

Experiencing the Spirit



the spirit
experiencing

A Short Study—John West

The Holy Spirit is at work in all creation. We live because of the breath of God's Spirit and without that Spirit we would die. This is not the same as pantheism. We do not worship nature, but we recognise God at work sustaining all living things. Probably this is why people feel they can draw nearer to God in a garden, in witnessing beautiful scenery, or by examining life under a microscope. For want of a better expression we shall say that here God's Spirit is experienced in the "ordinary" things of life, even though they may still fill us with awe and amazement.

However the Holy Spirit has been experienced in *extraordinary* ways as well, even in the Old Testament:-

In **Exodus 31:1-5** we read that Bezalel was filled with "divine spirit" in order to be a master craftsman.

In **Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29** we read of God taking the Spirit that was on Moses and putting that Spirit on seventy elders so that they could share the burden of leadership. Those seventy then prophesied – just once! Eldad and Medad who were still in the camp, prophesied there and when told, Moses proclaims, "*Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!*"

In **Numbers 24:2ff** Balaam has no choice but to bless Israel when the Spirit comes upon him.

Numbers 27:18 Joshua is referred to a person "*in whom is the Spirit*", even before he is commissioned. However in **Deuteronomy 34:9** we read that he was "*full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him.*"

God's service and glory.

The highly charged emotions associated with revival and the outpouring of God's Spirit often prompt concerns about how much is Spiritual and how much is a product of our own emotions, our own manufacture. A point we must remember is that everything we experience must be through our bodies, our own emotions. We cannot divide ourselves into spiritual, physical and mental/emotional beings. All of these things interact to make us who we are. God's Spirit works through our bodies. We experience God physically even as we experience God spiritually and emotionally. All our senses may be involved.

To perceive what may not be of God is to measure our experience against the Scriptures and to exercise discernment through prayer. We ask God to help us to put our prejudices and human expectations and hang-ups on one side. Should we not find our experience or manifestation of the Spirit explicitly mentioned in Scripture does not necessarily mean that the experience is not of God. But our experience should be *in accord* with Scripture. As we pray for God's guidance and protection the Spirit will also lead us to discern what is right.

Let us by all means pray for revival so that God's name may be glorified and the Kingdom grow, but let us also regularly pray that God will fill us with his Spirit to boldly share the gospel, and so that we may grow in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION...

What is your own experience of the Holy Spirit?

How do you feel about Charismatic manifestations you have seen?

What do you think about praying for revival?

Have you ever wanted to have a special and dramatic experience of God's Spirit? Why/Why not?

What evidence should there be when the Holy Spirit is at work in a person's life?

11:16 he refers to John the Baptist's baptism of water and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is a rite on initiation. It involve water and the Spirit, but it can also be used in connection with suffering and death (**Mark 10:38-39**).

In short, the receiving, filling and being baptised in the Holy Spirit, as well as water baptism, initially at least, all revolve around the same event—the receiving of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord—being born again of God's Spirit. Baptism in the Spirit can just be another way of talking about initiation by the Spirit into God's Family.

This does not mean that dramatic experiences of God's Spirit are anti-biblical. Far from it. In fact this may well be the experience of many people as they first come into the Kingdom. But they may equally receive, be filled and baptised in the Spirit at the time they receive Christ, quietly or with tears or with an inward profound happiness and assurance.

Nor should we rule out subsequent experiences of the Holy Spirit. After the experience of Pentecost the Disciples are found together, praying for boldness in the face of prohibitions by the authorities. What happens? The place is shaken and they are filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaim the word boldly. The filling of the Spirit is obviously part of that process we call sanctification. The filling of the Spirit is also a special anointing for a specific task. (**Acts 4:29-31**)

At many times and in many places God has poured out the Spirit upon his church in what we refer to as *revival* or an *awakening*. Such events are not the everyday experience but seem to occur in response to fervent prayer and repentance.

The purpose of this is not just so that Christians can have warm feelings and high levels of excitement, but inevitably to change the way we live, and to proclaim the gospel with power. The aim is always

The Spirit comes to the Judges of Israel...

On Othniel (**Judges 3:10**)

Possessed Gideon (**Judges 6:34**)

Upon Jephthah (**9:23**)

Stirred Samson (**13:25**)

Rushed on him (**14:6, 19. 15:4**)

Saul is possessed by the Spirit into a prophetic frenzy (**1 Samuel 10:6**) and the Spirit comes on him in power (**11:6**).

The Spirit is mightily on David (**1 Samuel 16:13**)

Ezekiel is moved by the Spirit on various occasions (eg **Ezekiel 8:3**) and prophesies of a new spirit in people (**11:19**)

There are Old Testament prophecies about the Spirit coming upon the future Messiah (**Isaiah 11:1-2, 61:1ff**).

Many references to "spirit" have to do with the human spirit, the driving or life force within us, which must have it's origins in the Holy Spirit but requires regeneration to join with God's Spirit. Some of the references seem to suggest the influence of God at work within people. Some suggest a more dramatic and obvious encounter and inspiration through the Spirit of God.

In the Old Testament these encounters were often temporary (in order to effect a particular task or as a sign of God's presence) and moreover they appear to be selective. In other words the Holy Spirit did not come upon every person.

HOWEVER the promise in Joel, quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, and fulfilling Moses' wish (**Numbers 11**) sees the Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh—**Joel 2:28-29**.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

In my lifetime I have listened to debates rage over terminology to do with the Holy Spirit. Disagreements about the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit have split churches. On the one hand it has been over frustration because of lack of growth or evidence of the Spirit in their churches, and on the other because of a by churches perception that the “evidence” was not in fact from God.

A major problem in understanding all of this is that we tend to read our experiences back into Scripture. What we feel is the Holy Spirit at work in our church life influences our understanding of what Bible says. I don't think we can entirely escape this, but we do need to recognise when we are speculating from experience and when we are deriving the meaning and understanding from the Word of God.

For example, there is a tendency to talk about three ways in which we experience God's Spirit. Namely...

Receiving the Spirit.

Being **filled** with the Spirit.

Being **baptised** with the Spirit.

The first refers to the event of “being born again” or “born from above”. It is God's indwelling Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (**Romans 8:9-16**). Jesus said that without the Spirit we cannot know or see God Kingdom (**John 3:1-8**).

Being filled with the Spirit suggests that every part of ones being is motivated by God. This has to be an ongoing process of growth, and this is confirmed by the present-continuous tense used in the command “be filled”. The sense from the Greek is “be being filled” (**Ephesians 5:18**).

The “Baptism of the Spirit” at first suggests an immersion in the

Spirit such as occurred on the Day of Pentecost. When people have had a dramatic filling of the Spirit (often with some form of speaking in tongues) they have referred to it as being Baptised in the Spirit. This experience was understood by many who received the blessing to be an absolute necessity for effective Christian outreach and living. In effect however it created a two-tier Christianity of those who had simply received the Spirit and those who were fully baptised and empowered by the Spirit.

This two-tier Christianity was closely paralleled in the Holiness Movement, which advocated a “Second Blessing” or “Full Surrender” - which was sometimes accompanied by a Pentecostal-style experience. However, over the years experience showed that though many earnestly sought this experience of the Holy Spirit, not everyone received it.

A careful reading of Scripture may suggest there was a misunderstanding in the view that, “what happened to me is what is described at Pentecost, and because I benefitted every other Christian should have the same experience in the same way that I did.”

Just as a person's receiving of Christ can be either a quiet or a spectacular experience, so may be our experiences of the Holy Spirit. Consider the Spirit terminology used in these references...

Mark 1:9 He (Jesus) will baptise you with the Holy Spirit

Acts 1:5 You will be *baptised* with the Holy Spirit (ref to Pentecost)

Acts 2 (Pentecost) They were *filled* with the Holy Spirit

Acts 8:15-16 The disciples go to Samaria so that the Samaritans, who had been baptised in Jesus name would *receive* the Holy Spirit (However the event is very like the description of Pentecost)

Acts 10 At the “Gentile Pentecost” The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard. The Spirit had been “poured out” then afterwards they had water baptism. As Peter describes the Gentile Pentecost in **Acts**