately, that is usually not the way it is. Somehow last things stir people up and there are so many books that are attacking that I am embarrassed about. But this is a wonderful book. In chapters where he argues against views he disagrees with, he first shares what he has in common with his brothers in Christ. My book, *Hell on Trial*, covers some matters of eternal destinies.

My philosophy of teaching is that I teach to persuade where I think the Bible is clear. But I always respect your own responsibility to make up your mind before God. So our fellowship together in Christ is not dependent on some checklist of how many things you agree with me in great detail. If you know the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior, as I do, then we are one; we start from that perspective and I will try to persuade you. If I think the Bible is unclear on some things, I will say so. For example, Christian baptism and some matters pertaining to future things, both of which are subjects of this course, are not as clear as other areas. In those cases, I will give some parameters or some different options for considering the issues. When I think the Bible is plain, however, then the truth deserves to be taught in a persuasive manner. So I am going to try to persuade based upon the Word of God. I hope you understand my method in that way.

Let me begin with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, specifically considering the person and the ministries of God the Holy Spirit. Study of the person of the Holy Spirit actually belongs to another course, which is “God and His Word.” But for the sake of completeness, I should at least highlight some of the major points. There are two main subheadings under the person of the Holy Spirit. The first is that the Holy

Spirit is a person, rather than in impersonal force, as some of the cults teach. Secondly, the Holy Spirit is God. I will work with that briefly. Following that we have the ministries of the Holy Spirit. There is a logical order there. Systematic theology forms patterns for the brain. There are some dangers to that, which I will mention those as we go, and you could pattern your brain wrongly. But it makes sense to first talk about who the Spirit is before we talk about what the Spirit does. So we will stress that He is a person—and He is a divine person.

I will highlight these matters and use one example, rather than going into all the detail. The Holy Spirit is a person, and although cults deny the personality of the Holy Spirit, as some liberals do as well, by teaching instead that He is a force, the Bible presents the Spirit of God as a person. A person is defined by the conservative Baptist theologian Millard Erickson as “an individual being with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings.” It is from Erickson’s good book, *Christian Theology*, which is a good one to add to your library. It is a very helpful book that is both up-to-date and very solid theologically. He and I disagree on maybe five percent of the Christian faith, but even there I use him as a model or as my partner in debate occasionally because he is such a fine Christian man.

So a person does not necessarily mean having a body. For example, when we die our bodies will rot in the grave while our soul or spirit will go to be with the Lord, if we know the Lord. In that state, however, we will still be persons. We will simply be disembodied persons. While that is abnormal because God made Adam and Eve as a soul and body together in the beginning, we are not going to cease being persons when we die. The normal state of affairs is that we do have bodies. We have them now and we will have them after the resurrection of the dead. But in that intermediate or interim existence, we will be absent from the body and present with the Lord, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5.

So while we say the Holy Spirit is a person, we do not mean that He has a body. The second person of the Godhead did become a human being and take a body to Himself. He took a body along with the other elements of human nature in its fullness. What we are saying is that the Holy Spirit has these elements of personality. And there are biblical proofs that the Spirit is a person rather than merely a force. The most important of these proofs are that He possesses personal qualities—those attributes that only persons have—and that He performs personality ministries, doing things that only persons do.

Let us examine at least one of these qualities and one ministry in order to get the flavor of this point. That way, as we proceed to talk about the ministries of the Spirit, we will understand the One of whom we are speaking. The Spirit possesses personal qualities. For example, He has intelligence and knowledge. The last time I checked forces did not have intelligence or knowledge. And so the Lord Jesus in John 14:26, in His so-called farewell discourse, spoke of the coming of the Comforter, or the Spirit, and one thing He said the Spirit would do would be to teach the disciples and remind them of Jesus’ words. He would bring to their remembrance the things that Jesus told them. Consider whether the following statement would make sense: the force will teach the disciples. It does not work. You can use that kind of logic when speaking with or sharing the Gospel with a cultist. I suppose I would focus on other things with them before this, namely who Jesus is and why He came. But they will say they have been indoctrinated to believe the Spirit is merely a force. It is true that He is powerful, so I understand their error a little bit. But He is not just a powerful force. He is a powerful person. There are more proofs of this as well. He has a will. I do not know any forces that have wills. He has emotions. It is pretty hard to grieve an impersonal force, but the Holy Spirit can be grieved.

Furthermore, the Spirit performs ministries that only persons perform. I am going to repeat myself at the risk of boring you, but I want you to know where we are. We are talking about the person of the Holy

Spirit. One of the proofs for that truth is that He performs personal ministries. One example will suffice from Romans 8:26, which teaches that the Spirit prays for believers. Paul writes, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.” Does it make sense to say that a force prays? It does not make sense. This is not something that is hidden. It is in the Bible all over the place. We have references to the Holy Spirit that speak of Him as a person. The Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*. Greek is similar to some other languages you might have studied, having masculine, feminine, and neuter genders. “Spirit” happens to be neuter. So the word spirit could be referred to as “it” in that regard. But the word still refers to the person. The Greek word for child, for example, is *teknon*. So a reference to the word child would be neuter. But it does not mean that a child is neuter in the Greek’s thinking. It is just the way languages work. As a matter of fact, at times the references to the Holy Spirit have masculine pronouns instead of the expected neuter ones, which actually is an indication of His personhood.

At this point we might wonder what some of the implications of the Holy Spirit being a person are. What difference does it make that He is a person rather than merely a force? To begin with, God as a Trinity is one God in three persons and we can have a relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, because He is not merely an impersonal force. You cannot have a relationship with a force. But you can have a relationship with God the Holy Spirit because He is a person. Remember the definition Erickson gave? A person is an individual being with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings. We can know the Holy Spirit, as Jesus says in John 14:17: “But you know him. The world will not know him because the world does not see him.” The implication is that the world is hopelessly empirical. It only knows what it sees. But you know Him for He lives with you and will be in you. That leads to a further ramification of the Spirit being a person, which is that we can be confident the Holy Spirit is caring for us.

Sometimes it is asked if we also can pray to the Holy Spirit. I do not know of a single biblical passage that actually does that, but I agree with Millard Erickson that it is an inevitable deduction or conclusion that we reach based upon the fact that God the Holy Spirit is a person. It would be wrong to pray to Him to the exclusion of the Father and the Son. After all, the Father sent the Son, whose job is to glorify the Father, and the Father and the Son sent the Spirit, whose job is to magnify the Son of God and in turn the Father. But it is certainly not wrong to talk to and praise God the Holy Spirit. It would be wrong to ignore the other persons of God. But if He is God then we can talk with Him as we walk with Him during our day and so forth.