

Personality of the Holy Spirit: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation

Christopher R. Mwashinga
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Down through the history of the Christian church, people have held different views about the personality of the Holy Spirit.¹ Some view Him as the personification of holy power in the same sense that they view Satan as the personification of evil power, and they conclude that neither Satan nor the Holy Spirit is a personal being.² Others see the Holy Spirit as the energy of God, an impersonal power God uses to activate His will in the universe,³ and still others maintain that the Holy Spirit is a person and that He was active with the Father and the Son in creation, incarnation, and redemption.⁴ These conflicting views raise the following question: Is the Holy Spirit an impersonal power of God, mere energy that God uses to activate His will in the universe, or a personal being?

The primary purpose of this article is to show that the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity is a personal being as opposed to an impersonal force. In this study, I investigate and develop a theological and biblical understanding that supports this view. In order to do so, I first give a brief historical overview of the understanding of the personality of the Holy Spirit from the patristic period to the twentieth century. Secondly, I

¹ For a general survey of the study of the Holy Spirit through the centuries, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit: Biblical Teaching through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

² Robert Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit: Who He Is and What He Does* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 1.

³ Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit*, 1.

⁴ Fernando L. Canale, "Doctrine of God," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 131–33.

investigate contemporary pneumatologies in order to establish whether such pneumatologies have been able to settle the longtime question of the personality of the Holy Spirit.⁵ I then give four biblical and theological arguments to show that the Holy Spirit is a personal being and not an impersonal force or power. Finally, I make concluding remarks based on the insights gained from the investigation. Issues of the nature and function of the Holy Spirit, while closely related to this subject, are beyond the scope of this investigation. They may be mentioned or alluded to when relevant but are not discussed in detail because of time and space limitations. With this road map in mind, let us now turn to the historical overview of the study of the personality of the Holy Spirit from the patristic period to the twentieth century.

A Historical Overview of the Understanding of the Personality of the Holy Spirit

Struggles to define the identity of the Holy Spirit characterized theological activities for much of the patristic period.⁶ During part of the second century AD, Christians held different views on the identity of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Some thought of the incarnation as the taking of a human body by the Holy Spirit before He was recognized as having a separate existence from the Son.⁸ Up until the third century AD, the church was still figuring out the identity of the Holy Spirit. During Origen's lifetime (AD 184–253), the identity of the Holy Spirit was still unclear to him and other Christians. "It is not yet clearly known," wrote Origen, "whether he [the Holy Spirit] is to be thought of as begotten or unbegotten, or as being himself also a Son of God or not."⁹ The prevailing situation demanded that the church find a

⁵ By contemporary pneumatologies, I mean theological constructions written about the Holy Spirit from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present.

⁶ Generally, the patristic period is considered to run from the end of the New Testament era to the end of the sixth century AD. See G. W. Bromiley, "Fathers, Church," *EDT* (2017), 308. Controversies surrounding the nature of Christ, both His divinity and His humanity, led to a deeper study of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

⁷ For the development of some of the views in connection with the Holy Spirit during this period, see also John Eifion Morgan-Wynne, *Holy Spirit and Religious Experience in Christian Literature ca. AD 90-200* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006).

⁸ This separation was clearer in the Apologists' writings, as well as in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. See R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 738.

⁹ *De princ.*, Pref., 4), quoted in Donald G. Dawe, "The Divinity of the Holy Spirit," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 33, no. 1 (1979): 19-31.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

clearer definition of the Holy Spirit, and Origen urged the church to seek one. “These are matters,” he wrote, “that we must investigate to the best of our powers from Holy Scripture inquiring with wisdom and diligence.”¹⁰ The fourth century AD continued to witness Christians struggling over the identity of the Holy Spirit. Some identified Him with a whole host of minor deities, while others, especially among the Arians, maintained the notion that the Holy Spirit was an angelic being.¹¹ The bottom line of these characterizations was clear: The Holy Spirit was subordinate to the Father and to the Son. In other words, the Holy Spirit was not of the same substance as the Father and the Son. This subordinationism was the error the Cappadocian theologians aimed to correct in the second half of the fourth century AD.¹² The Cappadocians were successful in helping the church accept the Holy Spirit as a full member of the Trinity with the Father and the Son.¹³

Although the Council of Constantinople approved of the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, it affirmed that He proceeded from the Father and not from both the Father and the Son.¹⁴ Apparently, the Latin wing of the church, which was poorly represented in the council, did not agree with the theological position of the Eastern wing regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit,¹⁵ so the Latin church later added the dual

¹⁰ De princ., Pref., 4), quoted in Dawe, 20.

¹¹ De princ., Pref., 4), quoted in Dawe, 21.

¹² The Cappadocian theologians, also known as Cappadocian Fathers, include Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

¹³ One of the most important works by the Cappadocians that had a great impact on the debate was Basil’s treatise *De Spiritu Sancto* (On the Holy Spirit). This work offers a rigorous exegetical and rhetorical argument for the Holy Spirit to be glorified and adored together with the other two members of the Trinity, the Father and the Son. For the summary of Basil’s arguments, see Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011).

¹⁴ The text of the Synodical Letter written in Constantinople in AD 382 shows that the Holy Spirit was put on equal status with the Father and the Son. The letter reads in part, “According to this faith there is only Godhead, Power and Substance of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost; the dignity being equal, and the majesty being equal in three perfect hypostases; i.e. three perfect persons.” Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, trans. Henry R. Percival (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 14:189.

¹⁵ For a brief historical background of this issue, see Michelle Coetzee, *The Filioque Impasse: Patristic Roots* (Pascataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 5-15.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

procession (*filioque*) of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son.¹⁶ Generally, from the end of the patristic period on, Christians who agreed that the Holy Spirit was a person also accepted Him as divine.¹⁷

In every successive generation, theologians have sought to clarify the nature of the personality of the Holy Spirit for their time. Medieval theologians were not different. Peter Abelard, along with other medieval theologians, including Anselm of Canterbury, Anselm of Havelberg, and Peter Lombard, worked to defend the orthodox position, stressing that the Trinity is one and indivisible, coeternal, consubstantial, and coequal.¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, even though he accepted the personality of the Holy Spirit, interpreted the Spirit's relationship to the Father to mean the love of God. He wrote, "So God the Father produces creatures through His Word, the Son and His Love, the Holy Spirit. God substance is common to all three persons."¹⁹ However, the struggle to refine the definition of the Holy Spirit and affirm His personality did not end with the medieval scholars but continued into the Protestant Reformation era.

The sixteenth-century Reformers, in opposition to Rome's theories, gave the study of the Holy Spirit a lift as they stressed that the church was not necessary for a correct interpretation of the Bible, but only the Holy Spirit illuminating man's mind.²⁰ Martin Luther's pneumatology was closely tied to that of Augustine; he believed that the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. Luther wrote, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, who with the Father and the Son is one true God and proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son yet is a distinct person in the one divine essence and nature."²¹ John Calvin held and affirmed the view that the Holy Spirit was a distinct person from the Father and the Son. He wrote,

¹⁶ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 4:38. For a history of this doctrinal controversy and how the term *filioque* became a divisive matter in Christianity, see A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1990), 25.

¹⁸ For an in-depth discussion of various twelfth-century theologians and their views on the personality of the Holy Spirit, see Matthew Knell, *The Immanent Person of the Holy Spirit from Anselm to Lombard* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009).

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologie: A Concise Translation*. trans. Timothy Mc Dermott (Chicago, IL: Christian Classics, 1991), 87.

²⁰ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit: The Traditional Calvinistic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1974), 10.

²¹ *Luther's Works*, ed. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 365–66.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

“The words, Father, Son and Holy Spirit certainly indicate a real distinction only not division.”²²

During the Enlightenment, Christian thinkers had opposing views about the personality of the Holy Spirit. For example, John Wesley believed in the full equality of the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He wrote, “I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us.”²³ Wesley also believed that the Holy Spirit was a person and not an impersonal force.²⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, on the other hand, taught that the Holy Spirit was “the continuous influence of Christ on the church which unites and inspires the community,” and he did not see the concept of personality as applicable to the Holy Spirit.²⁵

In the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a number of influential theologians continued the discussion about the personality of the Holy Spirit. Charles H. Spurgeon taught and preached sermons that affirmed the personhood of the Holy Spirit. In one of his sermons, Spurgeon wrote, “We are so accustomed to talk about the influence of the Holy Spirit and his sacred operations and graces that we are apt to forget that the Holy Spirit is truly and actually a person.”²⁶ Charles Hodge, in his theological system, argued for the personality of the Holy Spirit and concluded, “The people of God have always regarded the Holy Spirit as a person.”²⁷ While

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), I.13.17. For the entire exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit see I.13.1-19. Calvin is referred to as the Theologian of the Holy Spirit. See Eifian Evans, “Theologian of the Holy Spirit,” *A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 83–104.

²³ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, reprint ed., 1979), 10:82. Also quoted in Rob L. Staples, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of The Holy Spirit,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21, no. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1986): 91–115. Wesley’s pneumatology is categorized as the experiential tendency in Protestant pneumatology. See T. David Beck, *The Holy Spirit and the Renewal of All Things: Pneumatology in Paul and Jurgen Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 7–14.

²⁴ Staples, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of The Holy Spirit,” 92.

²⁵ See his *Glaubenslehre*, Vol. II, passim, especially pp. 121-25, quoted by Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 114. For the meaning of Schleiermacher’s concept of *Glaubenslehre*, see Walter E. Wyman Jr., *The Concept of Glaubenslehre* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

²⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Twelve Sermons on the Holy Spirit* (Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2014). See his sermon entitled “The Personality of the Holy Spirit.”

²⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 524–27.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

some people affirmed the personality of the Holy Spirit, others denied His divinity and personality. They considered Him an impersonal force or power of God and carried this attitude into the twentieth century.²⁸

In our historical investigation so far, we have discovered that every Christian generation has struggled with the question of the personality of the Holy Spirit and has maintained at least two opposing views: one, that the Holy Spirit is a person, and two, that the Holy Spirit is not a person but some form of force or influence. Reflecting on this historical investigation, it appears as if before the Council of Constantinople, which approved the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity, the church was looking forward to establishing an orthodox position on His personality. On the other hand, after the council, theologians looked back with the intention of either defending the personality of the Holy Spirit or rejecting it. However, with the resurgence of the study of the personality of the Holy Spirit²⁹ and the proliferation of contemporary pneumatologies beginning with the early decades of the twentieth century,³⁰ we need to ask the following question: Have these contemporary pneumatologies been able to go beyond the two positions regarding the personality of the Holy Spirit? To answer this question, we now turn to the views of contemporary theologians on the personality of the Holy Spirit.

²⁸ These groups included Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Unitarians. Sproul, *Mystery of the Holy Spirit*, 25. Another group was the Seventh-day Adventists. This group taught and maintained an anti-trinitarian doctrine until just before the turn of the twentieth century, when they abandoned it and accepted the full divinity of the Holy Spirit and affirmed His personality. For an account of the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, see Merlin D. Burt, "Ellen White and the Personhood of the Holy Spirit," *Ministry*, April 2012, 17-20.

²⁹ It is reported that the last great book about the Holy Spirit was written in 1674. See Samuel Chadwick, *The Way to Pentecost* (Berne: Light and Hope, 1959), 5. It is also surprising to note that until the early 1960s, there was no book available in the English language on the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. See Lloyd Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 1972), v.

³⁰ During this contemporary period, the Christian world has experienced a resurgence in the study of the Holy Spirit, which is evidenced in the many major publications that have emerged for the first time since the seventeenth century. Two major factors are cited as being responsible for this resurgence: (1) the entrance of Eastern Orthodox churches into the official ecumenical organization and (2) the dramatic spread of the Pentecostal movement throughout the world. See Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 40. The Pentecostal movement started in the early twentieth century and the Russian Orthodox Church joined the ecumenical movement in 1961.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Personality of the Holy Spirit in Contemporary Pneumatologies

The resurgence of the study of the Holy Spirit in the twentieth century brought up the same historical arguments and continued the two positions that traditionally characterized the discussion: one side argued for the personhood of the Holy Spirit and the other denied it. In examining contemporary pneumatologies,³¹ it becomes clear that the position of liberal theologians on the personality of the Holy Spirit is negative: they simply hold the view that the Holy Spirit is God's presence instead of being the third person of the Trinity. In other words, they deny the individual personhood of the Holy Spirit.³² For example, Hendrikus Berkhof held the view that the Holy Spirit is not a distinct person. He believed that "The Spirit is Person because he is God acting as a Person." Then he added, "However, we cannot say that the Spirit is a Person distinct from God the Father."³³

On the other hand, the so-called social trinitarian theologians have an interpretation that supports the view that the Holy Spirit is a person.³⁴ However, even though they agree on their interpretation of the Trinity as consisting of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they do not seem to agree on the nature of the personhood of the Holy Spirit. For example,

³¹ In the past quarter-century, a number of pneumatologies have been produced by theologians from various Christian traditions. See, for example, Koo Dong Yun, *The Holy Spirit and Ch'i (Qi): A Chiological Approach to Pneumatology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), xi. In this work, Yun has attempted to construct what he calls "postmodern, postcolonial, and post foundational pneumatology that is congenial to the East Asian soil." See also Karkkainen, *Constructive Christian Theology*; Michael Welker, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). For a diverse perspective on how people view the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in contemporary Christianity, see Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, eds. *The Spirit Over the Earth: Pneumatology in the Majority World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).

³² This view, according to Clark Pinnock, is influenced by "unitarian thinking." See Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 34.

³³ Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 116. Even though Berkhof refuses the status of the Holy Spirit as a distinct Person from God the Father, he does not endorse the view that the Holy Spirit is impersonal. In light of his view as summarized above, he writes, "Therefore we must reject all presentation of the Spirit as an impersonal force" (116). For a fuller reasoning of his argument, see 15-21.

³⁴ Some of the so-called social trinitarians include Herbert Muhlen, Wolfhard Pannenberg, Collin Gunton, Ted Peters, Cornelius Plantinga, Walter Kasper, Joseph Bracken, William Hill, and Jurgen Moltmann.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

even though Karl Barth suggested that the language of three persons of the Trinity should be replaced with the language of three modes,³⁵ he still used the language of social trinitarianism:

In Himself He does not will to exist for Himself, to exist alone. On the contrary, He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and therefore alive in His unique being with and for and in another ... The unbroken unity of His being, knowledge and will is at the same time an act of deliberation, decision and intercourse. He does not exist in solitude but in fellowship.³⁶

Barth's pneumatology affirms the equality of the three members of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "What is true of the Father and of the Son," he wrote, "is also true of the Holy Spirit of the Father and of the Son."³⁷ While another social trinitarian theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, affirms the persons of the Trinity, he argues that the three are not equal. "Consequently," he writes, "we have to reject any generalizing talk about the 'three Persons' of the Trinity. The Spirit is different from the Father and the Son."³⁸ This shows that even though Barth and Moltmann see value in holding the social trinitarian view, they do not agree on the nature of the persons who constitute the Trinity. Barth affirms the three members of the Trinity on equal levels, while Moltmann presents Father and Son as being on the same level and the Holy Spirit on a different level.

In recent decades, contemporary theologians have presented pneumatologies that affirm the personhood of the Holy Spirit in various ways. Proponents of female interpretations of the Holy Spirit³⁹ seem to

³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 1.1:407.

³⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1:275.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1975), III/1:56. However, he argues against referring to the three members as persons. He still insists on referring to them as modes. Barth wrote, "By preference we do not use the term 'person' but rather 'mode (or way) of being,' our intention being to express by this term, not absolutely, but relatively better and more simply and clearly the same thing as is meant by 'person.'" See his *Church Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 1.1:359.

³⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Munich: Christian Kaizer Verlag, 1992), 268.

³⁹ A significant number of the female interpretations of the Holy Spirit come from women. For a sampling of such contributions, see Mary Ann Fatula, *The Holy Spirit: Unbounded Gift of Joy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Wisdom Religious History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of*

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

affirm the Spirit's personality.⁴⁰ The point here is not whether the Holy Spirit is female or male, but rather that the use of female/male language implies personality as opposed to impersonality.⁴¹ It seems that feminist theologians in this regard would use feminine or maternal terms out of sheer necessity in order to make their argument tenable.

In contemporary evangelical pneumatologies, the personality of the Holy Spirit also finds affirmation. Clark H. Pinnock, for example, affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit and sees Him as a person and not an energy or a force. "The Spirit is more than God's presence," he writes, "the Spirit is a Person in fellowship with, but distinct from, Father and Son."⁴² Millard J. Erickson sees members of the Trinity as persons. "We therefore propose," he writes, "thinking of the Trinity [as] a society, complex of persons, who, however, are one being."⁴³

The historical overview and the discussion of contemporary pneumatologies has revealed one consistent experience of the church: Christians down through the centuries have found the study of the personality of the Holy Spirit a challenging endeavor. As has been demonstrated in this investigation so far, the experience of the church has been one of disagreement between those who affirm the personality of the Holy Spirit and those who reject it. The challenge comes from the fact that the Bible seems to present the Holy Spirit as both personal and impersonal. For example, while some of the names of the Holy Spirit, such as *Paraclete* or Teacher (John 16:26) present Him as a person, symbols such as fire (Acts 2:3), water (John 7:37-39), and wind (John 3:8) present Him as impersonal.⁴⁴ As a result, the discussion of whether the Holy Spirit is a person or impersonal has continued to this day.

God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York, NY: Crossword, 1992).

⁴⁰ By using the female gender or pronoun for the Holy Spirit, they affirm that the Holy Spirit is a person rather than an influence or a force.

⁴¹ Karkkainen, *Pneumatology*, 165.

⁴² Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 35. In this regard, Pinnock also embraces the social trinitarian view of the Trinity, which emphasizes fellowship, relationality, and community.

⁴³ Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 58.

⁴⁴ Such symbols have contributed to the "superficial and mistaken idea that the Holy Spirit is not a personal being like the Father and the Son." Canale, "Doctrine of God," 133. Most of the biblical symbols of the Holy Spirit seem to suggest impersonality. See, for example, Ray Pritchard, *Names of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 77-111. Pritchard mentions seventy-six names/symbols of the Holy Spirit, including water, doves, wind, and fire.

At this juncture, we need to ask ourselves that notorious question again: Is the Holy Spirit a person or an impersonal force or influence? What does the Bible say? Does it have enough evidence to shed more light on this longstanding problem? Faith and attitude toward the nature of the Bible influence how people answer these questions and establish the truth about the personality of the Holy Spirit. As stated earlier, in this article I seek to affirm the personality of the Holy Spirit by theologically reflecting on the biblical data to show that even though the nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery, the Bible has provided enough information to help us appreciate His personhood.⁴⁵

The Personality of the Holy Spirit

As I seek to establish the personality of the Holy Spirit, it is important that I first settle the question of the pronoun assigned to Him, which has generated intense debates over the centuries. Some theologians have argued that the Holy Spirit should be referred to as *He*, while others want Him to be referred to as *It*. Still others have argued for the use of the feminine pronoun *She*. As we shall see in this study, all three positions have been argued for by theologians from diverse schools of thought. For the purpose of this study, I briefly discuss the three pronouns in relation to the Holy Spirit and state which one is preferable here.

The word *ruach* in the Hebrew Bible, as with its Greek equivalent *pneuma* in the New Testament, originally signified “wind” or “breath.” This is the only word rendered “wind” in the Old Testament.⁴⁶ It is helpful to note that the Septuagint translates the word *ruach* into the Greek *pneuma*, maintaining the same meaning, “wind” or “breath.”⁴⁷ Looking at the use of *ruach* in the Old Testament, Charles Carter concludes that “*ruach* usually refers to the supernatural Spirit of God, and *pneuma* in the New Testament refers to the supernatural influences.”⁴⁸ It is important to observe here that

⁴⁵ Ellen G. White admonishes that “the nature of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. Men cannot explain it, because the Lord has not revealed it to them . . . Regarding such mysteries, which are too deep for human understanding, silence is golden.” Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1911), 52.

⁴⁶ Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Girdlestone’s Synonyms of the Old Testament: Their Bearing on Christian Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1983), 74.

⁴⁷ Alexander Sauter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 206–7. Also quoted by Charles Webb Carter, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit: A Wesleyan Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1974), 18–19.

⁴⁸ Carter, *Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, 18. For the New Testament *pneuma*, Carter gives exceptions in Rom 1:9; 8:16; 2 Cor 7:1.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

the Hebrew term *ruach* is usually grammatically feminine. However, this may not be “regarded as very significant, for personhood is relatively underdeveloped in relation to Spirit in the Old Testament.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, in the New Testament, *pneuma* is grammatically neuter and the pronoun *it* predominates.⁵⁰ These two pronouns, neuter and feminine, are predominant in the Bible, while the masculine pronoun is rarely used. However, we find John using the masculine pronoun when he refers to the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete* because this title is masculine (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14).⁵¹

So, which pronoun should be used in our discussion of the Holy Spirit in this study—*It*, *She*, or *He*? Practically, theologians have felt free to use any of these pronouns according to their theological preferences. Some contemporary pneumatologists like Veli-Matti Karkkainen, along with a host of feminist theologians, use the feminine pronoun,⁵² and others like Clark Pinnock prefer the masculine pronoun.⁵³ As part of these considerations about the pronoun of the Holy Spirit, let us now consider His personality.

In the past quarter of a century, a number of theologians have revisited the study of the Holy Spirit with a focus on His personality.⁵⁴ This indicates both the importance of the question and the challenges that still lie in the church’s need for a clear understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit. It seems that the personality of the Holy Spirit shows itself to be a relevant subject of study for Christians in every generation. Every generation is called upon to present it in a way that people of that generation will be able to grasp the real meaning and importance of the personality of the Holy Spirit. Using the biblical data available, I now wish to continue this conversation by presenting four arguments for the personality of the Holy

⁴⁹ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 15.

⁵⁰ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 15.

⁵¹ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 15.

⁵² Karkkainen, *Constructive Christian Theology*, 4.

⁵³ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 17.

⁵⁴ See, for example, James M. Houston, “The Personal Spirit and Personal Appropriation of the Truth,” in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 139–51; Bernd Oberdorfer, “The Holy Spirit—a Person?: Reflections on the Spirit’s Trinitarian Identity,” in *The Work of the Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 27–46; Ron E. M. Clouzet, “The Personhood of the Holy Spirit and Why It Matters,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 11–32; Jo Ann Davidson, “A Power or Person: The Nature of the Holy Spirit,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27, no. 1-2 (2016): 24–36.

Spirit: the linguistic argument, the intellectual-moral argument, the collaboration argument, and the actions of the Spirit argument.

Linguistic Argument

A careful study of the New Testament, especially the gospel of John, presents a very helpful linguistic argument for the personhood of the Holy Spirit. Linguistically, the Bible seems to teach that the Holy Spirit is a person. In the fourth gospel we find John intentionally using the Greek language freely to present the Holy Spirit as a person. In Greek, a pronoun must agree with its antecedent noun in gender, number, and person; otherwise, the sentence is not grammatically correct. In John 16:13-14, John uses the word “Spirit,” which in Greek is a neuter noun, but does not follow this pattern. Instead of the neuter pronoun *ekeino*, meaning “it,” he employs the demonstrative masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*).⁵⁵ This uncommon way of using the Greek can only be explained by the fact that John wanted to avoid the impression that the Holy Spirit is impersonal.⁵⁶ In this discussion, using the masculine pronoun *ekeinos* meaning “He” for the Holy Spirit seems a better choice for me. For that reason, throughout this study I use the masculine pronoun to continue John’s preference as he applies it to the *Paraclete* or Teacher.⁵⁷

At least four times in the gospel of John, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete*, which translates as Helper, Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, Teacher, etc. (see John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). He does not refer to the Holy Spirit merely as “help,” “comfort,” “advocacy,” or “teaching,” but as a personal being.⁵⁸ In connection to that, in John 14:16 Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “another Helper” (*allos parakletos*). The Greek *allos* means “another of the same kind.” By saying that God the Father would send another Helper to the apostles, Jesus simply meant that through the Holy Spirit, the apostles would receive “another helping presence” in his own

⁵⁵ For an analysis of this passage see Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 434.

⁵⁶ For a more elaborate version of this argument, see Dongsun Cho, “God the Holy Spirit~His Deity and Personhood,” accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.sbclife.net/article/1794/god-the-holy-spirit-his-deity-and-personhood>; Marcos Carvalho De Benedicto, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Enabling Believers for the Ministry: An Adventist Perspective” (D. Min dissertation, Andrews University, 2004), 37.

⁵⁷ Traditionally the Western church has used the masculine pronoun, having been influenced by the Latin, because “Spirit” in Latin is masculine. See Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 15.

⁵⁸ De Benedicto, “The Role of the Holy Spirit,” 37.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

bodily absence.⁵⁹ This suggests that as Jesus is a divine person who comforts and helps His disciples, so also is the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ As a personal member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit works together with the other members of the Trinity to bring about the salvation of those who believe and are baptized (Matt 28:19).⁶¹ This brings us the second argument for the personhood of the Holy Spirit: the intellectual-moral argument.

Intellectual-Moral Argument

I call this argument the intellectual-moral argument because it presents the Holy Spirit as an intelligent being who has moral characteristics. An impersonal force or influence cannot have intelligence and cannot display moral characteristics. There are several biblical passages, especially in the New Testament, that present the Holy Spirit as an intelligent and moral being. As the *Paraclete* or Teacher, the Holy Spirit hears, speaks, and tells the apostles the things to come (John 16:13-14), and reminds them of everything Jesus had said to them (John 14:26). Only an intelligent being can have the capacity to teach people and remind them of things they had been taught previously. As an intelligent personal being, the Spirit has a mind set or intention that He gives to believers, so that when they pray, God discerns the Spirit's intention and attitude in them and grants those prayers accordingly (Rom 8:27).⁶² If the Holy Spirit were a mere impersonal force or an influence, how could He help the believers in their weaknesses and make intercession for them with groanings which cannot be uttered? (Rom 8:26). This could only be done by an intelligent personal being.

A word must also be said here about His moral characteristics. First of all, the Bible teaches that God as a moral being is offended by sinful behaviors (Prov 6:16-19; Rom 8:8). This characteristic of God the Father is paralleled by that of the Holy Spirit. As God the Father is offended by sin, so is the Holy Spirit. The Bible also teaches that the Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph 4:30), He can be lied to (Acts 5:3), and He can be blasphemed against (Mark 3:29). All these are characteristics of a personal being. How could an impersonal force or power be offended by anything like sin or be grieved by the disobedience of human beings?

⁵⁹ Kostenberger, *John*, 473-74.

⁶⁰ For a more elaborate version of this argument, see Cho, "God the Holy Spirit."

⁶¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2018), 70.

⁶² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 446.

The Collaboration Argument

The collaboration argument presents the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as collaborators in the plan of salvation. The Word of God, which serves as the source of the good news of salvation, reveals that the success of the project of saving human beings involves all three members of the Trinity. As a Trinitarian community, the three persons collaborate in their work of making disciples of all nations and assuring their baptism, so that baptism is complete only when done in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). They also work in collaboration to ensure that human beings understand the good news and respond to it. The Son speaks to His disciples, and the Father sends the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son to teach them all things and remind them of what the Son said to them previously (John 14:25-26). As a community of divine persons, members of the Trinity collaborate in displaying grace, love, and fellowship as qualities that are needed by Christians to create harmonious communities of love and unity (2 Cor 13:14).

In many New Testament passages, the three persons of the Trinity are tied together as collaborators, not only in the business of saving the lost, but also in strengthening and maturing them in the faith. For example, the Apostle Paul links the three divine persons when he writes, “I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...that He would grant you... to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:14-19). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in divine collaboration to ensure the well-being of Christians.⁶³ This collaborative endeavor between the Holy Spirit on the one hand and the Father and the Son on the other indicates that the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force or energy, but a divine person just like the Father and the Son. The reciprocal, mutual dependence on one another among the three persons of the Trinity makes these divine collaborations possible.⁶⁴

⁶³ Other biblical passages that link the three persons of the Trinity in the collaboration argument include “foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:2) and “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord—through sanctification by the Spirit,” (2 Thess 2:13). See also Davidson, “A Power or Person,” 28.

⁶⁴ Karkkainen, *Constructive Christian Theology*, 4:33.

MWASHINGA: PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Personal Actions Argument

The actions performed by the Spirit in both the Old and the New Testaments give the most comprehensible and tangible evidence for His personality. These actions could only be carried out by a personal being and never by an impersonal force, because they require intelligence and rationality. Just as I stated in the intellectual-moral argument above, the Spirit can perform those actions because He is intelligent and can know, think, understand, predict, and even teach human beings (John 16:13-14). Considering His actions in this light, we see that the Holy Spirit must be a person to take part in the process of creating the earth just like the Father and the Son (Gen 1:2, 1:1; John 1:1-3); to appoint overseers to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:28); and to convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment (Rom 16:8). If the Holy Spirit were a mere impersonal force or energy, He would not be able to command the Apostle Peter to arise and meet Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10:19) or forbid Paul and his companions to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6). This argument seems to most conclusively prove the personality of the Holy Spirit, because an impersonal force cannot perform any of these actions.⁶⁵ For the Holy Spirit to perform such actions, He must be a divine person, as indeed the Bible teaches.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to show that according to the Bible, the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity is a divine person, as opposed to an impersonal force. After investigating the historical background of the theological debates about the personality of the Holy Spirit over the centuries, it is clear that throughout the history of the Christian church there have been two major views regarding the personality of the Holy Spirit: that the Holy Spirit is a person just like the Father and the Son, and that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force or influence.

In this article I have shown that a careful study of the Bible gives at least four reasons to safely conclude that the Holy Spirit cannot be anything but a personal member of the Trinity. Although each of the four arguments for the personality of the Holy Spirit makes a convincing case, together they make an even stronger case. To ignore all the above biblical attestations for

⁶⁵ John F. Walwood calls this the “most tangible and conclusive evidence.” See John F. Walwood, *The Holy Spirit: A Comprehensive Study of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 6.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the personality of the Holy Spirit leaves a person with very little reason to believe in the Holy Spirit, and the entire doctrine of the Trinity loses significance.

The plan of salvation makes sense only when the Holy Spirit is seen as a personal and equal member of the Trinity with the Father and the Son. As we have seen in the four arguments above, the three persons of the Trinity stand together and work together as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any attempt to theologically separate them or deny one of them the right to be a divine person like the other two works only to destroy their harmonious divine community of Trinity.

The two opposing views that have been exposed by this investigation—the claim that the Holy Spirit is a person and the claim that He is not a person—have raised another issue that needs to be addressed. The issue has to do with the nature of the personality of the Holy Spirit. Is the personality of the Holy Spirit equal to the personalities of the Father and the Son? This is an important and legitimate question to deal with in the process of trying to understand the personality of the Holy Spirit. However, this question has not been dealt with in this article, because the article addresses itself to answering the question of whether the Holy Spirit is a personal being or impersonal force. Therefore, more research is needed to answer the question of the nature of the personality of the Holy Spirit.

Christopher R. Mwashinga is a Ph.D. Candidate in Systematic Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He holds a B.A. in theology from the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton. He also earned an M.Div. and an M.A. in religion from Andrews University. His research interests include approaches to the soteriological issue of the unevangelized, biblical hermeneutics, Pneumatology, Christology, and global Christianity. Before coming to Andrews, for over ten years, Mwashinga, an ordained minister, served the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tanzania as conference director of several church departments including Education, Public Campus Ministries, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Children's Ministries, and Satellite Evangelism.