

## Holy Spirit FAQs

### David Spriggs

#### **01. Can we have the Holy Spirit in us at all before we become a Christian? In what sense does he 'dwell in us' when we become Christians?**

I think the answer to the first question is 'normally not'! However it was said, by an angel sent by God – not some heretic - of John the Baptist, 'from his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.' (Luke 1. 15) so there are conceivably exceptions! The normal Christian understanding is that we receive the Holy Spirit as part of our initiation into Christian faith. indeed acts 8. 15 -16 suggests that people can be some kind of 'believer' without receiving the Holy Spirit and Cornelius shows many signs of a person in dwelt by God's Spirit before his conversion. it is not wise, however to argue from unusual cases to establish the norm!

When we talk about the Holy Spirit in dwelling us, we are, of course using a metaphor – but that is the best language to use. it means that the Holy Spirit is with us consistently (not simply for an unusual event) that we have welcomed him (because we have responded to Christ) – he is 'at home' with us. but like any one who shares our home, we can upset them and grieve them by disregarding them, or showing disrespect for those they value e.g. God the Father and the Son or other believers. but that does not mean the Holy Spirit takes the huff and leaves us – he is resident with us – not a casual guest. So the Holy Spirit can communicate with us at many levels, can help re-shape us from within and so forth.

#### **02. What is the relationship between our spirit and the Holy Spirit?**

There are at least two distinct issues here. One is a purely linguistic one. Early Greek manuscripts normally only used higher case letters so they could not distinguish 'spirit' and 'Spirit'. When Holy is added to Spirit then we can be sure that it is the third person of the trinity who is meant but often 'Spirit' occurs without this adjective and it isn't always easy to know which 'spirit' is meant. (See Romans 8. 1-17; 1 Corinthians 2.10 – 15). The other is the substantial one about our spirit and the Holy Spirit. Here we can remember that our 'spirit' is not some distinct entity that we can isolate from our whole person. Rather, our 'spirit' is the whole of us as we relate to God – so our spirit can be experienced by us within what we call our emotions but also our intellect, will and body (compare Luke 10. 27 where 'loving God' is our spirit responding to God but is to be operative through the whole of the person – including 'strength' which means the physical part of us).

#### **03. Is it ok to be pray to the Holy Spirit alone? If we have the Spirit, do we still need Jesus the Son or God the Father?**

There is little evidence in the Bible that people prayed directly to the Holy Spirit – indeed most prayers seem to be addressed to God the Father. However, in that the Holy Spirit is an essential member of the Trinity, I doubt very much whether god has a problem with us doing so – as long as we remember that we are involving the whole of the God-head. Praying to the Holy Spirit can be a way for us to express our desire for god to be present and active in our lives now and that is a good thing. If we start to think that we can receive response from the Holy Spirit and in some way avoid the reality that the Christian life is always shaped by Jesus – discipleship by the cross and character and life-style by his nature, then it is unhelpful. When Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as 'another comforter' the 'another' means 'one just like me' not 'one different to me'. Indeed we cannot have God's Holy Spirit without having the Father and the Son – God is indivisible. The Holy Spirit is always showing us Jesus and honouring the Father.

#### **04. In what sense did Jesus mean that we would do greater things that he did?**

In John 14.12 Jesus says, 'whoever believes in me will do what I do – yes he will do even greater things because I am going to the Father.' Some take this to mean even more (i.e. greater in quality) amazing miracles, or social transformation, or some understand it to mean even more (i.e. a greater number) of things perhaps including miracles, bringing people to saving faith, or more widespread witness. There is evidence for both understandings in Christian history. What is perhaps more important is to understand very deeply that we do not do these things out of our own strength or even our own faith – these 'greater' things are only possible because Jesus is going to the Father – by way of crucifixion – and because he will respond to our requests. In no way are these 'greater things' for our benefit or for our honour – they are for the father's glory.

## **05. How do we know if we are filled with the Spirit? How do we know if we are not filled with the Spirit?**

It is worth noting that 'full of the Spirit' or 'filled with the Spirit' is used both of a person's 'steady state' and also 'exceptional empowerments', including speaking in other languages. In neither case should we deduce that being filled means there isn't room for more or that we can't lose something of the Spirit's filling. Some of the ways we can know we are filled with the Spirit are the consistency of our longing for God and all the things of God and the fact we are involved in and 'successful' in God's mission. Another way is that we are becoming more like Jesus – for this is the ultimate test, or as Paul might express it that we are living out a Christ-like love.

We can be sure we are not filled with the Spirit if we say 'Jesus is cursed' or if we are denying Christ in any way. While it might 'only' be depression, it is likely that if we have no desire to pray or serve God, then it is likely we are not so filled. If we find it easy to sin then we will be grieving God's Spirit.

## **06. In what ways might the Spirit convict us of sin?**

According to Jesus in John 16. 8-9 the helper (the Holy Spirit) will "prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin...they are wrong about sin because they do not believe in me..." So, according to this passage, it is not so much that the Holy Spirit convicts believers about their sin as that he convicts unbelievers about the real nature of sin. Sin is not breaking the law, or even committing adultery, it is not believing, that is trusting in Jesus as Saviour (John 4. 41) and Lord (John 20.28). Perhaps we can see the Holy Spirit at work in acts 2.37.

It is, of course, one of the functions of the Holy Spirit to challenge believers. The Holy Spirit is often called 'the Comforter' but this comforting is more like disturbing us than it is calming us down. Paul also tells us that we can grieve the Holy Spirit ('make God's holy Spirit sad' – GNB Ephesians 5.30). If we do this because we have sinned against the Christian community, then the Holy Spirit will convict us by the sense that we have injured a loved one, rather than pointing a critical finger at us.

Finally we can consider the situation when the Holy Spirit might speak to us through a prophet about our sinfulness. The words of Peter to Ananias that he 'let Satan take control of you and make you lie to the Holy Spirit...' (Acts 5. 3) provides this kind of context, for Peter's judgment is prophetic both in its severity and its outcomes. On the whole, however, it does not appear from Scripture that a major role of the Holy Spirit is to convict believers of their sin. Rather the Spirit sets us free and produces in us the character of Christ; the Spirit declares to us that we are God's children while it is the law or sin which condemns us as sinners.

## **07. Did Jesus and Paul differ on their view of the Spirit?**

Jesus and Paul seem to share a very strong common understanding of both who the Spirit is and what he accomplishes in us. They may use different language and images to describe the reality of God's Spirit, but it is unlikely there are any contradictions or real conflicts. Of course, 'Spirit' language occurs more in Paul's letters than Jesus teaching in the gospels (at least until John 14) because the Spirit's main focus during the incarnation was through and in Jesus. That is one reason why Paul's 'the fruit of the spirit' (Galatians 5) or 'then poem on love' (1 Corinthians 13) so strongly recall Jesus. Because of his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus facilitates a much wider impact of the Holy Spirit through all believers and on the world. For Paul, on the other hand, living in the days when Jesus was absent from earth but the Spirit had been given to the church, he often speaks of the spirit when describing or referring to the presence and effective working of God in our world.

## **08. What is the role of the Spirit in our lives? In what sense does he 'teach us'? How does he transform us? How does he help us to pray?**

The Spirit's role is to make Jesus real to us and to make us like Jesus. The Spirit 'teaches us' by helping us to make better sense of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This includes helping us understand the meaning of scripture but also growing through this understanding. But the Spirit can also 'teach us' by providing Christ-like understanding of issues and situations. The Holy Spirit transforms us by prompting and even cajoling us to become like Jesus. Negatively he makes us aware of un-Christ-like attitudes and actions but also increases our distaste for them – thus he helps us break free from those things which hold us back. Positively he fills us with both a desire and the power to become more like Jesus, although according to 1 John 3. 2 this process is not complete in this earthly life. When it comes to prayer, the Holy Spirit helps us by awakening in us a longing to know God better, but also gives us the assurance that prayer is worthwhile because he helps us know God loves us deeply (Romans 5.5; 8. 15 -16). Sometimes the Holy Spirit shows us how to pray by giving us insight into the subject for our praying. Then again the Holy Spirit can prompt us to keep praying or give us a sense that we should leave our prayer with God.

### **09. In what sense are there 'no non-charismatic Christians'?**

According to Jesus in John 3, Christians are 'born of the Spirit', so without God's Spirit working in us we cannot become Christians. According to Paul, 'the Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.' (1 Corinthians 12.7). These persons are, of course, those who are Christians. So every Christian begins life through the ministry of God's Spirit and every Christian is gifted (or given a 'charism' by this same Spirit. So all are 'charismatic' in this sense. However, not all are 'charismatic' in the way the word is frequently used to mean exercising the more overt gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in other languages, interpreting, prophesying or being used for physical healing in others. The charisms of God's Spirit are much broader in scope and impact than the 'charismatic' charisms alone!

### **10. What is the relationship between 'Spirit and flesh' written about by Paul?**

The simplest way to understand the contrast that Paul portrays is that flesh is everything about human beings that is living in opposition to or disregard for God – it is our self-centred, rebellious human life. Spirit, on the other hand (and in the Greek there is no way to distinguish from the letters whether it is 'spirit' or 'Spirit') is our human nature and life that is redirected to God. (See 2 above)

### **11. What about signs, wonders and the miraculous – are these meant to be every day, normal activities of the Spirit – or exceptional movements of the Spirit?**

Christians differ over their understanding of the role of signs, wonders and the miraculous. Some consider they were only 'normal' during the ministry of Jesus and the early life of the church. Others would expect them at special times and seasons when God is awakening his church and empowering her for times of renewal and revival. Still others would consider that biblically we are to expect these special manifestations of God's Spirit as normal, throughout all time as part of the Gospel. Why then, in many parts of the church are they not happening now? Their answer could take two forms. Firstly that for some reason God has decided to withdraw these gifts for a time – God always has the freedom to do this. Secondly that Christians are failing to live in such a way, with such expectant faith and with such obedience to God's mission, that God honours our Christian living with these manifestations. These two can merge into one – if God's reason is to warn Christians of their lukewarm lives and the consequences. But this need not be so – it could be because God has chosen not to manifest himself to a nation at a particular time.

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