

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT

### The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life

To neglect the work of God’s Holy Spirit in the believer’s life is to invite spiritual disaster. This is because the entire life of the believer in Christ is bound up in the Holy Spirit. It is in the Holy Spirit that we begin our Christian pilgrimage (Galatians 3.3). The new birth, by which a person enters the kingdom of God, involves both water and the Spirit (John 3.1-15; cf. Acts 2.38). It is a “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3.5).<sup>1</sup> “For in one Spirit,” says the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12.13, “we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” By his Spirit, God adopts us into his family, and he sends forth “the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4.6; cf. Romans 8.15). A good summary of how God begins his work in us is found in Ephesians 1.13-14 (cf. Philippians 1.6; 2.12-13), “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” The Christian life begins in the Spirit.

It is also in the Holy Spirit that we continue our Christian pilgrimage. “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (Galatians 5.5). So we must “walk by the Spirit” and “sow to the Spirit” (Galatians 5.16; 6.8). It is only by the power of the Spirit that we are able to “put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8.13). The Holy Spirit is our Helper in times of suffering and need (see John 14.16-18). When “we do not know

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<sup>1</sup>Scripture quotations unless noted otherwise are from the *English Standard Version* (2001).

what to pray for as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8.26; cf. John 14.16-18). With his word and our prayers, the Spirit empowers us to fight “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (see Ephesians 6.10-18). So it is important for our spiritual welfare to heed these warnings: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Ephesians 4.30); “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5.19). Hindering the work of God’s Spirit certainly will bring about spiritual death. We rather must allow God “to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3.20). We must strive “to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being” (Ephesians 3.16). Christian life can continue and be maintained only by the power of the Spirit.

Finally, it is in the Holy Spirit that our Christian pilgrimage will be consummated. God will “give life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in us” (Romans 8.11). And the indwelling Spirit is the pledge of Jesus to return for us and to give us “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” or a resurrected body (2 Corinthians 5.1-10). Yes, the life of the believer is bound up in the Holy Spirit. Let us rejoice in this gracious gift from our Creator.

### The Indwelling Spirit

In Romans 8.9-11, the apostle Paul writes about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer in Jesus.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

With the use of language about places to dwell or live (for example, “house” or “temple”), Paul and other New Testament writers portray the special presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. This special presence exceeds the omnipresence of the Spirit and seems to be similar to the Jewish understanding of the dwelling of God between the cherubim of the ark of the covenant. The indwelling of God in the temple, the *shekinah*, was described as “the abiding of the divine presence.” The indwelling Spirit likewise is the real, abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian. Through the power of the Spirit, those who are “in Christ Jesus” no longer fall under God’s condemnation (Romans 8.1). And the “Spirit-filled” person does not walk “according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8.4). As the apostle further explains:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8.5-8).

In other words, the “Spirit-filled” person pleases God, and it is this knowledge of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit that motivates us to renounce our fleshly desires and live for God. And the hope of our complete victory over sin and death, by virtue of our being “in Christ” and sharing in his resurrection glory, compels us to do our best to please him in all things. We have been blessed by God to be his people, and the proof of this is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As Paul wrote to fellow believers in Rome:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of

God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8.12-17).

### Spirit and Flesh

In Galatians 5.16-17, Paul tells us, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to one another, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” If we conduct our lives, or walk, by the rule of the Spirit of God, then we will put an end to the gratification of our fleshly desires. These fleshly desires seem to be those longings within us that go to extremes when unchecked by our spirits. But with the help of God’s Spirit, these longings can be brought under control with patience, moderation, and restraint. And they can be satisfied through God-given means. For example, the unrestrained gratification for the fleshly desire for sex is fornication and sexual immorality. But the satisfying of this bodily desire through God’s gift of marriage (that is, the “one flesh” of husband and wife) is sanctified and holy (Hebrews 13.4). So the flesh itself and its desires are not sinful. Our flesh is only the door through which sin might come upon us. And sometimes the flesh exerts such a power for its gratification that we could say it is an open door. This is why, I believe, we need to depend on God’s Spirit and the Word of God to help us close the open door that can lead us to sin.

If we have allowed our fleshly desires to control us, then we have not been listening to the Holy Spirit. Paul says, “Walk by the Spirit.” And if God’s Spirit is in control, we will not allow ourselves to be overcome by the wrongful wants and wishes of our flesh. The Spirit and the flesh are counterproductive. Following the Spirit brings life, but following the flesh brings death. So Paul warns, “These are opposed to one another, to keep you from doing the things you want to

do.” Paul does not seem to be saying that the believer in Jesus is not able to do the things that the flesh desires. Rather, Paul is saying that one who is under the control of God’s Spirit is not permitted to indulge in the things that the flesh desires to do. In other words, we cannot serve God and at the same time serve our flesh. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5.24). This is the calling of every believer in God and his Christ. It can be a difficult sacrifice, but it is a commitment well worth our effort. While gratification of the flesh can be fun and pleasing, the effect can be temporal and destructive. On the other hand, the effect of following the Spirit of God is both constructive and eternal. “Do not be deceived,” says the apostle, “God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Galatians 6.7-8). This outcome is certain and sure. For this reason, Paul encourages us, “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6.9).

### On Spiritual Gifts

It is important to distinguish between the gift of the Spirit himself and the power given to believers by the indwelling Spirit. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12.11, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” He is instructing the Corinthian Christians on “spiritual gifts” (see 12.1). The phrase “to each one individually as he wills” (Greek *idia hekasto kathos bouletai*) indicates that the distinction in gifts comes as a result of the will or desire of the Spirit. This distinction is also seen in Acts 2.4, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” On Pentecost, the apostles and those with them (see 1.15) first were filled

with the Spirit. Then out of the fulness of the Spirit, they were empowered to speak in tongues (that is, “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” Greek *kathos to pneuma edidou apophtheggesthai autois*). By the baptism of the Spirit they were filled with the indwelling gift of the Spirit, and the Spirit so chose on this occasion to give them power to speak languages they never had learned or studied.

The idea that there are different “measures”<sup>2</sup> of the Spirit among believers does not seem to be correct according to the precise meaning of the biblical text. This approach usually makes a distinction between the “extraordinary” or “miraculous” (e.g., Holy Spirit baptismal measure) and the “ordinary” or “nonmiraculous” (e.g., the indwelling measure).<sup>3</sup> I would prefer to see the distinctions as the result of the will of the Spirit, the same Spirit who dwells in all believers the same way, that is, by faith as a result of turning to God in baptism (as per Acts 2.38). So while the same Spirit dwells in all believers (both then and now) the same way, the same Spirit does not empower all believers (both then and now) the same way. The same gift of the Holy Spirit himself is received by all, thus the similar terminology (“promise,” “receive,” in Acts 2.33, 38-39). But the Spirit imparts particular gifts as he so wills.

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<sup>2</sup>See Lewis Foster, “In Step with the Holy Spirit,” *The Lookout* (July, August, September 1979); Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: Acts* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Besides the impossibility of getting any kind of definite meaning in today’s culture for what constitutes “miracle,” the “supernatural” versus “natural” (or “extraordinary” versus “ordinary”) dichotomy seems to be a post-Enlightenment phenomenon that generally is imposed on the biblical text. But there may be, however, textual grounds (i.e., from the wording of the biblical text) for seeing some things as “ordinary” (i.e., what happens frequently or routinely) and “out of the ordinary” (i.e., what happens occasionally or once in a while).

My concern is not to rob baptism (i.e., what is labeled “water baptism”<sup>4</sup>) of its effectual power—the regenerating work of God’s Spirit. We could even say that the work of the Holy Spirit at baptism is supernatural and miraculous, but many would misunderstand this due to what I have indicated in the footnote above. Regardless, the work of the Spirit at baptism transcends the natural; it is a gift from God. The “baptism of the Holy Spirit”<sup>5</sup> may be that general outpouring of God’s Spirit, which the church received at Pentecost, whereby the Spirit became available for “all flesh” through God’s appointed means of faith, repentance, and baptism. But the New Testament consistently places the work of the Spirit and the role of baptism together, at the same time, except for the special cases of Pentecost, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles.<sup>6</sup> If I understand New Testament teaching correctly, the Holy Spirit is fully and completely active at Christian baptism to save the sinner and to empower appropriately the regenerated member of God’s new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5.17). And this empowerment with spiritual gifts to believers brings about edification for the body of Christ, the church (see Ephesians 4.7ff.).

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<sup>4</sup>The exact expression “water baptism” never occurs in the New Testament, but several passages connect “baptism” with “water” (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.26, 33; Acts 1.5; 11.16; cf. 1 Peter 3.21).

<sup>5</sup>See Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16; John 1.33; Acts 1.5; 11.16.

<sup>6</sup>See David W Fletcher, “The Design of Baptism in the New Testament,” *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, edited by David W Fletcher (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 367ff.; also available online as “Baptism in the New Testament,” at: <[www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php](http://www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php)>.