

Who Is the Holy Spirit?



Session 1



Genesis 1:1-2






Session Objective

This session explores questions concerning the identity of the Holy Spirit: Who is the Holy Spirit? What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God? Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God? There are hints to the answers of such questions in the Bible, but there are also inconsistencies and gaps. Even though mysteries remain about the Holy Spirit, the Bible still gives us insights about who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit does. This session will help participants begin to develop a better understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Faith Statement

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.
—*Nicene Creed* (1.3)

Session Overview

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For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Read Genesis 1:1–2 and then try to picture in your mind the events described. Is it even possible to do so? If you're having difficulty wrapping your mind around God's first act of creation (and who wouldn't?), try breaking it down into stages:

- What does the *beginning* look like?
- What is a *formless void*? (A black hole?) Is anything there?
- Verse 2 mentions waters: Were these waters present in the beginning, or have we already moved past the beginning?

Now let go of the picture in your mind and focus your other senses: How does the *wind from God* feel on your face? Is there more to it than just wind? How is a *wind from God* different from just plain wind? Take a few moments to sit quietly with these sensory reflections and then let your mind form the words of a prayer—for the participants in your group and for the movement of the Spirit through your leadership and their learning.



Understanding the Scripture

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann contends that the first two verses of the Bible, Genesis 1:1–2, “contain the premise of all of biblical faith”¹ in their assertion that God is the Creator of all that is. In those first verses, however, unsolvable interpretive difficulties arise, and these difficulties are illustrated by the differences between various translations. Compare, for instance, verse 1 in the NRSV (“In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth, . . .”) with verse 1 in TNIV (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”) The NRSV’s translation suggests that God created the heavens and the earth by bringing order to a chaotic “soup” that already existed; TNIV, on the other hand, suggests that God first created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, while God’s second step in creation was to do something about that “formless and empty” earth.

Although this is a fascinating dilemma, our main concern in this session is that mysterious “wind from God”—or “Spirit of God” (TNIV)—that blows across the waters in verse 2. “Wind” and “Spirit” are both valid translations of the Hebrew word *ruah*, making a connection that is also present in (the originally Greek) Acts 2—the account of the birth of the church at Pentecost—when “the rush of a violent wind . . . filled the entire house” and those present “were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:2, 4). In everyday usage and in popular culture, we might tend to think of spirits more as personalities—for example, the ghosts of

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 29.

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*—than as something seemingly impersonal like wind. The biblical writers, however, were quite comfortable with using wind as one representation (among many!) of God's Spirit, and so in Genesis 1:2 we have the Bible's first mention of the Holy Spirit.

Still, the text leaves many unanswered questions: Is this wind/Spirit truly God or better thought of as an exhalation (breath) of God? Was this wind/Spirit present at the very beginning—*before* creation—or was this wind/Spirit a creation of God *after* the very beginning? And if this wind/Spirit is the same Holy Spirit whom we meet throughout the Bible and in the life of the church, then why, for instance, does Jesus speak of "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father *will send* in my name" in John 14:26? (See Session 2.) Some questions indeed remain unanswered, but there is value in such unanswered questions: They remind us of the unsearchable mystery at the heart of God and call us to awe, humility, and worship of our sovereign God.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The *Nicene Creed* is the first and oldest document in the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*, arising from two councils, or meetings, of bishops, in A.D. 325 and in A.D. 381. Though part of the PC(USA) Constitution, the *Nicene Creed* is in fact an ecumenical Christian confession, "the hallmark of orthodoxy" for more than fifteen centuries.²

The origin of the *Nicene Creed* is a harrowing account filled with controversy and intrigue, and the bishops fought over every word. It's a story that's much too long and complicated to cover here, but suffice it to say that the purpose of the two councils—and the creed itself—was to establish the church's true doctrine and to refute heresy: that is, to delineate what was right and what was wrong. In the portion of the creed used here, we learn a variety of things about the Holy Spirit, but they're not entirely compatible with one another. For instance, as "Lord" and "giver of life," the Spirit sounds a lot like God. And yet, we're also told that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son," as if the Spirit is somehow lower in rank and not quite God. Here once again we confront the reality that God is a mystery best approached with humble reverence!

2. *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), p. 1.



Teaching Today's Question

Who is the Holy Spirit? What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God? Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God? These are fundamental questions that go to the heart of the existence of the Holy Spirit and they probe truths that are humanly unknowable—but when asked by youth, these questions demand answers!

The Scripture passage and Faith Statement chosen for this session are like a train entering a tunnel: They carry travelers in the general direction of answers, but they enter the realm of mystery before they arrive at the destination. Thus, the learning activities in this session aim to help youth draw out those concrete answers that can be extracted from the Scripture and Faith Statement while also inviting them to rest as comfortably as possible in the loving mystery at the heart of God.

Some young people will resist acknowledging the unknowable and that's all right because Christian growth is a long (indeed, hopefully lifelong!) process. In your role as facilitator, example, and mentor, you have the opportunity to show that even though the train enters the tunnel's darkness, it remains guided by the rails.



Enter

A Wind from God

- Magazines, scissors, newsprint and marker, tape

Before the participants arrive, place the magazines in the middle of the meeting space. Write *Holy Spirit* in the middle of a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent location.

As participants arrive, give them each a pair of scissors. Invite each person to find and cut out an image or word from the provided magazines that represents what the Holy Spirit might look like. After a few minutes, gather the participants in a circle and give each person an opportunity to share his or her image or word with the rest of the group. After each person shares, have him or her tape the image or picture to the posted sheet of newsprint.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, marker, candle, matches, recording of contemplative music, music player

Before participants arrive, write *Who is the Holy Spirit?* on a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent location. Place the candle in the center of the meeting space.

Gather the participants in a circle around the candle and light the candle to focus the group's attention. Call the participants' attention to the session question, which is written on the newsprint, and let them know that it was initially asked by a Presbyterian teenager. Invite the group members to contemplate the question while you play the contemplative music. After a couple of minutes, invite the participants to share their reflections while discussing the session question and the following questions:



- Why might someone ask this question?
- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God?
- Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God?

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Basket of Questions

Copy of “Engage Questions” (Web Resource 1a), scissors, small basket

Before the participants arrive, cut out the questions found on “Engage Questions” (Web Resource 1a) and place them in the basket.

Gather the participants comfortably in a circle and have each person take a slip of paper from the basket. Have each person read the question on his or her slip of paper to the group before sharing his or her answer with the group. Continue passing the basket around the group as time allows, replacing the questions in the basket as necessary. To make things more interesting, consider having the participant who draws a question choose someone else in the group to answer the question. Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Small Group Studies

Bibles (several translations, if available), copy of “Session 1 Explorations” (Web Resource 1b) for each participant, pens, newsprint and markers, *optional*: dictionary or Bible dictionary

Divide the participants into two groups, assigning one group to be Group 1 and the other group to be Group 2. Give each participant a copy of “Session 1 Explorations” (Web Resource 1b) and a pen and ask the groups to follow their group’s instructions on the page. Make sure everyone in Group 1 has a Bible. If possible, make a dictionary or Bible dictionary available to the members of Group 2. As the groups are working, post three sheets of newsprint with one of the following questions on each sheet:

- Who is the Holy Spirit?
- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God?
- Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God?

When both groups have completed their discussions, give each group an opportunity to report its findings to the other group. Record each group’s responses to the questions posted on the newsprint. After both groups have shared, ask the participants to share their own remaining, unanswered questions about the Holy Spirit. Record these questions on a separate sheet of newsprint and leave this sheet posted in the room as a reminder for the remaining sessions of this mini-course.

Opening Prayer

Creating God, we gather here as your creations. Thank you for bringing us together and thank you for the movement of your Spirit among us, like the wind that swept across the waters at the beginning of time. Guide us during our time together to approach the mystery of who you are with humble hearts and open minds. Continue to form us into the people you’ve created us to be, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Option B: Exploring the Scripture and Faith Statement

- Bibles (several translations, if available), copy of the *Book of Confessions* or "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1c) for each participant, newsprint and markers, *optional*: dictionary or Bible dictionary

Post three sheets of newsprint with one of the following questions on each sheet:

- Who is the Holy Spirit?
- What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God?
- Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God?

Make sure each participant has a Bible and ask everyone to look up Genesis 1:1–2. Invite the participants to read the verses silently and then ask a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the group. Explore the following questions together:



- What do you picture in your mind when you read these words?
- What does "a formless void" look like?
- What impression does the phrase "wind from God" make on you? Can you see it, hear it, and/or feel it? Describe.
- At this point in the events of creation, who and what exists? Who and what does not yet exist?
- At what point in time or history do the events described in these verses take place?
- If multiple Bible translations are available, compare their phrases for the NRSV's "wind from God." What wording do you prefer? Why?

Give each person a copy of the *Book of Confessions* or a copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1c). Ask a volunteer to read the Faith Statement for this session, section 1.3 of the *Nicene Creed*, out loud to the group. Explore the following together:



- The Faith Statement expresses four different ideas concerning the Holy Spirit: (1) what the Spirit *does*, (2) where the Spirit came from, (3) how we should approach the Spirit, and (4) what the Spirit *has done*. What words or phrases in the Faith Statement connect with each of these ideas?
- What, in your view, does the Faith Statement mean when it calls the Holy Spirit "the Lord, the giver of life"? What possible different meanings can the phrase "giver of life" have?
- The claim that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son" has a long and controversial history. It means, basically, that the Spirit comes from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Does this suggest to you that the Holy Spirit somehow "ranks" lower than God the Father and Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

- On the other hand, the Faith Statement also says that the Spirit is to be “worshiped and glorified” along with God the Father and Jesus Christ. In your view, does this contradict the previous statement? Why or why not?
- The last line of the Faith Statement says that the Spirit “has spoken through the prophets.” Who are these prophets? Can or does the Spirit still speak through prophets? Can you think of any examples of prophets who are alive today? (It may be helpful to look up *prophet* in a dictionary or Bible dictionary.)


Call the participants’ attention to the questions written on the newsprint. Ask: Based on our discussions about the Scripture passage and Faith Statement, how would you respond to these questions? Record the responses to each of the posted questions. Then invite the participants to share their own remaining, unanswered questions about the Holy Spirit. Record these on a separate sheet of newsprint and leave this sheet posted in the room as a reminder for the remaining sessions of this mini-course.

Option C: The *Filioque* (The What?)

Bibles, copy of “*Filioque*” (Web Resource 1d) for each participant

This activity explores the questions “What is the difference between the Holy Spirit and God?” and “Who came first, the Holy Spirit or God?” It examines a controversial part of the *Nicene Creed* known as the *filioque* (fee-lee-OH-kway) in light of the Scripture passage and gives the participants the opportunity not only to delve into questions about the origin of the Holy Spirit but also to learn a bit about the colorful history of the *Nicene Creed* and the church.

Make sure each participant has a Bible and ask everyone to look up Genesis 1:1–2. Ask the participants to read the passage silently and then invite a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the group. Explore the following questions:

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- What do you picture in your mind when you read these words?
 - What does “a formless void” look like?
 - What kind of impression does the phrase “wind from God” make on you? Can you see it, hear it, and/or feel it? Describe.
 - At this point in the events of creation, who and what exists? Who and what does not yet exist?
 - At what point in time or history do the events described in these verses take place?

Divide the participants into small groups, with two or three participants in each group. Give each person a copy of “*Filioque*” (Web Resource 1d) and invite each group to read the information on the page and to respond to the questions at the bottom of the page. After a few minutes, give individuals or groups the opportunity to share their findings and conclusions.



Express

Option A: Film Clip—*The New World*

Bible, *The New World* (2005, PG-13) and movie-viewing equipment

Preview the following clip from *The New World*: 3:22–7:19.

Ask a participant to read aloud Genesis 1:1–2 and Genesis 2:4b–9. Ask: According to these verses from Genesis, what existed before God set to work creating? What do you think that would have looked like? Introduce the film clip by telling the participants that the film, *The New World*, is a fictionalized account of the establishment of the Jamestown settlement in 1607. The film begins with a scene of the British settlers' ships making their way up the James River. As the first Europeans to see this "new world," they see the landscape as a sort of Eden, and the film evokes the primordial nature of the setting. Watch the clip together and use the following questions to reflect on the Scripture readings in light of the film:



- If you were on one of those ships sailing up the James River, what would be going through your mind as you gazed at the landscape?
- The "new world" in 1607 was not the Garden of Eden—but what are the similarities between Eden, as described in Genesis, and the "new world"? What are the differences?
- The Holy Spirit is described as "a wind from God" in Genesis 1:2. What part does wind play in the film clip? How is this wind like or unlike the Spirit?
- The Native Americans have a view of their homeland that is entirely different from that of the English settlers. How do the Native Americans fit, if at all, into the metaphor of "new world" as Eden?
- As people living in the twenty-first century, we know how the story depicted in the film turns out. What does this "new world" Eden look like now? How does the Spirit move in creation now?

Option B: *Lectio Divina*

Copy of the *Presbyterian Hymnal* for each participant, "*Lectio Divina Guidelines*" (Web Resource 1e), candle or oil lamp, matches, music player, recording of contemplative music

Have the group sit comfortably in a circle and place the candle or lamp in the middle of the circle. Play suitable contemplative music at low volume. While the music plays, use the information found on "*Lectio Divina Guidelines*" (Web Resource 1e) to lead the group in a *lectio divina* reading of the chorus and first verse of the hymn "Spirit" (no. 319 in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*).

Option C: Riding on the Wind

- "Kite Instructions" (Web Resource 1f), brightly colored 8½" x 11" paper (20 lb. bond), 8" shish kebab sticks, fluorescent surveyor's plastic flagging tape available at hardware stores or plastic trash bags cut in 1-inch-wide spirals, roll of ½" masking tape, string (6 to 10 feet for each participant), 1" x 3" pieces of cardboard, scissors, hole punch, markers

Tell the participants that they will be making kites inspired by the "wind from God" moving across the waters in Genesis 1:1–2. Using the instructions found on "Kite Instructions" (Web Resource 1f), have each participant make a kite. After the kites are completed, encourage the participants to use markers to decorate their kites with images or words that describe the Holy Spirit. As a group, decide what the group will do with the kites. Suggestions include taking them home, using them to decorate the meeting space or the sanctuary, giving them to children in the church or the neighborhood, and so on.



Exit

A Life-Giving Wind

- Bibles, copy of "Spirit Poured Out" (Web Resource 1g) for each participant, candle or oil lamp, matches

Gather the group in a circle and place the candle or oil lamp in the middle of the circle. Give each participant a copy of "Spirit Poured Out" (Web Resource 1g) and light the candle or oil lamp. Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 1:1–2 out loud. Then ask another volunteer to read aloud Acts 2:1–4. After the Scripture readings, lead the group in the closing litany printed on "Spirit Poured Out" (Web Resource 1g).



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after each session. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Musical Connections

The hymn "Spirit," no. 319 in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*, has vivid imagery of the Holy Spirit's work in creation, history, and the church. Consider using "Spirit" in ways that share your group's creativity and particular talents with your congregation. Possibilities include:

- a dance or movement presentation in worship as the hymn is sung
- a dramatic reading
- a video that uses voices, music, color, and images to illustrate the language of the hymn

Share these possibilities with the group and see what emerges!

The Air We Breathe

Plan an activity that evokes the movement of the Holy Spirit in creation: an activity that promotes stewardship of the environment. In particular, consider an activity that, in light of Genesis 1:2, focuses on wind and/or air. This could be a study of the possibilities of wind power in your area or a presentation to the congregation on climate change or air pollution and how the church can make a difference.

More about the Nicene Creed

How the *Nicene Creed* came to be is a fascinating, albeit messy, story. If you or the youth in your church are interested in learning more, many good books delve into this history, including:

- Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985)
- John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine, from the Bible to the Present* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982)
- *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999).

Searches of the PC(USA) Web site (pcusa.org) and the Internet in general also turn up a wide variety of articles about the *Nicene Creed*.