

What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit

The Charismatic Movement, which features speaking in tongues and the exercise of other so-called miraculous gifts, has produced renewed interest in the Holy Spirit, who is supposedly responsible for these gifts. Some churches which have not traditionally been thought of as charismatic have joined in sanctioning tongue-speaking and holding healing services.

With the spotlight on the Holy Spirit, what should Christians believe on the subject? *We believe in the Holy Spirit*, but what do we believe about Him? The Bible reveals both the nature and the work of the Holy Spirit.

THE NATURE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Who or what is the Holy Spirit, and how is the Holy Spirit related to God and to Jesus Christ?

A Person

One key fact about the Holy Spirit is that He is a

person, not a thing—a “he,” not an “it.” In the KJV, Romans 8:16 says, “The Spirit itself beareth witness. . . .” The translators used “itself” rather than “himself” to make the pronoun “itself” (a neuter pronoun) agree with its antecedent, “spirit” (a neuter noun, rather than a masculine or feminine noun). However, in Greek a noun referring to a person may be neuter. Other versions more accurately translate “the Spirit Himself.”¹

Not only does the Holy Spirit testify, or bear witness (see 1 John 5:6), but other passages also make it clear that the Spirit acts as a person. He speaks (Acts 13:2; 1 Timothy 4:1), He searches (1 Corinthians 2:10), and He teaches (Luke 12:12). He has a will and can choose (1 Corinthians 12:11). Further, He can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). Only a person could be spoken of in such terms.

One of the Godhead

The Godhead is composed of three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The three have often been referred to as the “Trinity.” The idea of the Trinity is that there is only one God, but that one God consists of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Bible does not use the word “Trinity” but teaches the idea. Perhaps “Godhead” (KJV) comes close to meaning what the word “Trinity” denotes. Acts 17:29 speaks of the “Divine Nature”:² “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think

¹Neither is the Holy Spirit a “ghost.” While “Holy Ghost” might have been a good translation when the KJV was translated (1611), today “ghost” has connotations which do not accurately describe the Holy Spirit. No modern translation uses “Holy Ghost.”

²The RSV has “Deity.”

that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.”

Why do Christians believe in the Godhead, or in the Trinity? Because the New Testament refers to the three in such a way as to require such an understanding. The following passages contain examples:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18, 19).

Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me (Romans 15:30).

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons (1 Corinthians 12:4–6).

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4–6).

After Jesus was baptized, “the heavens were opened, and [Jesus] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased’” (Matthew 3:16, 17). All three persons in the Godhead played a role in this event: (1) Jesus was baptized, (2) the Holy Spirit descended, and

(3) God spoke from heaven. The connection between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in these passages can only be explained by describing the three as the “Godhead,” or the “Trinity.”

How is it possible that God could be one and at the same time three-in-one? Many analogies have been used to illustrate the Godhead on an elementary level. For instance, a husband and his wife are one in some sense, yet they retain their individuality. Again, the analogy of an egg, which is one object composed of three parts—shell, white, and yolk—may help people begin to grasp how the three members of the Godhead are related. Also, teachers have tried to clarify the concept of the Trinity by using three matches, lighting each separately, and then putting the three together to show how three things can continue to be three but can also be united in one. However, every analogy is imperfect; none fully demonstrates how God can be three and yet be one. Perhaps the ultimate answer to the “how” of the Godhead is that humans cannot fully comprehend such a spiritual phenomenon. Nevertheless, since the Bible teaches it, Christians must believe it.³

Because the Holy Spirit is one member of the Godhead, He has the characteristics of Deity. Just as God is spirit, without a human body or physical characteristics, so is the Holy Spirit. Just as God is omnipresent, the Holy Spirit is omnipresent; that is, He is not confined to one place. Consequently, He can and does indwell all Christians at the same time.

³Some who profess the Christian faith deny the doctrine of the Trinity. Among them are the Unitarians. The biblical teaching on the subject leaves us with no alternative but to accept the doctrine that the one God consists of three persons.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

What does the Holy Spirit do? He had work to do in the apostolic age, and He has work that He continues to do.

In the Apostolic Age

Jesus promised the apostles that, when He had left the earth, He would send the Holy Spirit to comfort or help them (John 14:16, 17; 16:7–11) and to guide or teach them (John 14:26; 15:26, 27; 16:13–15). John the Baptist had said that Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8). During Jesus' ministry the Holy Spirit had not yet been sent upon the apostles (John 7:38, 39).

Shortly before Jesus ascended, He told the apostles when and where they would receive the promised Holy Spirit: “. . . behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:48, 49). We see in Acts that Jesus elaborated on that promise:

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4, 5).

“. . . you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Then, in Acts 2, we read,

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were

all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance (Acts 2:1–4).

By putting these passages together, we learn the following:

1. The apostles were promised the Holy Spirit, a promise they did not receive until after Jesus' ascension.
2. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles was equal to the baptism of the Holy Spirit (being immersed in the Holy Spirit).
3. The apostles were to wait in Jerusalem until they received power.
4. The power was to come when the Holy Spirit came (and when the Holy Spirit came, they would be baptized in the Holy Spirit).
5. The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.
6. Therefore, on the day of Pentecost the apostles were baptized in the Holy Spirit and received the promises attached to the Holy Spirit's being sent upon them.

The apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit (and guided into all truth by the Spirit; John 16:13), preached the gospel. The result of their preaching was that people were saved (Acts 2:35–41). Since people were converted by the preaching of the Holy Spirit-inspired word, they were saved “by the washing of regenera-

tion and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5) and were born again “of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). As a consequence of being saved, they received the Holy Spirit to dwell within them (Acts 2:38; 5:32).

Through the Spirit, the apostles also were enabled to perform miracles to confirm the word they preached (Hebrews 2:3, 4). In addition, they were able to lay hands on other Christians so that they, in turn, could perform miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–24). These miraculous powers, or spiritual gifts, were widely distributed in the early church (see 1 Corinthians 12; 14; Ephesians 4:7–16).

Then the apostles, helped and guided by the Holy Spirit, taught the church and its individual members what they needed to know and do in order to be pleasing to God. Eventually, guided by the Holy Spirit, they recorded those instructions. The apostles’ doctrine has come to people in this present age as the New Testament.

In the Present Age

Much of what the Holy Spirit did in the first century, He continues to do today.

The Holy Spirit converts sinners now just as He did when the church began—through the preaching of “the word of God” (Luke 8:11; see John 3:3, 5; Acts 2; Titus 3:5).

The Holy Spirit continues to guide the church, to teach Christians and congregations what they need to do to please God, just as He did in the first century. He does this through the instructions inspired men wrote in the New Testament.

The Holy Spirit continues to indwell Christians today. He is given to all those who become Christians by

being baptized for forgiveness of sins:

Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"⁴ (Acts 2:38).

"And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32).

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6).

As Christians, we have been given the Holy Spirit, and He dwells within us.⁵ We are "partakers" of the Spirit (Hebrews 6:4) and are privileged to have the "fellowship of the Spirit" (Philippians 2:1; 2 Corinthians 13:14). He strengthens us and helps us when we pray.⁶

However, the Bible tells about some things that the Holy Spirit did in the infancy of the church but is not doing today:

The Holy Spirit is not inspiring people today as He did in the days of the early church. He inspired the writers of the Bible, and the Scriptures it contains are now complete. They can furnish the man of God "unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; KJV). Therefore, further inspired revelation is neither required nor provided.

⁴The "gift of the Holy Spirit" means the Holy Spirit given as a gift, just as one who is given a bicycle might say, "I received the gift of a bicycle."

⁵See Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Thesalonians 4:8; 2 Timothy 1:14.

⁶See Romans 8:26, 27; Ephesians 2:18; 3:16; 6:18; Jude 20.

The Holy Spirit is not coming upon people today in a way that should be called “the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Aside from the apostles, only Cornelius, with his household, and Paul had this kind of experience (Acts 10; 11). The purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was to fulfill the promises made to the apostles. Christians today still benefit from the fulfillment of God’s promises when the apostles were baptized in the Holy Spirit, but people are no longer baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not enabling Christians to perform miracles today. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were given to confirm the word of God (Mark 16:20; John 20:30, 31; Hebrews 2:3, 4). That word has been revealed and confirmed; therefore, those miraculous gifts are not needed anymore. Paul said that such gifts belonged to the infancy of the church and would pass away when the “perfect” came—that is, when the word of God was completely revealed (1 Corinthians 13:8–10).

CONCLUSION

Christians can believe “too little” or “too much” about the Holy Spirit. If we believe that the Holy Spirit continues to baptize people, to inspire people, or to enable Christians to perform miracles, then we believe “too much.” If we think that the Holy Spirit is not a person or is not part of the Godhead, or if we deny that the Holy Spirit personally dwells in Christians to help them live the Christian life, then we believe “too little.” Members of the Lord’s body ought to believe what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit—no more and no less. The Scriptures offer great comfort by telling who the Holy Spirit is and what He does for us today.