

The Holy Spirit

Bible understanding of God's power

Who or what is the Holy Spirit? What part does the Holy Spirit occupy in the work of God? These are serious and deep questions. We must conduct our inquiry with reverence because we are searching into the things of God. All of our searching would be useless if God had not encouraged us to find out as much as we can by means of the Bible, which is His authoritative word. Let us discover what He has told us about His Spirit.

At the outset let us clarify whatever mystery or confusion may lie behind the word "Ghost" in the expression "Holy Ghost" in the King James (Authorised) version of the Bible. In Shakespeare's day "ghost" was a current word for "spirit" and a spiritual adviser was called a "ghostly confessor". Holy Ghost and Holy Spirit are translations of the same original words. The strange notions which now attach to our word "ghost" are not what the translators intended to convey. Later translations uniformly render the words, "Holy Spirit".

Several expressions are to be found in the Bible which are descriptive of the Holy Spirit and these include:

"The Spirit of God" (Genesis 1:2; Matthew 3:16);

"The Spirit of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2; Acts 8:39);

"Thy good spirit" (Nehemiah 9:20);

"The Spirit of the Lord God" (Isaiah 61:1);

"His holy Spirit" (Isaiah 63:10,11);

"The Spirit of your Father" (Matthew 10:20);

"The Spirit" (John 1:32);

"The holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30);

and "The power of the Lord" (Luke 5:17).

The terms 'God the Holy Ghost', or 'God the Holy Spirit', are not to be found in the Bible. Nevertheless, there is clearly a very strong link between God and the Holy Spirit. (We shall not deal here with the doctrine of the Godhead. A very useful treatment of that subject will be found in Jesus: God the Son or Son of God?.) Indeed, the Spirit is said to be "of God", "of the LORD", "of the Lord GOD", and "of your Father", in the list of expressions given above. If we make this the starting point of our journey through scripture we shall find that progress is not difficult.

Look at the following descriptions of creation:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1,2)

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7)

"The Spirit of God hath made me, and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life."
(Job 33:4)

"He hath made the earth by his power ... established the world by his wisdom ... stretched out the heavens by his discretion." (Jeremiah 10:12; 51:15)

God's power in creation

These are but a few of the many evidences in the Bible about the work of God in creation. He alone by His wisdom conceived the wondrous plan, and it was executed by His Almighty power, His Spirit. God is Spirit (John 4:24, RSV), and whatever He does is by His Spirit.

How is creation sustained in existence? Is it a huge clock, wound up by the Almighty and left gradually to run down? Or is the Lord God still involved and concerned with what He has made? The Bible in all its parts tells us that creation is upheld by God and He is everywhere present throughout and within all that He has made. Without Him nothing could exist or continue to exist:

"God that made the world ... giveth to all life, and breath, and all things ... in him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:24-28)

"If he set his heart upon man, if he gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust." (Job 34:14,15)

"Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is his name."
(Amos 5:8)

God fills His creation. All of its activity is because of His wise and sustaining Spirit, the divine energy working out His gracious purpose. The Spirit is not a "separate" or "other" person. It is God's own radiant power, ever outflowing from Him, by which His "everywhereness" is achieved. The Spirit is personal in that it is of God Himself: it is not personal in the sense of being some other person within the Godhead.

Writers inspired by God's Spirit

The scriptures teach us that God has a redemptive purpose for man and for the earth on which he lives. It will come as no surprise to learn that the revelation of that will has come about by God Himself through His Spirit:

"We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it . No prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:19-21, NIV)

The message is simple. God has revealed His will infallibly by the Holy Spirit upon chosen men called prophets. It was by this means that the scriptures came into existence. Those who wrote were inspired by God's Spirit and what they set down upon the written page was inspired by God. Therefore, although all the prophets have long since died, we have a totally reliable and wholly inspired word of God in our hands. God still speaks to us therein as surely as He spoke by the mouth of the prophets:

“The holy scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God ... that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

The word of God provided in this way carries to us the mind of God and all of the glorious attributes associated with His holy name. To resist the message and command of the word of God is to resist God Himself. Indeed, it is to resist the Spirit of God in every sense of that word, including that broader meaning which we imply when we talk, for example, of the “spirit” of an agreement. This is how the Bible describes the resistance of the children of Israel to God’s word through the prophets:

“Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear ...” (Nehemiah 9:30)

“In all their affliction he (God) was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them ... he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit.” (Isaiah 63:9,10)

“Ye stiffnecked ... ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye.” (Acts 7:51)

Clearly, it was not simply the naked power of God that the rebels resisted. They resisted the redeeming love and righteousness of God whether in His prophets or later in the Christ. They refused to humble themselves to serve God. This was the evil spirit of man contesting the Holy Spirit of God.

Miracles and wonders

There were times, of course, when the powerful nature of the Spirit of God was made manifest. From time to time God intervened openly and worked wonders among men. This aspect of the Spirit whether in goodness or in severity is unmistakable:

“Our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of thy mercies; but provoked him at the sea, even at the Red Sea. Nevertheless he saved them for his name’s sake, that he might make his mighty power to be known.” (Psalm 106:7,8)

“The power of the Lord was present to heal them. And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy ... He said to the sick of the palsy ... Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house. And immediately he rose up.” (Luke 5:17-25)

“Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God.” (Romans 15:19)

The miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ in stilling the storm on Galilee, in causing miraculous catches of fish, in feeding many thousands at one time, and in healings of every kind, were strongly reminiscent of the various works of God in the Old Testament. It was as though the activity of the Spirit of God was focused, as never before on earth, in the person of the Lord Jesus.

This was equally true of the words he spoke. His words and miracles were wonderfully married together. It was as though the Lord God had brought near to man in His Son everything He had to say in a most compassionate and powerful form. The Spirit had worked God’s will in ages past, sometimes in signs and wonders, fearful and gracious; sometimes in word or vision or dream; but now, in Christ, the Lord God provided a

wondrous and unforgettable manifestation, a Son filled with all the radiance of God's word and in himself a reflection of all that He spoke, and endued with such power and authority as to extend the gracious word in saving acts of almost unbelievable kindness. In all of this the mind and will of God were made known in such a way as to redeem the destitute, and to give hope to those who were bowed down with sin, or oppressed by the man-made traditions and restrictions which made life intolerable for the ordinary man in the days of Jesus.

Christ's words relieved the desolate and despairing. His deeds brought spontaneous praise to their lips. His devoted death provided the release from their sins. God had spoken through all of these aspects of the life of Christ. Then at Calvary and in the tomb in the garden, when all seemed to have been lost, the Lord moved again by His Spirit: "By his power God raised the Lord from the dead" (1 Corinthians 6:14, NIV). Thus the power of God, exercised in love and righteousness, visited the silent sepulchre and brought forth the only begotten Son to receive glorious and unending life:

"God ... raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory." (1 Peter 1:21)

"His Son Jesus Christ our Lord ... was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." (Romans 1:3,4)

"According to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand ... and hath put all things under his feet." (Ephesians 1:19-22)

"(Christ) is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him." (1 Peter 3:22)

God's power to raise the dead

The exaltation of Christ is a source of great joy and praise for believers. Christ is Saviour and Christ is Lord. Moreover, God who had raised His Son from the dead by the power of His Spirit continued His will and purpose in him after his resurrection:

"Of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen." (Acts 1:1,2)

"This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit ..." (Acts 2:32,33)

The exalted Christ is empowered and authorised by the Spirit of God.

The life which Jesus now lives is a life of the Spirit; he has been "quickened by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18) so that now, in the fullest sense, he lives by the Spirit. His mortality has been clothed upon with immortality. It has been swallowed up by life. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus is now "a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45, RV): "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will" (John 5:21). The Lord Jesus Christ is now the source of life everlasting for all who truly believe in him. He is "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), the one who is to bring "many sons to glory", and is "the author of

eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 2:10 and 5:9). It is impossible to over-estimate the significance of the present standing and office of the Lord Jesus Christ as Son of God. God has bestowed immortality upon him and given him the power to grant immortality to others.

This is the glorious message of the New Testament. In Christ there is not only the promise of eternal salvation; he is the actual Forerunner, the one who has arrived, and has himself attained to immortality. This is the unshakable assurance for all who come to God by him. Christ is truly the Saviour granted to us by God. This is the pinnacle of the work of the Lord God by His Holy Spirit: prophesied in old time by the holy prophets and brought to perfection in the birth, life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Apostles empowered by the Spirit

Therefore, the Gospel is now proclaimed "in his name", and the progress of the message of salvation on earth is now under his care. The apostles were sent to proclaim this good news. And they were directly empowered by the Spirit of God in Christ so that the words they were to speak and the wonders they were to perform would be integral parts of the one message of God made known in Jesus:

"Having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear ... And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles." (Acts 2:33,43)

"By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth ... Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:10,12)

To resist the mission of Christ by the apostles was to resist Christ: any who resisted were resisting the Holy Spirit as did their Old Testament counterparts (Isaiah 63:10 and Acts 7:51). The Jewish authorities who opposed the development of the Gospel were "against the Lord, and against his Christ" (Acts 4:26). Saul of Tarsus, who later became the beloved Apostle Paul, bitterly persecuted the early believers but, when challenged by Jesus on the way to Damascus, was asked by Christ: "Why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4).

The word and the Spirit

Those, on the other hand, who believed were submissive to the Spirit's message and thereby to the Lord Jesus Christ and his Father. The word of the Spirit convicted their hearts, bringing repentance and the hope of everlasting life. In the New Testament particularly, this message, the glad tidings of "the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), is plainly related to the word and the Spirit:

"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming. Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:8,17, NIV)

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ... Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:3,5)

“Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever ... And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.” (1 Peter 1:23-25)

“It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I (Jesus) speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.” (John 6:63)

“Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” (James 1:18-22)

“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh ... God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” (Galatians 5:16,17; 6:7,8)

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” (Galatians 5:22)

The message of the Spirit

From these scriptures it is evident that the way of salvation in Christ is the way of the Spirit. It is God’s way. Salvation comes from God. The whole purpose and plan of salvation and its execution are of God. Man was altogether impotent and sterile. There was no goodness in him. God has made compassionate and gracious provision in Christ. God’s will was brought into action by His Spirit. None of this is known other than by the word of God which is the message of the Spirit:

“Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:43)

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” (Revelation 2:7)

The message of salvation is the power of God (Romans 1:16) which brings man into contact with the mind of God, the Spirit of God. An entirely new force enters into his life when he willingly receives the word of God. Meekness in receiving the word leads to faith. The word illumines the mind and understanding, and commences a process of change which leads to repentance and conversion.

God’s word written on the heart of man in this way by believing the written message in the Bible is said to be, “written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3). This is a marvellous happening. It is truly the work of the Spirit of God engendered by a faithful acceptance of the glad tidings of the Gospel. At the beginning of human history Eve’s mind had been polluted by the words of the serpent. They were words which spelt sin and death. The way of God is to teach man anew. The mind has to be redeemed from mere human, fleshly thinking. The thinking of God has to replace it.

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Romans 12:2)

The word of the Gospel is designed for this process. It is a seed which will bear spiritual fruit. The man who receives it into his heart will be caught up in the floodtide of God’s saving love in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A part of this on-sweeping work of God is to assure us of the care of God and of Christ for those who believe and seek to obey. This is what the Gospel is all about; it is designed to bring us to God through Christ:

“Come unto God by him (Jesus).” (Hebrews 7:19,25)

“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.” (James 4:8)

We are assured of God’s care and the shelter of Christ during our life of pilgrimage as we wait for the day of the kingdom of God.

God’s care through angels

One of the ways in which God cares for His children is by means of the angels:

“Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14)

“The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.” (Psalm 34:7)

We can therefore, when we become disciples of Christ, be assured that those who are for us are more effective than anything ranged against us in this life.

Perhaps the greatest blessing afforded by the Gospel in this life is communion with God through the Lord Jesus by means of prayer. This is the lifeline. God hears prayer. Through the mediation of Christ in heaven our petitions and praises are taken to God and they are answered according to what is best for us in the will of God:

“It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:34,35)

“We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1,2, RV)

“Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

The unspeakable privilege of prayer is granted to us through the goodness of God by His Spirit. Our faintest whisper, or our unspoken petitions, reach Him through Jesus, when we truly belong; and He inclines His gracious ear to our cry. It is a means of unfailing access and help in our spiritual warfare.

The power of prayer

Do we really obtain help by prayer? But, of course. God responds to our need. Prayer is not a substitute for the strength to be drawn from the word of God. Prayer works with that word of faith. Indeed, it is when we know the will and way of God from His word that we discover the need for prayer in order that we might not enter into temptation. Prayer in its upward life counteracts the downward drag of our sinful natures. We need every source of help and sometimes we need it urgently. The reservoir of the word of God in the mind, the mind of Christ dwelling in us richly, will always afford counsel and strength, because it is designed for that very purpose. Nothing could illustrate this more clearly than the manner in which Christ dispelled the temptations of the wilderness.

The records of the temptation of Christ are to be found in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 where the threefold assault on his Sonship was made in the form of three questions, each of which appealed to self-will and would have denied the will of God had they been successful. The Lord Jesus found his replies, and the strength to make them, in his understanding of and reliance on the written word of his Father in the Old Testament. Each temptation was rebutted with the words: "it is written", followed by the appropriate words of scripture. "The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17) pierced the temptation at its heart and ensured the victory of Christ.

Even so, we must have the armour of prayer. Prayer was the Lord's refuge and comfort. It was a source of great blessing for him. If we faithfully ask God for help in our battle against sin, it will always be forthcoming:

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

"So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." (Hebrews 13:6)

The believer who passes into the family of God by faith and baptism becomes a son to be cared for in every way: to be chastised from time to time, to be led in paths of righteousness for His name's sake, and to be blessed with strength from God in the life to be lived as he submits to the yoke of the Lord Jesus Christ. From morn to night, from day to day, a whole life long he hears the word of the Father: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5).

Holy Spirit gifts

Shortly before he ascended to heaven the Lord Jesus Christ made this promise to his apostles: "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8). This promise was fulfilled in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was poured down from heaven and forthwith the apostles witnessed openly in the city. A huge assembly of Jews from Palestine, Mediterranean lands and the Middle East flocked to hear, "every man in his own language" (Acts 2:6), the wonderful works of God proclaimed as never before. Everyone was amazed.

Peter explained that he and his fellow apostles were proclaiming the message given to them by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that their ability to do so in tongues intelligible to their hearers had also been bestowed by the same Spirit:

"Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he (Christ) hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear." (Acts 2:33)

Peter repeated this same explanation when he later wrote a letter to believers concerning "the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven" (1 Peter 1:1,2). We are therefore assured that the message of the apostles (called the "apostles' doctrine", Acts 2:42) was precisely and only that which the Father and the Son wished to declare. Furthermore, their message was attested by speaking in a variety of languages, and by many signs and wonders – miracles of healing and of raising the dead in the name of Christ (see Acts 2:43; 3:4-7).

The spoken word and the signs provided a firm foundation for faith. Thousands believed and, because the visitors to Jerusalem carried the message away with them, the Gospel spread outwards to distant lands.

Groups of believers in widely separated places needed constant help in order to preserve the faith they had espoused, and to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). It was physically impossible for the apostles to spend long periods in each place, although they clearly travelled ceaselessly in their labours for Christ. There was as yet no New Testament from which the whole of the apostles' message might be read and related to the Old Testament which was already in very wide circulation. The inspired written accounts of the Gospel writers and the special letters to individual congregations and individuals came into existence in the first century, for the most part before AD 70, and these – or copies of them – would quickly be known over a wide area. Moreover these writings were themselves a part of scripture given by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 3:15,16).

Special powers

But how was the time-gap between the spoken message of the apostles and the divinely given account in writing to be bridged? The Holy Spirit was the means used by the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the apostles, certain other persons were given special powers which were designed to support the believers in the various congregations. These persons were prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11), and the widespread gifts were those described as follows:

"For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit ... to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues ..." (1 Corinthians 12:8-10)

By this means members of each congregation or ecclesia were equipped with gifts to help them exercise functions for the instruction, correction, exhortation and public witness of the group. No one had all of the gifts and the gifted members were therefore made dependent on one another for the total work. None of the gifts provided for one member to pass on gifts to other members. Only the apostles were able to do this (see Acts 8:14-18).

We do not know precisely when the bestowal and operation of the gifts ceased to happen, but it was probably some time after the death of the last surviving apostle. That they would so cease is provided for in the words of the Spirit by Paul: "Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away" (1 Corinthians 13:8). Moreover, the cessation of these gifts is coupled with the survival of three principal virtues: "But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three" (1 Corinthians 13:13, RV). Faith and hope will give place to reality and fulfilment at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the end of the first century the New Testament had been completed and became available for all to read as the circulation and collation of the twenty-seven individual books gradually took place. In this way all of the ecclesias would have available to them the full accounts of the life of Christ together with the ministry and letters of the apostles. It is significant that God did not inspire any writings after the end of the first century. By this time, therefore, the gifts may have commenced to fade. From non-

Biblical sources we learn that during the second century men arose who merely simulated possession of the gifts, evidence in itself that the true gifts were no longer widespread.

Holy Spirit gifts today?

From time to time throughout the following centuries there have been groups claiming that once again the gifts were available to men. In modern times the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have made such claims. Speaking with tongues, known as glossolalia, is the gift which exceeds all others in claims of this kind. Rarely is it claimed as an ability to speak foreign languages in the manner of the apostles (see Acts 2:4,6,11). Instead it is said that those concerned are given ecstatic utterance which they do not themselves understand but have to depend on others to provide the interpretation.

For the most part this manifestation is made known in meetings of committed members of the groups concerned. It is not used as a principal means for preaching the Gospel as they see it, and this is contrary to the direct instruction and practice laid down in scripture (1 Corinthians 14:22-25). Indeed, there is no evidence whatsoever that the modern phenomenon is in any way related to the gift of tongues as described in the New Testament. Nor is it unique to "Christian" groups. The same occurrences are to be found amongst members of eastern religions and in the Mormon movement. We believe that the phenomenon arises from "religious excitation", an emotional state of mind, and not from any action by God through His Holy Spirit.

Similar considerations arise about the supposed "gift of healing". Healings wrought by the apostles were never carried out at "healing meetings". There was no religious service, no emotional fervour produced by hymn-singing and preaching, but instead direct and positive healing in the open, on the spot, for all to see; or in private by an apostle (see Acts 3:1-10 and 9:36-41). These miracles followed the pattern of the healings of the Lord Jesus Christ. For the most part, the Lord healed by a touch or by the spoken word and the results were evident.

Both the procedures and the results of modern healings are widely different from those of New Testament times. There are many failures and often a lack of permanence in the improvement achieved. Such was not the case with the apostles. In those days, a man who had never walked was healed in an instant and could run for joy (Acts 3:1-10). A dead woman was restored to life by the quiet prayer of one apostle and his spoken word to the corpse (Acts 9:36-41). Healers of today belong to non-Christian groups, Spiritualists, and others as well as Charismatics. The Holy Spirit cannot be the common factor. It is much more likely to be a result of the power of the mind of the healer upon the mind and will of the person who has come to be healed. Whatever may prove to be the explanation, a far more basic inquiry must be conducted into the claims of those who profess to be moved by the Spirit.

Holy Spirit gifts and the second coming

It is sometimes claimed that we should expect a renewed outpouring of Spirit gifts before the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is said that as the Spirit gifts were a sign when Jesus came the first time, so they will be once more before his second coming. The verses in Joel 2:28-32 are quoted to substantiate this claim.

If we assume for purposes of discussion that the argument is a sound one, how would we expect the gifts to come? By Charismatic movements such as are about today? If so, why? If not, how? Although the verses in Joel were quoted by the Apostle Peter in support of the outpouring of Spirit gifts in his day, it is to be noted that they were not quoted before the outpouring took place but afterwards. Moreover, the bestowal of Spirit gifts did not precede the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ; it came after his ascension to heaven. If such an outpouring were to occur again, we would expect the pattern to be similar to that established on the first occasion. In other words, the outpouring would follow and not precede the second coming.

However, we do not need to theorise in this way. The scriptures give us an insight into the work of the Spirit in the first century and in the "world to come" (Christ's own words to describe the coming kingdom of God on earth, Luke 18:29,30). Those who had Spirit gifts are described as having "tasted ... the powers of the world to come" (Hebrews 6:5). Spirit gifts were but a foretaste of the powerful work of the Spirit of God when Christ returns in power and great glory. At that time there will be the resurrection of the dead (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16); the saints will receive the gift of everlasting life (Matthew 25:31,46); Christ will reign over all the earth from Jerusalem and will be accompanied by the saints, who will be kings and priests (Zechariah 14:9; Revelation 5:10; 20:4; Psalm 2:6); the wicked will be powerfully rebuked (Psalm 2:5,9; Isaiah 11:3,4); the earth will become beautiful and fruitful (Isaiah 35:1,2; Psalm 72:1-6); it would seem that the physically afflicted will be healed (Isaiah 35:5,6); and countless other wonders will be worked by the Holy Spirit of God at the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorified saints.

The test of Bible teaching

The Bible provides us with a very positive test by which to determine the validity of the claims of those who say they are speaking or working by the direct influence of the Holy Spirit. The test does not question the conviction or sincerity of those concerned, and it does not question the subjective experiences which they are often said to have had. The test goes to the root of the matter: What is the doctrinal content of the message? Does it accord with Bible teaching? In other words, in our day, does the Gospel preached by, say, Charismatics, harmonize with the teachings of Christ and his apostles? It is for this reason that we are commanded to "try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Alongside this standard, the widespread evangelical movement is found to be woefully astray from Bible teaching. What they have to say about life after death, the devil, the Godhead and the Lord Jesus Christ, baptism and many other matters does not ring true. It is incredible that a community, if they are indeed truly gifted by the Spirit, could be basically at fault in this way, not in the beliefs of a few individuals amongst them, but in the message of the movement as a whole. When we examine carefully what is taking place, we discover that they place more stress on guidance by the Spirit than on the guidance in true teaching by the word of God.

Guidance from God

The foregoing considerations lead us to examine another feature of those who claim possession of the Holy Spirit, namely, claims to special guidance by the Spirit. Decision making is said to be determined by the Spirit. Answers are said to be provided by the Spirit in one way or another. It is not simply claimed that everything is put to the Lord in prayer (a practice with which we would have no cavil), but rather

that explicit replies are given. All kinds of coincidences and "evidences" are adduced in support of this way of decision making.

We believe that this approach arises from a mistaken understanding of Bible teaching. The root of the problem lies in an attitude to the authority of scripture. The Bible is a book filled with guidance. Most of the questions of daily life are already fully answered within the pages of the Bible which is meant to be "a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). The Book of Proverbs declares: "For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (6:23). Prayerful and regular Bible reading ensures that our feet are shown the path in which we should walk. The Bible is the Holy Spirit's book of guidance.

It is sometimes said, by those who claim that the Spirit gives them guidance, that such guidance is sought only where scripture is silent. The writer's experience of several such claimants is that they seek guidance in areas where the Bible is quite clear in its teaching, and claim to be guided even when what they do is contrary to the direct teaching of the word of God. In other words, "the Spirit" was made to override the word of God, and this conflict of authority lies at the base of the error in approach to spiritual decision making.

The disciple is assured that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28). The lives of true believers are in the Lord's hands, and we are to seek Him constantly in prayer for His blessings on our journey through life. He has not promised to reveal to us openly what we should do. Provided that we are following the instruction of the word of God and prayerfully seek the Lord's blessing and help in fulfilling His commands, we know that His oversight will ensure that life's path will lead us in the steps of the Master, and bring us safely, if we continue in faith, to everlasting life at the return of Christ.

We must choose!

Choice is one of the key functions of the life of a disciple. He must constantly decide between the alternatives which present themselves in everyday living. His decisions should be based on the word of the Bible. It is not a scripturally acceptable method to shrink from making spiritual choices by handing everything over to the Lord or by asking God for answers. Revelation in this way is not promised in the Bible. We are expected to exercise our minds on the problems of life in the light of Bible teaching and in prayerful submission to God.

The Bible abounds in clear teaching which urges the believer to make the right choice based upon the principles set out in scripture. For example:

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life."
(Deuteronomy 30:19)

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve." (Joshua 24:15)

"Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will he teach sinners in the way. The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way. All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies ... What man is he that feareth the Lord? him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose."
(Psalm 25:8-10,12)

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Timothy 3:16,17)

The Bible – divine instructor

The word of God is the divine instructor of the mind and provides us with ample guidance on the everyday affairs of life. Therein is set forth clear teaching on the choices to be made in almost every aspect of Christian living. We neglect it at our peril. Moreover the word of God is food for the mind and strengthens us in making the Christlike choice. In other words, the word of God tells us why as well as what we are to choose.

If we humbly accept the teaching of the word and resolve to follow it, we can rightly seek the blessing of God in prayer. He has promised never to leave us or to forsake us. When our choice is difficult to resolve even with the Bible in hand and on the heart, our course is to commit our way to the Lord in prayer and, without expecting direct revelation from Him, proceed to do in faith that which we believe to be wise before Him.

These simple guidelines are sufficient for the needs of life. Paul gave detailed tuition to disciples in his own time, many of whom had Spirit gifts, and concluded by saying:

"And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." (Acts 20:32)

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