

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Experiencing God in a Fallen World

Jesus promised His disciples that once He had "gone away," He would send a "Helper" to them. The Helper, Jesus says, is the Holy Spirit. But what is the Holy Spirit, and how can you receive this priceless gift of God?

IN THE TESTAMENT TIMES, the Spirit of God came upon individuals for the purpose of accomplishing specific tasks. These individuals were the kings, judges, and prophets whose divinely assigned jobs could not be accomplished by mere human strength or natural abilities. Often, the Spirit was given for only a brief period, usually until the task at hand was accomplished or until the individual given the task abandoned his mission.

However, the coming of Jesus Christ marked the beginning of a new age wherein the Holy Spirit was no longer given primarily to leaders and prophets but to all who turned to God in heart-rendering repentance and put their trust in Christ. This new age of the Spirit was foreseen by the prophets, began in the life and ministry of Jesus, and demonstrated through the followers of Christ.

Long before the coming of Christ, the prophet Joel wrote of a time when God would "pour out" His Spirit "on all flesh" (Joel 2:28-32). The Spirit would not be given only to the elders, nor would it be given only to males. It would be given to old and young alike, as well as to both males and females. It would even be given to slaves, irrespective of gender.

In fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, the Holy Spirit came from heaven with a sound "as of a rushing mighty wind" on the first Pentecost following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:1-2, 16-21). Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle Peter preached powerfully and convincingly that "God had made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (verse 36).

To those who were convicted of the truth of his message, he inspired specific commands: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (verse 38). That marvelous gift was received by

"about three thousand souls" that day (verse 41) and by many more in the days that followed (verse 47).

The age of the Spirit did not end with the apostles. The Holy Spirit is still available today and can be received by anyone who understands and fully believes the true gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, puts his wholehearted trust in God's promises, turns to Him in genuine repentance, and accepts and trusts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

But what is the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit an impersonal "active force," as some would have us believe? Or is the Spirit a separate identity, one that is personally distinct from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?

Or is it possible that neither concept accords with biblical descriptions of God's Spirit?

Power and Presence of God

In Scripture, God is described as entering outside the natural world. He is transcendent, meaning that He is not a part of the physical universe, but is completely independent of it. He is not affected by time and is not restricted by space. He is wholly outside the natural realm. However, as Creator of all that is, He is completely capable of intervening into and interacting with His creation, thus making His power and presence known to His human creatures. When the ancients witnessed the power and presence of God, they used descriptions such as "Spirit of the Lord" and "Holy Spirit."

"The Old Testament frequently speaks of the 'Spirit of God,' or of the 'Holy Ghost,'" writes C. S. Lewis in *Sursum Corda*. "By this is to be understood not a Divine Person, but 'a power proceeding from God, which gives life, bestows strength, illuminates and impels towards the

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To those who were convicted of the truth of his message, the inspired apostle commanded, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (verse 38). That marvelous gift was received by “about three thousand souls” that day (verse 41) and by many more in the days that followed (verse 47). The age of the Spirit did not end with the apostles. The Holy Spirit is still available today and can be received by anyone who understands and fully believes the true gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, puts his wholehearted trust in God’s promises, turns to Him in genuine repentance, and accepts and trusts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But what is the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit

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presence of God, they used descriptions such as “Spirit of the Lord” and “Holy Spirit.”

“The Old Testament frequently speaks of the ‘Spirit of God,’ or of the ‘Holy Ghost,’” writes Catholic theologian Dr. Ludwig Ott. “By this is to be understood not a Divine Person, but ‘a power proceeding from God, which gives life, bestows strength, illuminates and impels towards the good’ (P. Heinisch)” (*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 1960, p. 54).*

Under the subheading “God’s Spirit Not Presented as a Person,” the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “The OT clearly does not envisage God’s spirit as a person, neither in the strict philosophical sense, nor in the Semitic sense. God’s spirit is simply God’s power. If it is sometimes represented as a being distinct from God, it is because the breath of Yahweh acts exteriorly.... Very rarely do the OT writers attribute to God’s spirit emotions or intellectual

activity.... When such expressions are used, they are mere figures of speech that are explained by the fact that *ruach* ["spirit"] was regarded also as the seat of intellectual acts and feelings.... Neither is there found in the OT or in rabbinical literature the notion that God's spirit is an intermediary being between God and the world. This activity is proper to the angels, although to them is ascribed some of the activity that elsewhere is ascribed to the spirit of God" (Vol. XIII, McGraw Hill, 1967, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., p. 564). The Holy Spirit, then, is the power and presence of God. It is *God in action* in the natural world. As James D.G. Dunn points out, in the Old Testament literature the Spirit "denotes *effective divine power*" and "*is in no sense distinct from God, but is simply the power of God, God himself acting powerfully in nature and upon men*" (*Christology in the Making*, 1980, 1989, p. 133). The Old

Testament understanding of the Spirit of God “is not merely of a power *from* God, but of the power *of* God, of God himself putting forth efficacious energy” (Dunn, p. 133).

In “the Judaism out of which Christianity sprang,” writes Max Turner, “to speak of *the* Spirit of God was to speak of Yahweh himself in action—in person, as it were, as *opposed* to his actions through mediating beings from within the order of creation. The Spirit is even more intimately associated with Yahweh’s own being and with the extension of his life, vitality and activity, than Wisdom or Word. The latter two may be personified (and be portrayed as acting distinctly from Yahweh), but the Spirit is more usually synecdoche for God....

[E]ssentially, the Spirit is the selfmanifesting, transforming and empowering presence of God himself. The Spirit is so intimately God himself that it can be described as the very

‘breath of his mouth’ (Job 33.4; 34.14; Ps 33.6; Wisd 11.20, etc.)” (“Trinitarian’ Pneumatology in the New Testament?— Towards an Explanation of the Worship of Jesus,” *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Fall 2002, Spring 2003, p. 169). When we turn our attention to the New Testament, we find a continuation of this same concept of the Spirit as the power and presence of God, but with something new added to it.

Spirit of Christ

Given his Jewish heritage and knowledge of the Old Testament, it is not surprising to find Paul speaking of the Spirit of God as the power of Yahweh, or as God Himself acting powerfully in the world and upon the lives of people.

Indeed, this understanding is reflected throughout the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles; but due to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, the expression “Spirit of God” took on an

expanded definition for the early Jewish disciples of Christ.

The “Spirit of God” is now synonymous with the “Spirit of Christ.” Paul writes, “But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the *Spirit of God* dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the *Spirit of Christ*, he is not His. And if *Christ is in you*, the body is dead because of sin but the *Spirit* is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:9–10).

The “Spirit” is both the “Spirit of God” and the “Spirit of Christ,” or “Christ in you.” Because Paul realizes that the exalted Christ shares in the divinity of Yahweh, he can speak of “the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:19) and “the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead” (Romans 8:11), while affirming that “by one Spirit we were baptized into one body...and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

No longer is the Spirit viewed only as the

power of God. It is now understood as the power of both God and Jesus. It is God and Christ acting powerfully upon the lives of believers. As Gerald F. Hawthorne says, “It is clear from the literature that the Holy Spirit is God/Christ powerfully, mysteriously, sometimes quietly and unobtrusively at work in and through the church” (*Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, 1997, p. 496).

Professor C.F.D. Moule suggests that “Spirit of God” may simply mean “God at work” or “God immanent,” and that “Spirit of Christ” may mean no more than “God at work in a way made possible by Christ” (“The New Testament and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *The Expository Times*, Oct. 1, 1976). Moule concludes that New Testament theology is essentially binitarian rather than trinitarian.

Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as a

“Helper” who teaches, convicts, guides, and reveals (John 14:15–17, 26; 15:26; 15:7–14). The Helper is presented as if distinct from God, but this should be understood as a figurative way of describing the presence and power of God the Father and the exalted Christ. Jesus Himself says, “These things I have spoken to you in *figurative language*” (John 16:25).

The apparent intention in this section of John’s Gospel, says Professor Moule, is “to designate the experience of the Spirit as the mode of Christ’s continued presence with his people. It is in this sense that John 14.18, where Jesus says ‘I am coming to you’, should be read” (*The Holy Spirit*, 1978, 2000, p. 37).

John’s account of Jesus’ own words suggests strongly that the Helper—the Holy Spirit—is the spiritual presence, power, and indwelling of both the Father and the Son. Jesus says, “If anyone loves

Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23). But perhaps because of the disciples’ limited understanding of the salvific work of the Messiah, Jesus uses figurative language to describe His and the Father’s future relationship with them.

God in Action

It is clear, then, that the Holy Spirit is neither a separate Person of the Godhead nor an impersonal force that God uses from time to time to accomplish His will. The Holy Spirit is God; it is both God the Father and Christ the exalted Son acting powerfully in the cosmos and upon the lives of human beings.

Those who believe that the Holy Spirit is merely an impersonal force tend to overlook the scriptures that speak of the Spirit as having *personal* attributes. The

Holy Spirit is God/Christ powerfully acting in the lives of human beings, so it is a mistake to say that the Spirit is impersonal.

Those who accept the belief that the Holy Spirit is a third and separate personal identity tend to neglect the many “binitarian” texts that speak of God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ but make no mention of the Holy Spirit.

Again and again the apostle Paul salutes the brethren with wishes for grace and peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 2:2; etc.). If the apostle thought of the Spirit as a third and separate personal identity—or one of three “consciousnesses”—within the Godhead, one must wonder why he repeatedly failed to mention Him in his salutations.

The Holy Spirit is God in action. It is the presence and power of God the Father and Christ the Son in the world of

humankind. And anyone who turns to God in genuine repentance and truly accepts Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior can experience the power and inspiration of that divine presence in his or her life.

If you are willing to surrender your life to God—if it is your heart's desire to become a pliable lump of clay in the hands of the Master Potter—then you, too, can receive the Holy Spirit just as those 3,000 repentant believers did over 1,900 years ago.

The words Peter spoke to the assembled crowd then are no less valid today:

“Repent,” the inspired apostle said, “and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; *and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38).

*It is not our intention to imply that the authors cited herein reject the doctrine of the Trinity. Most or all of them affirm Trinitarian theology in some form.

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