

The Holy Spirit and Translation Bias (Part One)

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Translators have historically held incredible power to influence millions of Bible-readers over the eons. Many impressive developments have occurred in the field of textual criticism and lexicology over the last century. Today we can access dozens of English translations, Greek interlinears, and lexical aids online for free. In no other age have Christians had better access to biblical tools for personal study than today. Even so, rather surprisingly, many Bibles contain wild distortions, especially on texts related to dogmas long ago etched in the stone of infallible tradition. The uninformed Christian walking into a local bookstore sees dozens of Bible translations lining the shelves and picks the one that best meets his or her needs—the Green Bible, the Extreme Teen Bible, the American Patriot’s Bible, the Catholic Holy Bible, the Archeology Study Bible, the Life Application Study Bible, and so on. The number of translations produced in the last sixty years is even more impressive. Here are some of the major ones in chronological order.

Name	Abbr.	Date(s)
New World Translation	NWT	1950, 1960, 1984
Revised Standard Version	RSV	1952
Tanakh	JP	1963
Amplified Bible	AB	1965
Jerusalem Bible	JB	1966
New American Bible	NAB	1970
New English Bible	NEB	1970
Living Bible	LB	1971
New American Standard Bible	NASB	1971, 1995
Good News Bible	TEV	1976, 1992
New International Version	NIV	1978, 1984, 2011
New King James Version	NKJV	1983
New Jerusalem Bible	NJB	1985
Tanakh	JPS	1985, 1992, 2003
New Revised Standard Version	NRSV	1989
Contemporary English Version	CEV	1995

New Living Translation	NLT	1996
Complete Jewish Bible	CJB	1998
English Standard Version	ESV	2001, 2007, 2011
Message	MSG	2002
Holman Christian Standard Bible	HCSB	2004
New English Translation	NET	2005
Today's New International Version	TNIV	2005
Orthodox Study Bible	OSB	2008

Although most of these Bibles stay relatively true to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in most places, nearly all of them still have significant blind spots that subtly lean readers towards a Trinitarian theology. In what follows I intend to expose one of the smoking guns of text tampering as it relates to the holy spirit.¹ I want to delve into the world of how translators go about their task, of how Greek grammar translates into English, and how theology consciously or unconsciously gets injected into translations. In particular, I am interested in exposing one of the most flagrant (mis)translation practices found in virtually all English Bibles: rendering impersonal Greek pronouns as personal in English when referring to the holy spirit. What I present here is neither sectarian nor ground breaking. Anyone who can read Greek can verify what I am saying. I will cite mainstream Trinitarian scholars to backup these very points. Yet, since one cannot grasp the issue at hand without some cursory knowledge of Greek grammar, we will begin with a brief overview of the basics.

Gender and Pronouns in Greek Grammar

In English nouns do not have gender. For example the word “table” is neither masculine nor feminine. It is a thing not a person, an “it” not a “he” or a “she.” However, in Greek, as with many other languages, nouns do have gender. The Greek word for table “τράπεζα” (trapeza) is feminine. Thus, when employing a pronoun to refer back to “table” in Greek, one would say “she” rather than “it.” This has nothing to do with how masculine or feminine the table in question might be. One could have a rustic, manly picnic table, and we would still refer to it as “she” in Greek. However, when translating a sentence into English, we would change the word “she” to “it” since that is how English works. Here is an example.

Ἡ τράπεζα ἐστὶν ἀγαθὴ ὅτι αὐτὴ ἐστὶν ἰσχυρά.

The table is good because **it** (lit. “she”) is strong.

Even though the word “αὐτή” (afte) really means “she” we translate it as “it” in English because English does not use personal pronouns for things. So even if we usually translate gender out from most pronouns, we generally preserve the grammatical gender for neuter words. So if something is an “it” in Greek, it remains an “it” in English, but if something is a “he” or “she” in Greek, we change it to an “it” in English if the antecedent is a thing rather than a person. However, just like any language, Greek allows for breaking the rules in certain situations.

¹ To see a number of other examples of translation shenanigans not related to the holy spirit, see the appendix.

One such case occurs when a neuter noun is used for a person or a group of individuals.² In the following example Paul uses the grammatically feminine word “head” for Christ, yet when he uses a pronoun to refer back, he chooses a masculine one.

Colossians 2.19

καὶ οὐ κρατῶν **τὴν κεφαλὴν**, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὔξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.

and not holding to **the head** (feminine), from **whom** (masculine) the whole body being supplied and held together through joints and ligaments grows the growth (which is) from God.

The words τὴν κεφαλὴν (the head) are feminine, yet the relative pronoun, οὗ (of whom), is masculine rather than feminine. It would have been grammatically correct to use the feminine word ἧς (of whom), but since the antecedent, “head,” refers to a person (i.e. Christ), Paul broke the rules of grammar to communicate more naturally—after all Christ is not a “she.” This phenomenon occurs many times throughout the New Testament.³ Here is one more example:

Matthew 25.32

καὶ συναχθήσονται ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ πάντα **τὰ ἔθνη**, καὶ ἀφορίσει **αὐτούς** ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων, ὥσπερ ὁ ποιμὴν ἀφορίζει τὰ πρόβατα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίφων,

and all **the nations** (neuter) will be gathered together before him, and he will divide **them** (masculine) from one another, as the shepherd divides the sheep from the goats,

Here the phrase “τὰ ἔθνη” (the nations) is neuter, but Matthew refers to them using the masculine αὐτούς (them) rather than the neuter αὐτά (them). He does so because “the nations” are groups of people, not things, and it sounds more natural to refer to nations as masculine rather than neuter.

So, if the New Testament writers could bend gender from impersonal to personal when neuter words referred to persons, then we should expect the same sort of anomaly in reference to the spirit—if they really did believe the spirit was a person.

Key Texts Analyzed

What follows is a collection of key texts in which the holy spirit is referenced using pronouns in English translations. Every one of these texts is an example where one of the very best and most literal English versions—the NASB—chose to use personal pronouns to refer to the spirit. Yet, in *every* case the Greek words are actually neuter!

John 6.63 [NA27]

John 6.63 [Literal]

John 6.63 [NASB]

τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν **τὸ** ζωοποιοῦν, ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν...

the spirits is **that which** gives life, the flesh does not benefit

It is the Spirit **who** gives life; the flesh profits nothing...

² For much of this discussion I am indebted to Daniel Wallace’s fine treatment of pneumatology in his article “Greek Grammar and the Personality of the Holy Spirit,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13.1 (2003) 97-125, Institute for Biblical Research, 2003.

³ i.e. Matthew 28.19; Mark 9.26; Acts 21.36; Galatians 4.19. See *ibid.* for a much more extensive list.

anything...

John 7.39 [NA27]

τοῦτο δὲ εἶπεν περὶ τοῦ
πνεύματος ὃ ἔμελλον λαμβάνειν
οἱ πιστεύσαντες εἰς αὐτόν...

John 7.39 [Literal]

but this he spoke concerning the
spirit **which** those who believed on
him (were) about to receive...

John 7.39 [NASB]

But this He spoke of the Spirit,
whom those who believed in
Him were to receive...

Acts 5.32 [NA27]

καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν μάρτυρες τῶν
ῥημάτων τούτων καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα
τὸ ἅγιον ὃ ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς
πειθαρχοῦσιν αὐτῷ.

Acts 5.32 [Literal]

and we are witnesses of these
words and the holy spirit **which**
God gave to those who obey him

Acts 5.32 [NASB]

And we are witnesses of these
things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit,
whom God has given to those
who obey Him.

Acts 8.15-16 [NA27]

οἵτινες καταβάντες προσήξατο
περὶ αὐτῶν ὅπως λάβωσιν
πνεῦμα ἅγιον· οὐδέπω γὰρ ἦν
ἐπ' οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν **ἐπιτεπτικός**...

Acts 8.15-16 [Literal]

who, having come down, prayed for
them so that they may receive holy
spirit; for **it has** not yet **fallen** upon
any of them...

Acts 8.15-16 [NASB]

who came down and prayed for
them that they might receive
the Holy Spirit. For **He had** not
yet **fallen** upon any of them...

Romans 8.16 [NA27]

αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ
πνεύματι ἡμῶν ὅτι ἐσμέν τέκνα
θεοῦ.

Romans 8.16 [Literal]

the spirit **itself** testifies together
with our spirit that we are children
of God.

Romans 8.16 [NASB]

The Spirit **Himself** testifies with
our spirit that we are children of
God,

1 Corinthians 2.12 [NA27]

ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ
κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ
πνεῦμα **τὸ** ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ...

1 Corinthians 2.12 [Literal]

but we did not receive the spirit of
the world but the spirit **which** (is)
from God...

1 Corinthians 2.12 [NASB]

Now we have received, not the
spirit of the world, but the Spirit
who is from God...

1 John 5.6 [NA27]

...καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν **τὸ**
μαρτυροῦν, ὅτι τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν
ἡ ἀλήθεια.

1 John 5.6 [Literal]

...and the spirit is **that which**
testifies, because the spirit is the
truth.

1 John 5.6 [NASB]

...It is the Spirit who testifies,
because the Spirit is the truth.

As we can see from these texts, the Bible employs neuter (not masculine) pronouns to refer to the holy spirit. However, due to an ambiguity in the Greek language, there are some instances where the neuter and masculine forms of a word are the same. Here are some relevant examples:

Romans 5.5 [NA27]	Romans 5.5 [Literal]	Romans 5.5 [NASB]
ἡ δὲ ἐλπίς οὐ κατασχύνει, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ δοθέντος ἡμῖν.	but the hope does not put to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the holy spirit which/whom has been given to us.	and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
Ephesians 4.30 [NA27]	Ephesians 4.30 [Literal]	Ephesians 4.30 [NASB]
καὶ μὴ λυπεῖτε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἐν ᾧ ἐσφραγίσθητε...	and do not grieve God's holy spirit, by which/whom you have been sealed...	Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed...
2 Timothy 1.14 [NA27]	2 Timothy 1.14 [Literal]	2 Timothy 1.14 [NASB]
τὴν καλὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ ἐνοικοῦντος ἐν ἡμῖν.	Guard the good deposit through holy spirit which/who is dwelling in you.	Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to <i>you</i> .
1 John 3.24 [NA27]	1 John 3.24 [Literal]	1 John 3.24 [NASB]
...καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι μένει ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος οὗ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν.	...and by this we know that he abides in us, from the spirit which/who he gave to us.	...We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Each time the bolded word(s) could be translated “who” rather than “which” since masculine and neuter forms are identical in these cases. However, all we need to do is look at the noun to which the pronoun or participle refers to find out which is intended. In every instance, the noun is πνεῦμα (spirit), itself neuter, and this easily determines which gender the other word is. So, translators should render each of these in English as “which” in keeping with grammatical consistency. We will return to see how English Bibles translate these unambiguous texts in a moment. First we need to consider what the translation committees themselves set for standards.

Translator Standards

Since most people do not have any way of testing how trustworthy a Bible is, they depend on what the translation committees say they intended to accomplish. Here I will quote from just a few of the most popular Bibles in current bookstores to show what their translation philosophies are:

The Lockman Foundation (NASB)⁴

The *New American Standard Bible* translation team adhered to the literal philosophy of translation. This is the most exacting and demanding method of translation, and requires a word-for-word translation that is accurate and precise, yet easily readable. This philosophy of translation follows the word and sentence patterns of the original authors so that the reader is free to understand God's message as the Holy Spirit leads....

First published in its complete form in 1971, the *NASB* is excellent for Bible study because it aims at a precise translation of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. As such, it renders, where practical, the original order of words and phrases. In passages where this literalness produces unacceptable English, the translators used modern English idioms and indicated the literal renderings in marginal notes.”

The Biblical Studies Foundation (NET)⁵

The NET Bible is a completely new translation of the Bible with 60,932 translators’ notes! It was completed by more than 25 scholars – experts in the original biblical languages – who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. Turn the pages and see the breadth of the translators’ notes, documenting their decisions and choices as they worked. The translators’ notes make the original languages far more accessible, allowing you to look over the translator’s shoulder at the very process of translation. This level of documentation is a first for a Bible translation, making transparent the textual basis and the rationale for key renderings (including major interpretive options and alternative translations). This unparalleled level of detail helps connect people to the Bible in the original languages in a way never before possible without years of study of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It unlocks the riches of the Bible’s truth from entirely new perspectives.

Committee on Bible Translation (NIV)⁶

...the translators were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form...The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers. They have weighed the lexical and grammatical details of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.

National Council of Churches (NRSV)⁷

Many of us pay scant attention to the Bible translation we use, and yet we all want the most accurate and readable translation available for our study and devotional use. That Bible translation is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Widely recognized by scholars and religious authorities as the most accurate translation, it is also the direct successor of the beloved King James Bible, following in that Bible’s tradition of elegant, readable prose. As a

⁴ <http://www.lockman.org/nasb/nasbprin.php>

⁵ <http://bible.org/article/preface-net-bible>

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995), p. xi.

⁷ <http://www.nrsv.net/about/about-nrsv/>

literal translation rather than a paraphrase, the NRSV leaves interpretation in the hands of the reader.

Notice how they are all committed to accuracy of translation. None of them indicates that their commitment is first to a creed or tradition over and above reliable translation. As a result, we should see these versions rendering the texts I listed above using impersonal pronouns, since that is what the Greek says. Let's see how they do.

Putting the Translations to the Test

Imagine someone jumps online and accesses the most popular and well received translations to investigate the meaning of Acts 5.32 and they check fifteen translations:

NA27⁸

καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν μάρτυρες τῶν ῥημάτων τούτων καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ὃ ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς πειθαρχοῦσιν αὐτῷ.

NJB

We are witnesses to this, we and the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him.'

KJV

And we are his witnesses of these things; and *so is* also the Holy Ghost, **whom** God hath given to them that obey him.

NRSV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NWT

And we are witnesses of these matters, and so is the holy spirit, **which** God has given to those obeying him as ruler."

CEV

We are here to tell you about all this, and so is the Holy Spirit, **who** is God's gift to everyone who obeys God.

RSV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NLT

We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, **who** is given by God to those who obey him."

AB

And we are witnesses of these things, and the Holy Spirit is also, **Whom** God has bestowed on those who obey Him.

CJB

We are witnesses to these things; so is the Ruach HaKodesh, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

⁸ The Nestle Aland 27th edition is the standard Greek text translators use for the New Testament (same as the United Bible Societies' fourth edition).

NAB

We are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit **that** God has given to those who obey him."

ESV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NASB

"And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

MSG

And we are witnesses to these things. The Holy Spirit, **whom** God gives to those who obey him, corroborates every detail."

TEV

We are witnesses to these things—we and the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to those who obey him."

HCSB

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

NIV

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NET

And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NKJV

"And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is* the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

TNIV

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

After seeing that eighteen of these nineteen translations personalize the holy spirit by capitalizing Spirit (most capitalize Holy as well) and that seventeen out of the nineteen use "who" or "whom" to refer back to holy spirit, what would someone conclude? Of course, they would go with the majority. Besides, the only translations that differ on this point are the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation and the Roman Catholic's New American Bible—the very two sources that evangelicals and Protestants are trained never to trust! In fact, the New World Translation does not even appear on major Bible websites (or in BibleWorks), so access to it is limited. What is so shocking is that the Greek very clearly reads "the holy spirit **which** God gave..." There is no ambiguity or confusing grammar to cloud the question. It is as plain as day, and any first year New Testament Greek student could easily verify it.

The most frustrating aspect of this chicanery is that these translations mislead honest-hearted men and women who simply want to read and understand the Scriptures. What is more, most Bible readers implicitly trust the scholars who produce translations in the same way that most people trust doctors or school teachers. This is partly due to the impressive verbiage we saw above in their translation philosophies. The NASB team “adhered to the literal philosophy of translation” and required “a word-for-word translation that is accurate and precise,” yet, they literally did not translate the word “ὅ” as “which.” The NET boasts that its nearly 61,000 translators’ notes enable readers to “look over the translator’s shoulder” and make “transparent the textual basis and the rationale for key renderings (including major interpretive options and alternative translations).” However, when I look at the footnotes on Acts 5.32, I see nothing whatsoever indicating they flat out changed a word to make their translation more palatable. Ironically, Daniel Wallace was one of the primary scholars involved in the NET and his paper on this subject exposes this very issue. The NIV committee stated that they were committed “to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form,” yet they corrected the infallible Scripture in their translation to read “whom” instead of “which.” Isn’t a correction the result of an error? But, if Scripture is infallible, why is the NIV correcting it? Lastly, the NRSV claims it is “the most accurate and readable translation” and that it “leaves interpretation in the hands of the reader.” Yet, in this verse (and many others like it), it obscures the meaning of the text and does not so much as leave a footnote indicating their decision.

So if the Greek is clear, why do nearly all of these translations get it wrong? Why do all of these translations think the simple word ὅ (which) is really ὅς (whom)?

***Sola Scriptura* and Perspicuity**

From the time of the Protestant reformation to today, countless Christians have embraced the motto “*sola scriptura*,” a Latin phrase meaning “scripture alone.” The idea is that Christians can find whatever pertains to faith and piety in the pages of Scripture without depending on external traditions or authorities. This came up quite a bit in the battle between the reformers and the establish Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics claimed tradition was necessary for rightly interpreting Scripture whereas the Protestants argued people could understand the Bible without the Church telling them what it was supposed to mean. To this day the mentality of *sola scriptura* dominates the confessions and creeds of most non-Catholic denominations.

Sola Scriptura is, I think, a very good idea, but it can only be practical for the one who is willing to change his or her beliefs based on what the Bible actually says. Still, one will always need external help from translations, lexicons, cultural studies, etc. To be uncompromisingly *sola scriptura* would require someone to be able to read uncial manuscripts fluently without the aid of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek dictionaries. Even so, the sentiment has great force and it combines with another idea from the Reformation—perspicuity. Someone who is perspicacious can accurately see or grasp a matter. The idea here is that Scripture is clear and understandable by nearly everyone. Here are a couple of classic articulations of this notion:

On the Bondage of the Will (Section 4) by *Martin Luther*

Therefore come forward, you and all the Sophists together, and produce any one mystery which is still abstruse in the Scriptures. But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from their own blindness or want of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of the truth. As Paul saith concerning the Jews, 2 Cor. iii. 15. “The veil still remains upon their heart.” And again, “If our gospel be hid it is

hid to them that are lost, whose heart the god of this world hath blinded.” (2 Cor. iv. 3-4.) With the same rashness any one may cover his own eyes, or go from the light into the dark and hide himself, and then blame the day and the sun for being obscure. Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God.

Westminster Confession of Faith (1.7)

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all (2 Pet. 3:16); yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (Ps. 119:105, 130).

This mentality puts an incredible burden on Protestants to find their doctrines in Scripture. It will not do to say, “Well, the creed has the following...” or “The Church teaches that this means...” No, they *must* show the teaching in plain Scripture. This would all work out well enough if denominations were actually willing to evaluate their long cherished creeds in the light of Scripture, but, of course, they are not. The whole situation is doomed from the start, because the Protestant Reformation did not start from scratch and question each belief based on Scripture. Sure, there were a few, highly significant, doctrines that they put on the chopping block of biblical scrutiny and successfully eliminated, but many of their core beliefs were never up for discussion. For example, they never allowed the Trinity to be questioned and when people did apply *sola scriptura* to the dogma they found themselves on the chopping block.

However, now that Catholics and Protestants are no longer able to execute their fellow brothers and sisters on the charge of heresy, they have had to find new ways to deal with this thorny problem. This is precisely where the need arises for translators to monkey with the text. The issue comes down to pressure—pressure to make the Bible conform to the creed so that we can say the creed is biblical. Jason BeDuhn helpfully explains:

“For the doctrines that Protestantism inherited to be considered true, they had to be found in the Bible. And precisely because they were considered true already, there was and is tremendous pressure to read those truths back into the Bible, whether or not they are actually there. Translation and interpretation are seen as working hand in hand, and as practically indistinguishable, because Protestant Christians don’t like to imagine themselves building too much beyond what the Bible spells out for itself. So...there is a pressure (conscious or unconscious) to build up those ideas and concepts within the biblical text, to paraphrase or expand on what the Bible does say in the direction of what modern readers want and need it to say.”⁹

But, this sort of circular reasoning cannot prove anything. The translators begin with the belief that the holy spirit is a “person.” As a result they go against their own stated translation principles to literally change the text from “which” to “who.” Next a reader comes along and, on the basis of all those personal pronouns, concludes therefore that the Holy Spirit is, of course, a “person.” We begin with a creedal belief and we end with one—and at the end of the day we have proved nothing.

⁹ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2013), pp. 163-164.

We should not allow our doctrines to determine the text. To do so is like a doctor who believes that cancer is the root cause of all sickness. Someone comes to him for examination, and though the patient's symptoms line up perfectly with the common flu virus, the doctor finds ways of convincing himself that cancer is the true culprit. Every test he orders comes back negative, but still he knows, in his bones, that chemotherapy is the right treatment. When translators see that troubling σ (which) they ignore the negative results for the test of personhood, and merrily capitalize the "S" on spirit and put "who" anyhow. This is a smoking gun of translation bias and it is absolutely unacceptable. It does the exact opposite of what all of the translations say they want to do; it injects theology into Scripture and limits the reader's access to what the text really says.

How This Works in Our Favor

The fact that nearly all modern translations change the text so that it supports their doctrine about the third person of the Trinity is actually evidence that the Bible does not teach that the holy spirit is a person. This whole issue smacks of anachronism. Of course neither Jesus nor Paul would say something like, "God the Spirit" or "the third person of the Trinity" or "three persons in one essence" because this kind of language did not yet exist! Pneumatology slowly evolved into full blown Trinitarianism over centuries of reflection. It was not until a.d. 381 that some Christians officially recognized the holy spirit as an equal person of God in the Constantinopolitan Creed. Since the theologians cannot find any of this terminology in Scripture, they tweak the translation to ensure compliance with their beliefs. This dastardly act needs to be exposed so that doubt can be cast on the doctrine of the personhood of the holy spirit. These mistranslated pronouns are like make-up covering a large pimple. If we can help people see through this deception, they just may turn away from the dogmatic deception that has held sway for so many centuries and instead simplify their piety and come to worship the true God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, rather than some three-headed Cerberus.

Appendix

Here are a few other examples of textual tweaking to make the Bible sound more Trinitarian:

1 John 5.7-8 in KJV

For there are three that bear record [in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth,] the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

Everything within the brackets is a forgery not found in any ancient Greek manuscripts. All modern translations have thankfully omitted these words.

John 8.58 in NAB

Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM."

Here the translators have garbled the word order in order to dangle the "I am" statement tantalizingly off the end of the verse. They further emphasize their intention by capitalizing the "I am" in order to make the reader think back to the burning bush incident when God told Moses "I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3.14). However, in every other translated verse the NAB correctly reorders the wording to reflect proper English. For example, the first part of John 8.58 reads εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς, which literally translated is, "said to them Jesus." However, following the word order for good English, the translators properly rendered the phrase, "Jesus said to them." The last part should be "I am before Abraham came to be" or something similar.

Revelation 1.8 in NIV

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Red letter editions of the Bible often color this saying in red to indicate that Jesus is the speaker. But, the speaker is clearly identified as "the Lord God." Thus, only if one assumes *a priori* that Jesus is the Lord God can he or she likewise assume that these words are spoken by him. Furthermore, in verse four, it is clear that "him who is, and who was, and who is to come" is not Jesus.

Worshiping vs. Bowing in NASB

Matt. 2:2

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to **worship** Him."

Rev. 3:9

'Behold, I will cause *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie-- I will make them come and **bow down** at your feet, and *make them* know that I have loved you.

In these two texts, the text used the identical Greek word προσκυνέω (proskyneō), but the translators rendered the former as "worship" and the latter as "bow down." They do this because they believe Jesus is God so when people bow before him, they are not just paying respect, but they are offering religious worship, whereas when people bow before the saints, they are merely doing obeisance. This subtle inconsistency, invisible to anyone without access to the Greek text, colors Scripture and biases

the reader towards believing Jesus is God. Another cunning trick the NASB and many other translations play on the reader is capitalizing pronouns that refer to Jesus or God. So, above, it reads “we...have come to worship **Him**.” The capital “H” on “Him” combined with the word choice of “worship” strongly implies to modern readers that even the baby Jesus is no mere man. However, the text would more probably read, “we...have come to bow to him.” If this were the case, people would probably call to mind a regal context wherein subjects bow before a new born king.

Phil 2.5-6 in NIV

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

As with the prior example, the meaning of this text turns on word choice. The phrase in question is “Who, being in very nature God,” which comes from the Greek phrase “ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων,” which comes into English as “who being in (the) form of God.” A massive interpretive chasm lies between saying that Jesus is “in very nature God” and saying he is “in the form of God.” Yet, with the NIV one does not get the opportunity to wrestle with the meaning of this curious phrase, instead he or she is simply told that Jesus is God.

Romans 9.5 in the NLT

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned. And he is God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.

The translators of the NLT are among the most flagrant offenders when it comes to changing the text to fit the meaning they think it should have. A simple comparison to another translation reveals what tricks they were up to in rendering this verse:

Romans 9.5 in the NAB

theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

We need not get into their inserting names of patriarchs or completely reworking the sentence structure. Instead I want to focus on the last phrase in which the NLT unambiguously calls Jesus “God, the one who rules over everything and is worthy of eternal praise” whereas the text is far more ambiguous, depending on where and what punctuation one inserts as the NAB makes clear.

The Holy Spirit and Translation Bias (Part 2)

by Sean Finnegan (Restitutio.org)

In the first part of this investigation into the holy spirit and translation bias, I limited my focus to relative pronouns used to refer to the holy spirit. In what follows I will broaden my inquiry to include several other key texts and important concepts related to the God's spirit. First I will discuss in detail the primary texts used to prove the personhood of the spirit on grammatical grounds, before I make the case that the biblical concept of God's spirit resists categorization.

Key Texts Used to Establish Personhood¹⁰

Before jumping in to exegete each of the primary texts commonly used to affirm the personality of the spirit, I will begin by citing Millard Erickson's words to show how the argument typically works:

The first evidence of the Spirit's personality is the use of the masculine pronoun in representing him. Since the word πνεῦμα is neuter, and since pronouns are to agree with their antecedents in person, number, and gender, we would expect the neuter pronoun to be used to represent the Holy Spirit. Yet in John 16:13-14 we find an unusual phenomenon. As Jesus describes the Holy Spirit's ministry, he uses a masculine pronoun ἐκεῖνος where we would expect a neuter pronoun. The **only possible antecedent** in the immediate context is "Spirit of Truth" (v. 13)...[John] deliberately chose to use the masculine to convey to us the fact that Jesus is referring to a person, not a thing. A similar reference is Ephesians 1:14, where, in a relative clause modifying "Holy Spirit," the preferred textual reading is ὃς [who].¹¹

It is important to note that Erickson does not base his argument here on the theology expressed in these texts, but on grammatical grounds. We will broach the subject of theology, especially with reference to the Upper Room Discourse, once we have made our way through the grammatical issue. One more source that aptly articulates the same grammatical argument comes from George Ladd:

[W]here pronouns that have *pneuma* for their immediate antecedent are found in the masculine, we can only conclude that the personality of the Spirit is meant to be suggested...The language is even more vivid in 16:13: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he (*ekeinos*) will guide you into all truth.' Here the neuter *pneuma* stands in direct connection with the pronoun, but the masculine form rather than the 'normal' neuter is employed. From this evidence we must conclude that the Spirit is viewed as a personality.¹²

¹⁰ For much of this exegesis I am indebted to Daniel Wallace's "Greek Grammar and the Personality of the Holy Spirit," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13.1 (2003) 97-125, Institute for Biblical Research, 2003.

¹¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 859-860 (emphasis added in bold). Other scholars who employ this same argument include Dabney, Smeaton, Kim, Conner, Berkhof, Chafer, Thiessen, Pache, Pentecost, Ryrie, Green, Williams, Packer, Sproul, Grudem, Ferguson, Reymond, Congar, John, Lange, Godet, Mortimer, Westcott, Bernard, Lenski, Hendricksen, Barrett, Behler, Sanders, Brown, Morris, Lindars, Newman, Nida, Carson, and Beasley-Murray. For references see Wallace's list in "Greek Grammar and Personality of the Holy Spirit" pp. 102-103.

¹² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 295.

As I mentioned in part one, the New Testament does sometimes break the rules of grammar by employing masculine pronouns to refer to neuter nouns when it is clear that the referent is a person or group of individuals. Thus, if Erickson and Ladd are right, they would be on solid grounds to affirm a personal view of the spirit (or Spirit) on this grammatical basis. Of course, this would not prove that the Spirit is a *distinct* person *of* God; that would require considerably more work. I will return to the theological implications later, for now let us work through each of the five major texts typically used to make the grammatical case for the personality of the holy spirit (John 14.26; 15.26; 16.13; Ephesians 1.14; 1 John 5.7).

John 14.26 [NA27]	John 14.26 [Literal]	John 14.26 [NASB]
ὁ δὲ παράκλητος, τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ὃ πέμψει ὁ πατὴρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐκεῖνος ὑμᾶς διδάξει πάντα καὶ ὑπομνήσει ὑμᾶς πάντα ἃ εἶπον ὑμῖν [ἐγώ].	but the advocate, ¹³ the holy spirit, which the father will send in my name, that one will teach you everything and remind you (of) everything which I said to you.	"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

Once again the text uses the word ὃ (which) to refer to the holy spirit and the NASB and most other versions alter the text by translating it “whom.” We have already discussed this translator’s hucksterism in part one, so we can jump ahead to the next interesting word—ἐκεῖνος (that one). This is the masculine form of the demonstrative pronoun and it simply points back to its antecedent. This pronoun, like the ones we examined earlier, contains grammatical gender, but this does not necessarily correlate to personhood unless the referent is itself an individual. Some say that ἐκεῖνος (that one) refers to τὸ πνεῦμα (the spirit) since it is the nearest noun and on that basis argue for the personality of the holy spirit. However, this way of looking at it ignores the sentence structure. The phrase “the holy spirit which the father will send in my name” is an appositive or an aside employed to provide further detail about παράκλητος (the advocate). Appositives interrupt the flow of a sentence momentarily to add more information, but then the sentence returns to what it was saying before. Thus, “that one” refers back to “the advocate,” and it is masculine because its antecedent is masculine. So, in this verse we do not have grammatical grounds to argue that the spirit is a person.

John 15.26 [NA27]	John 15.26 [Literal]	John 15.26 [NASB]
Ὅταν ἔλθῃ ὁ παράκλητος ὃν ἐγὼ πέμψω ὑμῖν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς, τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας ὃ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται, ἐκεῖνος μαρτυρήσει περὶ ἐμοῦ·	when the advocate may come whom/which I will send to you from the father, the spirit of truth which proceeds from the father, that one will testify concerning me	"When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, <i>that is</i> the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me,

Once again the Spirit personality defenders argue that ἐκεῖνος refers to “the spirit of truth,” effectively bestowing personhood on the spirit. But, as before, the phrase “the spirit of truth which proceeds from

¹³ The word παράκλητος *parakletos* or *paraklete* looms large in what follows so a definition may be in order. F. F. Bruce explains: “The work *parakletos* is...one who is called alongside as a helper or defender, a friend at court. ...[T]he word is there aptly rendered ‘Advocate’, from the Latin *advocatus*, which is the exact equivalent of Greek *parakletos*.” [F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 301-302.]

the father” is in apposition to ὁ παράκλητος (the advocate). Like John 14.26, we cannot make a grammatical argument that the spirit is a person here.

John 16.7, 13 [NA27]	John 16.7, 13 [Literal]	John 16.7, 13 [NASB]
ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ τὴν ἀλήθειαν λέγω ὑμῖν, συμφέρει ὑμῖν ἵνα ἐγὼ ἀπέλθω. ἐὰν γὰρ μὴ ἀπέλθω, ὁ παράκλητος οὐκ ἐλεύσεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς· ἐὰν δὲ πορευθῶ, πέμψω αὐτὸν πρὸς ὑμᾶς...ὅταν δὲ ἔλθῃ ἐκεῖνος , τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας, ὀδηγήσει ὑμᾶς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πάση...	But I tell you the truth, it benefits you that I depart. For if I do not depart, the advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him/it to you...but when that one comes, the spirit of truth, he/it will guide you into all truth...	"But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. But when He , the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth...

Here a third time ἐκεῖνος (that one) appears in close proximity to “the spirit of truth.” Scholars like Erickson and Ladd argue on this basis that John is applying the masculine pronoun “that one” to a neuter noun “spirit” in order to affirm the personhood of the spirit. However, as with the last two instances “the spirit of truth” is really just in apposition to “that one” and the referent, though it goes all the way back to verse 7, is actually ὁ παράκλητος (the advocate). Curt Mayes helpfully explains the flow of thought in this passage:

It is necessary to begin back in verse seven. There the Spirit is introduced as the παράκλητος [advocate] and becomes the subject of an extended discussion. Αὐτόν [him] in verse seven refers back to παράκλητος, as does ἐκεῖνος [that one] in verse eight. Then verses nine through eleven explain the work of the παράκλητος (with respect to the world) which (work) was introduced in verse eight. Notice the dependency of verses nine through eleven on verse eight, as attested by the incomplete sentences in the former. Verse twelve sets the stage for another statement about the work of the παράκλητος—this time with respect to believers. Ἐκεῖνος is used in both verses thirteen and fourteen, probably with the same reference. On the basis of this sequence, then, it is this writer's contention that ὁ παράκλητος is introduced in 16:7 as the subject of the passage and remains the subject through 16:15. Ἐκεῖνος would then refer to παράκλητος in each instance (vv. 8, 13, 14)—simple agreement, the general rule.¹⁴

Further strengthening this case is the fact, as Daniel Wallace points out, that verses 8-11 are actually only one Greek sentence, the subject of which is ἐκεῖνος. He goes on to say:

Yet, as soon as v. 12 disrupts the flow of thought...the Paraclete is immediately brought back into view by the resumptive ἐκεῖνος, *followed* by his identification as τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας [the spirit of truth]. Thus, in spite of the distance between παράκλητος in v. 7 and ἐκεῖνος in v. 13, since the παράκλητος never fully fades from view throughout the discourse, the masculine gender of ἐκεῖνος can easily be accounted for on grounds other than the Spirit's personality...Although one might argue that the Spirit's personality is in view in the Upper Room Discourse, the view must be based on the nature of a παράκλητος and the things said about the Counselor, not on any alleged grammatical subtleties. The fact is that, in all of John's Gospel, the only time a masculine pronoun is used concerning the πνεῦμα is in relation to ὁ

¹⁴ Curt Steven Mayes, *Pronominal Referents and the Personality of the Holy Spirit* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980), p. 35.

παράκλητος. This suggests that the philological argument in John 14-16 may be a case of *petition principii*.¹⁵

So, there are no *syntactical* grounds—at least not in John—for arguing the spirit is a person, but before moving on to look at the last two texts, we should pause and consider the *theological* meaning of the texts we have just cited. There is no doubt that the many actions attributed to the advocate in this Upper Room Discourse indicate personhood. Here is a brief list of such statements made about the advocate:

John 14.17	abides with you
John 14.26	teach you all things
John 14.26	bring to your remembrance
John 15.26	testify about me [Jesus]
John 16.8	convict the world
John 16.13	guide you into all the truth
John 16.13	will not speak on his own initiative
John 16.13	hears...speaks...discloses
John 16.14	will glorify me
John 16.14	take of mine...and disclose to you

Who can teach, remind, testify, convict, guide, etc., other than a sentient being? What is more, the very word, παράκλητος (advocate), normally refers to individuals not things. Patrick Navas, however, does not think a woodenly literal reading is appropriate here:

The fact that the Spirit is sometimes depicted as “teaching,” “speaking,” “interceding,” “guiding,” and “helping” in the Scriptures has influenced many theologians to conclude that the Spirit must be a distinct “person” like God the Father and Jesus Christ. But because the holy Spirit does not have a personal/proper name like the Father and Son, is never shown to be an object of worship or recipient of prayer, and never depicted or identified as a member of a “triune” God in Scripture, other Bible students believe that these are simply a few of numerous examples where the Bible uses the common linguistic device of *personification*—that is, the practice of ascribing personal attributes or qualities to subjects that are not actually or literally persons¹⁶

Navas’ theory gains traction once we come to grips with two facts. First of all, Jesus explicitly states that he words are not to be taken literally, “These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour

¹⁵ Wallace, 110-111. *Petitio principii* is, according to Merriam Webster, “a logical fallacy in which a premise is assumed to be true without warrant or in which what is to be proved is implicitly taken for granted” (i.e. begging the question).

¹⁶ Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition: A Reconsideration of the Roman Catholic-Protestant Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007), p. 477.

is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father” (John 16.25). The second point to keep in mind is how often Scripture employs personification. Here is a table of several such instances:

Examples of Personification

Genesis 1.10	voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground
Isaiah 3.26	gates will lament and mourn, Jerusalem will sit on the ground
Isaiah 35.1-2	the desert will be glad, rejoice, shout for joy
Isaiah 49.13	heavens shout for joy, earth rejoices, mountains break forth into joyful shouting
Psalms 98.8	the rivers clap their hands, the mountains sing together for joy
Proverbs 8	wisdom calls, understanding up her voice, she [wisdom] cries out at the entrance to the city, wisdom speaks noble things and opens her lips, wisdom dwells with prudence, wisdom walks in the way of righteousness, wisdom was a master workman with God, etc.
Luke 7.35	wisdom is vindicated by all her children
John 3.8	the wind blows where it wishes
Romans 10.6	righteousness based on faith speaks
1 Corinthians 13	love is patient, kind, not jealous, does not brag, is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, does not seek its own, etc.
1 John 2.27	the anointing abides in you and teaches you
1 John 5.7	spirit, water, and blood testify

Another option, put forward tentatively by Wallace, is that the advocate actually refers to “the concept of the ascended Christ as Spirit.” He goes on to speculate, “If this were the case...the author would tend toward the masculine, not because of a view of the Spirit’s personality, but because of a view that the Spirit was identified some who with the ascended, exalted Christ (who would naturally be thought of as masculine).”¹⁷ We will return to wrestle some more with pneumatology, but, for now, suffice it to say we have two interpretive options for these Johannine texts: (1) Jesus here employs personification to talk about the advocate as if it were a person or (2) the advocate really is (or is to be) a person. Even if we accept the latter idea, it does not necessarily imply a third person; it is much more likely that Christ is really talking about himself in his future role as heavenly mediator. We will return to this in the next section, but for now we must work through the last two texts marshaled to support a personalized spirit.

Ephesians 1.13-14 [NA27]	Ephesians 1.13-14 [Literal]	Ephesians 1.13-14 [NASB]
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¹⁷ Wallace, p. 100.

<p>Ἐν ᾧ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀκούσαντες τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς σωτηρίας ὑμῶν, ἐν ᾧ καὶ πιστεύσαντες ἐσφραγίσθητε τῷ πνεύματι τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τῷ ἁγίῳ, ὁ/ὅς ἐστὶν ἀρραβὼν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν, εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῆς περιποιήσεως, εἰς ἔπαινον τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ.</p>	<p>In which also you having heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also you having believed were sealed with the holy spirit of promise, which/who is a down payment of our inheritance, for redemption of the , to the praise of his glory.</p>	<p>In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation-- having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of <i>God's own</i> possession, to the praise of His glory.</p>
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The issue here in Ephesians 1.14 is quite different than what we have seen before. In this case, the Greek manuscripts differ on whether the neuter ὃ (which) or the masculine ὅς (who) belongs here. According to Bruce Metzger and the committee behind the critical Greek text, the more likely reading is ὃ, to which they give a {B} rating, meaning “the text is almost certain.”¹⁸ Here is their explanation for their decision:

It is difficult to decide whether copyists altered ὅς to ὃ in order to make it agree with the gender of πνεῦμα, or whether ὃ became ὅς by attraction to the gender of the following ἀρραβὼν [down payment], according to a usual idiom. On the basis of what was taken to be superior external attestation, a majority of the Committee preferred the reading ὃ.¹⁹

This manuscript discrepancy is possibly another smoking gun, an incident of scribal mischief or sloppiness. Naturally, it is very difficult to decide which the case is. Sadly, even recent translations that take into account Metzger’s work continue to translate the ὃ as “who” in defiance to what Scripture actually says. I was surprised to discover that the NET Bible, with its 60,000 translators’ notes, fails to alert the reader to the existence of the manuscript difference and audaciously translates the neuter pronoun as masculine. Ironically, Wallace, who was intimately involved with the NET, completely agrees with Metzger’s assessment on this point. What is more, even if the text had said ὅς, this still would not be a slam dunk for the spirit’s personality. This is because of the grammatical phenomenon known as attraction. Wallace writes, “The attraction-to-predicate idiom is thus common enough that, even if the verse were textually stable, Eph 1:14 should still be removed from the proof-text bin for the Spirit’s personality.”²⁰ So, either way, this verse does not bear on the question we are investigating. Now we turn to analyze our last proof text, 1 John 5.7-8.

1 John 5.7-8 [NA27]	1 John 5.7-8 [Literal]	1 John 5.7-8 [NASB]
<p>ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες, τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἷμα, καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν.</p>	<p>because there are three who testify, the spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are in agreement</p>	<p>For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.</p>

¹⁸ Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2002), p. 14.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 533.

²⁰ Wallace, 117.

Here we have an unambiguous masculine participle employed in reference to the spirit. Interestingly, all three nouns in the collection (the spirit, water, and blood) are neuter, and therefore one might expect to see a neuter form—τὰ μαρτυροῦντα (which testify). Ironically, the NASB here gets cold feet and avoids tweaking the translation to lean the reader towards a personalized spirit. This is probably because it would prove too much, for if they woodenly translated the phrase as I did (“those who testify”) it would leave the impression that not only is the spirit but also are the water and the blood conscious beings! Now that we have completed our survey of grammatical proof texts, I would like to return to the big questions of what exactly the holy spirit is.

Is the Spirit a Thing, a Person, or Neither?

Up until now we have focused a lot more on what the spirit is not rather than what it, in fact, is. This is because the focus for these papers has been on the issue of translation bias not on building a biblical pneumatology.²¹ Before attempting a synthesis, I want to first present the evidence for four distinct ways that Scripture talks about the holy spirit. The first of these is when spirit is used interchangeable with God as if the spirit (or Spirit) just is God.

The Spirit as Interchangeable with God

Psalm 51.11	your presence = your holy spirit
Psalm 139.7	your spirit = God's presence
Psalm 143.10	teach me = let your good spirit lead me
Isaiah 30.1	mine = of my spirit
Isaiah 40.13	spirit of Yahweh = him
Isaiah 63.10	his holy spirit = himself
Mt 12.28; Lk 11.20	spirit of God = finger of God
Luke 1.35	the holy spirit = power of the most high
Acts 5.3-4	lie to the holy spirit = lied...to God
1 Cor 12.11; Heb 2.4	as the Spirit wills = according to God's will

Navas sums up this perspective with the following words:

Perhaps the matter is best put in terms like these: the Spirit is God’s active approach to us. Where the Spirit operates, there God himself is at work. The Spirit is not a ‘thing,’ over against God, but a way of expressing God in his relation to us...Where the Spirit is given a personal quality such as teaching, revealing, witnessing, interceding, creating, and so on, it is not as an

²¹ The interested reader may obtain my essay entitled, “What Is the Holy Spirit?” from christianmonotheism.com. That paper was originally presented at the 2006 One God Seminar in Atlanta, GA.

entity distinct from God, but as God himself doing these things and yet not compromising his transcendence.²²

This may help make sense of a whole other collection of texts wherein the spirit (or Spirit) appears to be autonomous. Here is the data:

The Spirit as Autonomous

Mark 1.12	Immediately the Spirit impelled Him <i>to go</i> out into the wilderness.
Acts 1.16	Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.
Romans 8.26-27	In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for <i>us</i> with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to <i>the will of God</i> .
1 Corinthians 2.11	For who among men knows the <i>thoughts</i> of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the <i>thoughts</i> of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.
1 Corinthians 12.11	But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.
Hebrews 3.7	Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

With the exception of Romans 8.26-27, in these texts the spirit really is the Spirit—God himself. Thus, when the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, it is really God who impels him. When the Spirit speaks to the prophets, it is really God who speaks. Just like our spirit knows what we are thinking and yet is not a distinct person, so God’s Spirit knows what he is thinking. We’ll return to Romans 8 shortly, but for now, we need to consider the many Scriptures where the spirit is spoken of as a thing or a gift.

The Spirit as a Thing/Gift

Exodus 31.1; 35.31; Deuteronomy 34.9; Micah 3.8; Luke 1.15, 41, 67; Acts 2.4; 4.8, 31; 5.3; 9.17; 13.9; 13.52; Eph 5.18	filled with the spirit (like a liquid)
Proverbs 1.23; Isaiah 29.10; 32.15; 44.3; Ezekiel 39.29; Joel 2.28-29; Zechariah 12.10; Acts 2.17-18, 33; 10.45	spirit poured upon someone (like a liquid)
Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33; Acts 1.5; 11.16; 1 Corinthians 12.13	baptize/immerse in spirit (like a liquid)

²² Navas, pp. 483-484.

Acts 2.38; 5.32; 8.19; 10.47; 15.8; Romans 5.5; 1 Corinthians 2.12; 2 Corinthians 5.5; Galatians 3.2; Ephesians 1.17; 1 Thessalonians 4.8; 1 John 3.24; 4.13	something given/received (a gift, pledge, down payment)
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These many texts are nearly always swept under the rug by those advocated a myopic personal view of the holy spirit in line with traditional orthodoxy. The Bible often speaks of the spirit as a liquid that God (or Christ) pours out resulting in someone being filled with or baptized with it. It is a gift which God gives to those who obey him and a pledge of our ultimate inheritance. Still, there is one more significant grouping of texts to consider before attempting any kind of synthesis. In this last table I present some of the Scriptures that show, as Anthony Buzzard put it, “The Spirit is Christ himself extending his influence to the believers.”²³

The Spirit Interchangeable with Christ

Mark 13.11	Luke 21.14-15
When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit .	So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; for I [Jesus] will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.
Romans 8.26	Romans 8.34
In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;	who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.
Romans 8.9	Romans 8.10
However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you . But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.	If Christ is in you , though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

We find the word παράκλητος only five times in the NT, four of which occur in the Gospel of John in reference to the spirit. However, the last, and most interesting, usage shows up in 1 John 2.1 where we read, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate [παράκλητος] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Furthermore, throughout the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus switches between speaking of his own coming and the spirit’s coming without clarifying much of a difference. Here are some examples:

²³ Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham: International Scholars Publications, 1998), p. 233.

The Advocate Will Come

He will give you another helper, that he may be with you forever	14.16
the helper, the holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you	14.26
when the helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father...	15.26
if I do not go away the helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you	16.7
when he, the spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth	16.13

Jesus Will Come

I will come again and receive you to myself	14.3
I will come to you	14.18
you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you	14.17
he who loves me...I will love him and will disclose myself to him	14.21
if anyone loves me, he will keep my word...and we will come to him and make our abode with him	14.23
I go away, and I will come to you	14.28
'a little while, and you will see me;' and, 'because I go to the Father'	16.17

What is interesting about this coming of Christ is that it has nothing to do with the ultimate return when the resurrection occurs and the kingdom arrives. This is a coming that will happen in a little while. Note how freely Jesus switches between the spirit's coming and his own coming in this text:

John 16.13-19

"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me."

Some of His disciples then said to one another, "What is this thing He is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go to the Father '?" So they were saying, "What is this that He says, 'A little while '? We do not know what He is talking about."

Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'?"

In this last grouping the spirit appears to be just another way of referring to Christ's on going work in his heavenly ministry—a role he was preparing his disciples to understand in his last meeting with them before his death.

So, pulling together the various threads of the Biblical data regarding the spirit, we have the following picture. The spirit (or Spirit) is sometimes used interchangeably with God, sometimes employed to refer to Christ, and as such appears autonomous. However, other times the spirit sounds much more like a thing or a force or a gift. I do not claim to have some brand new category of thought that would adequately hold together these disparate notions, but I can say it is not at all helpful to box ourselves into one, and only one, category of thinking about the spirit. We should allow it to be what it is. The Anchor Bible Dictionary offers the following polysemous definition:

The Spirit appears in some texts as the autonomous agent of prophecy (Acts 1:16; Heb 3:7); the vehicle of sanctification (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16-25), and intercession (Rom 8:27); the sign of God's acceptance (Acts 15:8; Gal 3:2); and a guarantee of future salvation (Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 5:5). It is also, however, clearly designated as the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11-12; Rom 8:9-17), the Spirit sent by God that represents in some sense God's active and indwelling presence.²⁴

Likewise Navas, offers the following explanation:

Although it does not seem necessary (scripturally speaking) to view the Spirit as a "person" per se, it also does not seem necessary to think of the Spirit as merely an "impersonal force," for it is undoubtedly the Spirit of a *personal* being; the outwardly extending through invisible expression and influence of the inward, personal reality and heart of God.²⁵

So, which is it, a person or a thing? Is it both or neither? Perhaps the whole purpose of a concept like "spirit" is to defy the pinning down of a single definition. I agree with the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* when they write, "The New Testament treatment of the Spirit is difficult, ambiguous, and sometimes even oblique to the interests of later trinitarianism."²⁶ Defining the spirit as another distinct personality within the Godhead not only fails to account for all of the data, but it also exerts tremendous pressure on translation committees to shoehorn the original text into a Trinitarian mold, even when doing so requires them to violate their own principles of translation and violate the very Scripture they revere so much.

Conclusion

Our foray into pneumatological translation bias began with looking at the many texts where translators rendered neuter relative pronouns as masculine in order to make the Bible appear to personalize the holy spirit. We saw that in every single case, the text grammatically supported a non-personality position. Next we turned to investigate the five texts that allegedly employ personal pronouns to refer to the spirit. Upon closer examination, every one of these Scriptures failed to demonstrate the personality of the spirit on grammatical grounds. Then we turned our attention to the more interesting theological question of interpreting the many texts, especially in the Upper Room Discourse, that attribute personal actions and qualities to the spirit or advocate. I put forward two possible

²⁴ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1055.

²⁵ Navas, 499.

²⁶ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, p. 916.

explanations (personification or personhood) before collecting together several other groupings of Scripture that bear on this question. We saw that sometimes the spirit (or Spirit) is used to refer to God and/or Christ and as such is properly given personal qualities. This is not to say that the Spirit is a distinct person from the Father and Son, but that it is the distinct person of the Father or the Son. In other instances we observed that the Scriptures speak of the spirit as a thing, often portrayed metaphorically as a liquid. I conclude that the spirit is hard to define and it steadfastly defies categorization.

In this instance the unitarian may feel like Socrates whereas the Trinitarian, the wise men of Athens. The old guard is confident in their superior wisdom, yet upon examination are found wanting. Socrates, who knows he is not the wisest man in Athens, comes to realize that precisely because he is least deceived, he is actually the wisest. We may not be able to offer a fully organized and neatly defined view of the spirit, but at least we know that we do not know what the spirit exactly is. Even so, the advantage of being truth seekers is that we can change our beliefs based on the evidence and follow the truth wherever it leads. Sadly, most groups are so encumbered by fixed creeds, confessions, and statements of belief that they cannot change, even if they wanted to. I am not suggesting that we jettison any kind of statement of faith or evaporate away into some post-modernist fog, but I am arguing that we must retain a modicum of doctrinal humility. Whatever ends up being true at the end of the day is what we should want to believe, even when it conflicts with our own long held traditions.

We must strive to always keep the correct order when pursuing biblical truth: the text is first, then translation, interpretation, and, last of all, doctrine. If we begin with our doctrinal commitments, we run the risk of reading our beliefs into the Bible, tampering with the translation to suit our fancy, or worst of all, changing the text of Scripture itself (see 1 John 5.7-8 in the KJV). Last of all, we must be content sometimes to say we are not sure how to best understand something or someone.