

The Holy Spirit

MANY individuals and religious groups claim that they are able to speak in 'tongues', and perform miracles, just as the Bible tells us the apostles and early Christians did. They refer to Bible verses such as 1 Corinthians 12:3: *"No one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit,"* and conclude that unless we possess 'gifts of the Holy Spirit' we are not 'real' Christians or are just 'beginners'.

This is an important subject, and is a matter of authority – does the Holy Spirit speak directly to us, does the Holy Spirit influence the church, or is the Bible the principal authority in the Christian's life?

We believe that most claims to possess Holy Spirit gifts are made by sincere people – but they are mistaken. We believe this because when we read the Bible, we see that Christians did once possess the Holy Spirit gifts, but that God withdrew these powers within a few years.

What is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is God's Spirit – His energy or His power. Psalm 104:4 says *"He makes His angels spirits"*, so the angels are embodiments of that Spirit. But usually His power is invisible, although the effects can be dramatic.

At the start of the creation of the world *"the earth was without form, and void... And the*



Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" which originally covered the planet (Genesis 1:2). By the end of the sixth day (verse 31) the earth was transformed.

He has made the earth by His power (Jeremiah 10:12).

By His Spirit He adorned the heavens (Job 26:13).

Other actions of the Holy Spirit include the birth of Jesus, for God's Son was conceived without the aid of a human father. Mary was told:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35).

On occasions God caused men and women to be filled with His Spirit to carry out for Him tasks which required superhuman abilities.

The Holy Spirit at Work

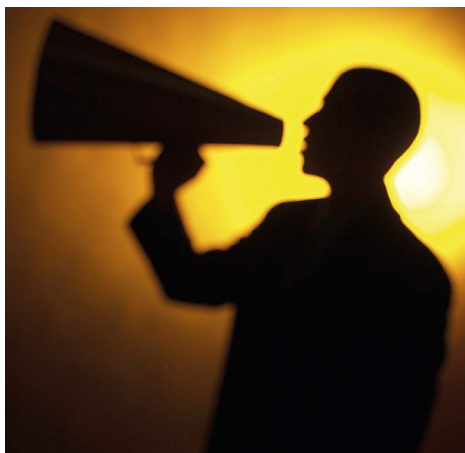
Sometimes it is thought that the Gospel begins in Matthew chapter 1 but this is not so. It is rooted in the Old Testament, and if we only read the New Testament, we know only half the story.

As we read God's record of His dealings with the people of Israel before Jesus was born, we see the history of a people who were chosen by God but who usually let Him down. This was despite the fact that they were led by rulers who had God's Spirit specially given to them and prophets who shared messages from God.

Moses and Joshua (Deuteronomy 34:9), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Saul (1 Samuel 11:6) and David (1 Samuel 16:13) are just some of the men who spoke and acted with God's authority and were given the Holy Spirit to guide their decisions as they ruled the nation.

Both the Old Testament (Nehemiah 9:30) and the New Testament (2 Peter 1:21) refer to God, through chosen prophets, warning and teaching His people by the process of 'inspiration'. He gave messages to the prophets that they should relay to their hearers.

People like Samson, Elijah and Elisha are recorded as having God's Spirit to perform miracles and acts of healing. What many regard as a New Testament phenomenon turns out to be not so 'new' after all. God at certain times and for specific purposes gave His Spirit to particular people well before the time of Christ.



The Old Testament prophet Isaiah (61:1) said "*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me*"; and after Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism he taught that these words applied to himself (see Luke 4:17–21).

What was different about Jesus was that, as the apostle John says, "*God does not give the Spirit by measure*" (John 3:34).

In other words, Jesus spoke and acted on God's behalf as no one has ever done before, because he is God's Son. His words carried authority and his miracles were evidence that what he said was true (John 5:36). This was always the purpose of miracles, that they should support, not replace, the preaching of the Gospel, because it is God's will that people should be persuaded to believe His message. But the Jewish leaders did not want to be persuaded and they put Jesus to death.

He who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father (John 14:12).

In these words Jesus described the legacy and the work that he was giving his followers – that they should carry on where he left off when he went to heaven, and preach the Gospel to all who would hear.

The Comforter

When Jesus spoke these words, the apostles had already been preaching and had received the Holy Spirit to help them in that work (Matthew 10). Now, as he prepared them for his heart-rending departure, he promised them “another Helper” (John 14:16) that is, the Holy Spirit.

In John chapters 14–16, the ‘Helper’ is described as ‘the Spirit of Truth’, showing that this was its purpose. The ways in which Jesus’ disciples would be ‘helped’ may be summarised as follows:

- ◆ Chapter 14:26 and 16:13 – to teach, remind, guide them “into all truth”, so they had a proper knowledge and understanding of the things of God.
- ◆ Chapter 16:8–11 – to give them words (‘inspire’ them) to preach the Gospel.
- ◆ Chapter 15:26 – to “testify” (provide evidence) about Jesus by miraculous acts – see for example Acts 14:3.

After Jesus had ascended to heaven the apostles were “filled with the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost (Acts 2:4). They were supernaturally aided to preach the Gospel in foreign languages to the people from different countries who had gathered for the feast.

For some listeners it had the desired effect and 3,000 were baptised. The apostle Peter said to them that they would “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you (i.e. these new Jewish converts) and to your children (i.e. the next generation of Jewish believers), and to all who are afar off (i.e. Gentiles who would come to believe and be baptised), as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). See also Ephesians 2:11–18.

With the Holy Spirit inspiring their preaching and providing evidence of the truth of their message about the Lord Jesus, assemblies of newly baptised believers grew and the gifts of the Spirit were needed for other reasons.



These early assemblies needed guidance in their administration and development; the Old Testament pattern of Spirit-guided ruling and prophesying was repeated in these communities. Paul’s letters were addressed to these developing communities.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

In 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 we have a list of the supernatural abilities in use in the

continuing task of preaching the Gospel, as well as the new one of strengthening the believers. Verse 28 extends our view of the different ministries and offices employed. We know also that there were elders, bishops and deacons, who had the Holy Spirit to help them perform their roles. Paul in his letter warns that no one should become proud because of the things he could do and say with the help of the Spirit.



In chapter 13, Paul says that a Christian's behaviour, in showing love, was more important to God than displaying the abilities given by the Holy Spirit (verses 1 and 2). Love, he says, is the enduring quality, a standard that is eternal – unlike the gifts of the Spirit, which, though dynamic and impressive, would fade away (verse 8). He describes this early stage of Christianity, despite its display of miracles and inspired messages, as childhood (verse 11), which passes as maturity is acquired. Why does he say this?

Remember the lesson from the Old Testament: that God gave His Spirit to particular people at particular times for particular purposes. 1 Corinthians 12:7 tells us that in those days possession of the Holy Spirit was very widespread; but 13:9 tells us it was given *"in part"*. Paul foresaw the coming of *"that which is perfect"* (13:10), which would mean that *"that which is in part"* (the distribution of various spirit gifts) would be no longer necessary.

In 2 Timothy 3:15–17 Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of the scriptures, the

written Word of God, and the many purposes that they achieve. Shortly afterwards the Bible as we know it, consisting of Old and New Testaments, was completed. It was the work of the Holy Spirit, *"given by inspiration of God"* (verse 16), the Holy Spirit in writing, if you like.

This is the form in which we can 'possess' the Holy Spirit today – the written Word of God which can be absorbed into our minds and direct our words, our behaviour, our lives.

As before, in its dynamic form, it is the source of all truth; it teaches us the Gospel and provides the evidence for its genuineness. It achieves all the purposes that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were designed to achieve; but it is available to everyone.

Let the written Word of God 'fill' us. Let it be absorbed into our minds. Let it direct our minds, our behaviour and our lives. For, as Psalm 19:11 says, in keeping God's Word there is great reward.

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