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**GOD
GIFT
AND
GUIDE**

**KNOWING
THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity

You may be wondering at this point how the Holy Spirit is different from God the Father and God the Son. We have been emphasizing the common nature of the three persons, explaining there is no distinction in terms of their divine attributes of all-powerfulness, love, holiness, unchangeableness, and the like. And we have affirmed with the early creeds that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are together to be worshipped and glorified.

So, how are there three persons? How do we distinguish between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Specifically, for our purposes, how is the Spirit different from the other two divine persons?

Let me take a brief detour and offer a basic primer on the Trinity. (Warning: this topic is the deepest and most difficult doctrine there is, so don't despair if it takes you a few passes through this material!) By the end of the chapter, you'll see the payoff: how God the Holy Spirit engages in a mission to rescue us from sin and death. Beautifully, His mission is linked to the mission of God the Son incarnate, and together they bring us back to God the Father—that God may be all in all!

There are seven points in our primer:¹

1. There was never time in which God did not exist.

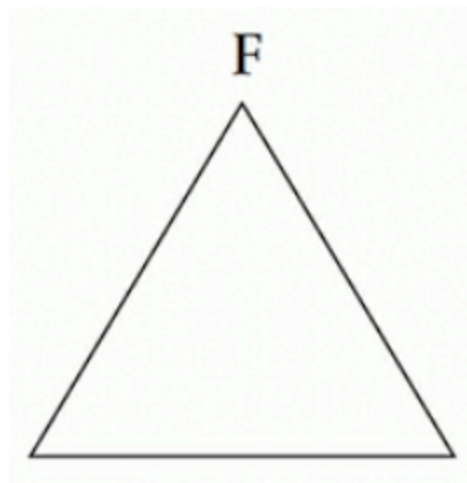
(This mathematical sign represents the null set, which means there are no examples in the set.)

2. There was never a time in which there existed a generic god.

god

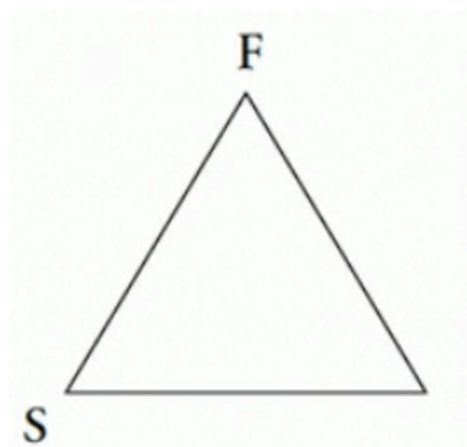
(The small “g” god symbolizes a nonspecific divine being.)

3. There was never a time in which God was only the Father.



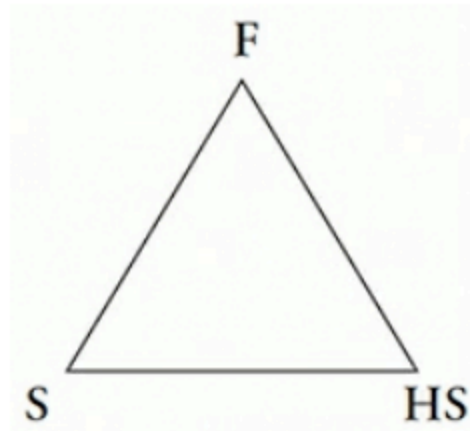
(The equilateral triangle is a standard representation of the Trinity. F stands for the Father.)

4. There was never a time in which God was only the Father and the Son.



(The equilateral triangle is a standard representation of the Trinity. F stands for the Father and S stands for the Son.)

5. There was never a time in which God was *not* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.



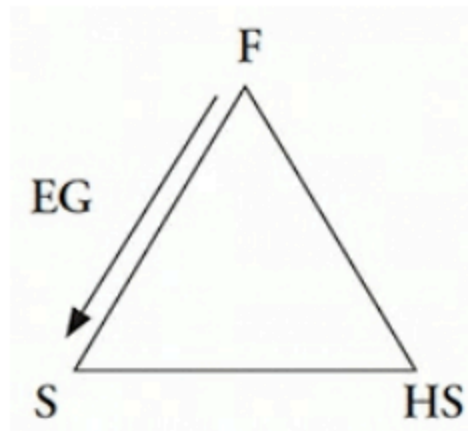
(The equilateral triangle is a standard representation of the Trinity. F stands for the Father, S stands for the Son, and HS stands for the Holy Spirit.)

6. God eternally exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
7. So how are the three persons distinct? (Here's where we take a deep dive.) The three persons differ according to their eternal relations.²

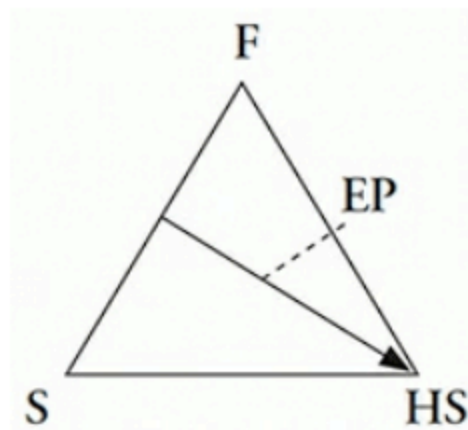
Specifically, there are two relations of the triune God: these are called *relations of origin* (we'll see the reason for this name shortly) or *processions*.

The first procession is the relation of the Father and the Son. This is called *eternal generation* (or *eternal begottenness*). Put

very simply, there has forever been a unique, special relationship—EG—between the Father and the Son.



The second procession is the relation of the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit; this is called *eternal procession* (or *eternal spiration*).³ Put very simply, there has forever been a unique, special relationship—EP—between the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.



These two processions distinguish the three persons of the Trinity within the triune God Himself:

- Procession 1: the Father and the Son
- Procession 2: the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit

You will note there is no procession in regard to the Father: He is not eternally generated. He does not eternally proceed. This is due to the Father being first in order, the source of the two processions. Indeed, the eternal characteristic that is unique to the Father is *paternity*. As the first person in relation to the second person, He is eternally *the Father* of the Son.

As the source of the eternal processions, the Father is the originator of the processions. Thus, the processions are also called “relations of *origin*.”

The first procession—*eternal generation*—is the relation of origin with respect to the Father and the Son. The eternal characteristic that is unique to the Son is *generation*. The first person eternally generates the second person. This does not mean that the Father created the Son. The Son is not created by the Father. It does not mean that the Son borrows deity from the Father. The Father does not lend “godness” to the Son. Rather, it means that the first person eternally grants the second person His person-of-the-divine-Son. He is *the Son* of the Father.

The second procession—*eternal procession*—is the relation of origin with respect to the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The eternal characteristic that is unique to the Holy Spirit is *procession*. The third person eternally proceeds from the first person and the second person. This does not mean that the Father and the Son created the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not created by the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit does not borrow deity from the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son do not lend “godness” to the Spirit. Rather, it means that the first person and second person eternally grant the third person His person-of-the-divine-Spirit. The Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son.

I can hear an objection: This is SO deep and hard! Why do we bother talking about it? The simple answer is: the Bible affirms these deep truths about our triune God.

Where?!

Let's first look at the biblical basis for the first procession. Because this book is about the Holy Spirit, our attention will be limited to two key passages about the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. Speaking of His Father, Jesus states, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he *has granted the Son also to have life in himself*" (John 5:26 ESV). The church has historically understood Jesus's affirmation to refer to the first person's eternal "granting" of sonship life to the second person: the Father's eternal generation of the Son. The apostle John approaches it this way: "We know that *everyone who has been born of God* does not keep on sinning, but he *who was born of God* protects him, and the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18 ESV). The first phrase "everyone who has been born of God" refers to us Christians who have been *regenerated* by the Holy Spirit. The second phrase "he who was born of God" refers to the second person: the Son who is *eternally generated* of the Father.

We may be tempted to understand John's reference to the Son as the one "who was born of God" in terms of human birth: what did not exist before comes into existence through birth in time and space. For example, my three children were "born of Nora" my wife/their mother. But that's not the way John intends us to understand the Son "who was born of God." This "birth" did not bring the Son, who did not exist, into existence. And it did not take place in time and space. Rather, the Son "was born of God" in the sense presented above: the Father, who is the first person, eternally grants the second person His person-of-the-divine-Son. Not birth in the sense of human birth. But "birth" in a divine sense of always being the Father of the always existing Son, who is eternally generated of the Father.

Second, let's turn to the biblical basis for the second procession, with greater attention to this topic. Three times in His Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17), Jesus comforts His disciples with important teaching about the Holy Spirit:

"The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom *the Father will send in my name*, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you." (14:26)

“When the Counselor comes, the one *I will send to you from the Father*—the Spirit of truth *who proceeds from the Father*—he will testify about me.” (15:26)

“It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don’t go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, *I will send him to you.*” (16:7)

To summarize: The Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus’s name. Jesus will send the Holy Spirit from the Father. Jesus will send the Holy Spirit.

To what event was Jesus referring when He promised that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit? The day of Pentecost, which would occur a little over fifty days from when Jesus presented His teaching about the sending of the Spirit on that day. The apostle Peter confirms our understanding. In his gospel message on the day of Pentecost, Peter spoke about Jesus and explained the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

“God has raised this Jesus; we are all witnesses of this. Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear.” (Acts 2:32–33)

From the Father, the Son has poured out the promised Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But why did the Father and the Son get to send the Holy Spirit on that day? The church’s answer to this perceptive question is the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. Because the first person and the second person eternally grant the third person His person-of-the-divine-Spirit, it was fitting that the Father and the Son would send the Holy Spirit in space and time, that is, on the day of Pentecost about two thousand years ago. The temporal sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son beautifully mirrors the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son.

Unsurprisingly, then, the apostle Paul gives instructions to us related to the Holy Spirit: “You are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed *the Spirit of God*

lives in you. If anyone does not have *the Spirit of Christ*, he does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9). The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of God* who, in this context, is the Father. The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of Christ*, who is the Son. He is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, which is exactly what the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit affirms. He proceeds from the Father and the Son.

But what are we to make of Jesus’s statement (which we’ve skipped until now) about “the Spirit of truth who *proceeds from the Father*” (John 15:26)? Jesus seems to affirm the eternal procession of the Spirit from the first person, not the first and second person (Himself). Importantly, Jesus did not say “the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father *alone*.” Noting the absence of this limitation and putting together the rest of the Bible’s teaching about the relations of the three persons, the church early on concluded (as we see in the Creed) “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” This creedal confession does not contradict Jesus’s statement, but simply adds to it on the basis of other biblical affirmations.⁴

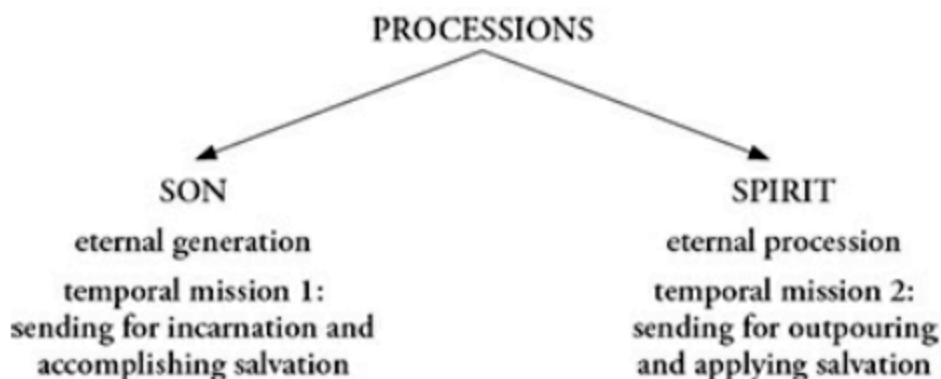
To summarize the eternal distinctions of the three persons of the triune God:

- the Father is characterized by *paternity* in relationship to the Son: He is the Father of the Son
- the Son is characterized by *eternal generation* from the Father: He is the Son of the Father, eternally generated from the Father (Procession 1)
- the Holy Spirit is characterized by *eternal procession* from the Father and the Son: He eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (Procession 2)

The importance of these two processions lies not only in helping us to know how the three persons differ. They also help us to understand the two missions of the triune God (here is the promised payoff of our difficult discussion).⁵

From these eternal processions flow the temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit. A mission is a divine operation that takes place in our created world for our sake. The Son's mission—mission 1—is about incarnation and the work of accomplishing our salvation. The Spirit's mission—mission 2—is about being poured out on Pentecost and the work of applying salvation to our lives.

Importantly, we should not think in terms of processions and missions as separate matters. Rather, processions and missions are intimately connected: a mission is a procession turned outside and in time for the benefit of us image-bearers who have fallen into sin.⁶



The temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit express and are reflective of their eternal processions. There is an appropriateness to the Son becoming incarnate and doing the work of accomplishing salvation as the particular mission 1 of the Son who is eternally generated by the Father. And there is an appropriateness to the Holy Spirit being poured out and doing the work of applying salvation as the particular mission 2 of the Holy Spirit who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.

So closely related are these two missions that we could also talk about one mission with two aspects. This interconnection will become especially clear and important when we talk later about salvation: our salvation from sin and progress in holiness is established by both the Son and the Spirit. Similarly, this interconnection will come to the forefront when we later address the church: the church is established by both the Son and the Spirit.⁷ The missions of these two are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. So, we could say there is

one mission of God with two aspects. And most important for us, the Son who is eternally generated from the Father, and the Spirit who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son, undertake their missions on behalf of us image-bearers who have fallen into sin. Together through their missions, they save us and bring us back to our triune God.

You may be wondering, *Does anyone ever understand this stuff?* Believe it or not, they do!

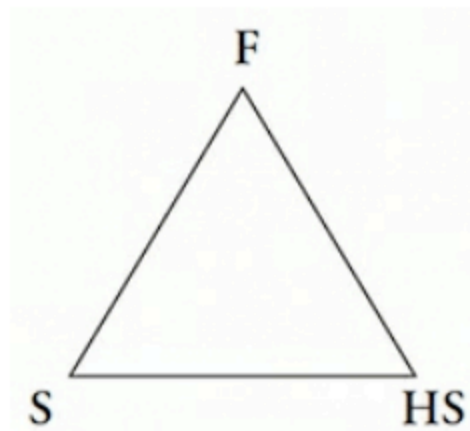
A couple of years ago I was asked to teach the Trinity to a Sunday school class of fourth- and fifth-graders. I wondered—and worried!—whether any nine-year-old was going to understand what I would share with the class.

I started out by wearing a T-shirt with a diagram of the Trinity on it.

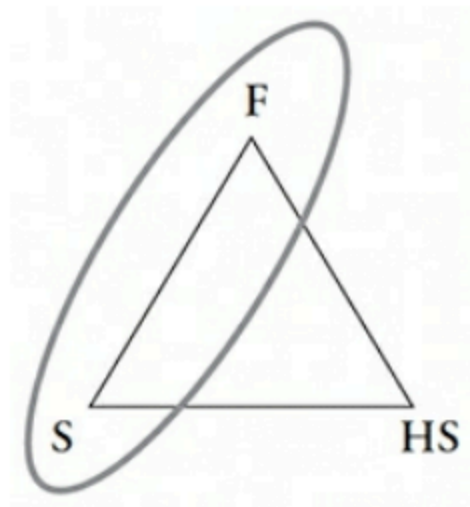


As soon as the class saw my shirt, they asked, “Are we going to learn about the Trinity?” I had their interest piqued!

Because trying to explain the diagram on my shirt while wearing it was too difficult, I drew the Trinity triangle on the whiteboard:

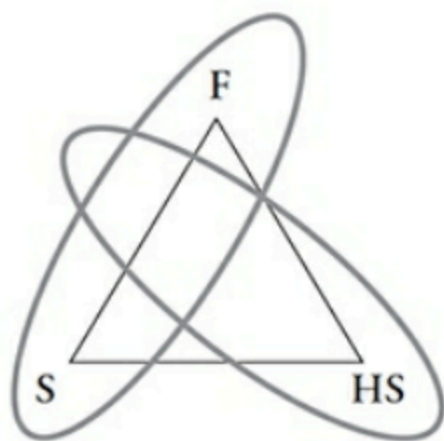


I next drew an ellipse around the F and the S, explaining that the Father and the Son have always had a special relationship.



Much to my pleasant surprise, one ten-year-old blurted out, “Is that why God sent His only Son to die on the cross for our sins?” Jumping for joy (at least on the inside), I enthusiastically congratulated her! As the others nodded in agreement, I sensed we were making good progress.

The next question quickly brought me back down to earth: “What about that third dude on the right?” As the question came from a nine-year-old, I didn’t take the reference to the Holy Spirit to be disrespectful or blasphemous. Besides, the questioner appeared to really want to know the answer to his question. So I drew a second ellipse, explaining that the Father with the Son, and the Holy Spirit, have always had a special relationship:



Intrigued but not quite satisfied, my still enthusiastic but now silent audience needed a prompt. So I asked them, “Where in our church do we see these three together?” One hand shot up: “We baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Another reply quickly followed: “Right before we finish church, the pastor says, ‘Go now in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you.’”

I was amazed!

Everyone was smiling—they had figured it out! My explanation that the third dude was poured out on the day of Pentecost didn’t gain any traction with the kids. But that was okay. As fourth- and fifth-graders, they had learned the basics of the Trinity.

I hope you have too!

Ready for some questions for reflection?

1. Does this discussion help you to (better) understand the Trinity? What new truths did you learn? What questions do you still have? If you’re (a bit) overwhelmed by this material, don’t panic or despair! Reread this chapter and see if you gain (some) clarity.
2. Does this presentation help you make sense of why the Father sent the Son to become incarnate and accomplish the work of salvation? Does it help you to understand why the Father and the Son poured out the Holy Spirit on the

day of Pentecost to carry on the ministry of the Son? Do you see how the two missions of the Son and the Spirit are intimately connected?

3. Does this chapter shed any light on Jesus's promise: "It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7)? In light of the eternal processions and temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit, why is Jesus's promise both true and necessary?



God's new
relationship
with His people
—the new covenant—
would feature a fresh,
unprecedented outpouring
of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

1. These ideas are developed in Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit: Theology for the People of God* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 255–64.

2. The distinction in eternal relations is one of two ways of distinguishing between the three persons. The distinction in roles with respect to creation, providence, salvation, and other divine works is the second way. It will not be discussed in this book, which concentrates on the works of the Holy Spirit.

3. *Spiration* has the idea of breathing. You will note that the word *procession* is used in two different ways. *Procession* in the first sense refers to both the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. *Procession* in the second sense refers only to the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. The language of “procession” comes from Jesus’s teaching about the Holy Spirit: “When the Counselor comes, the one I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who *proceeds* from the Father—he will testify about me” (John 15:26).

4. After all, every verse in Scripture doesn’t have to say everything there is to say on a particular topic.

5. For further discussion, see Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 273–86.

6. The following is adapted from Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 276.

7. We know this point through two biblical images for it: the church is both the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. See chapter 11.