

## What We Believe – 7. The Holy Spirit

We believe in: *“The work of the Holy Spirit as essential for a true and spiritual understanding of the Scriptures; for regeneration, the exercise of repentance and saving faith, and for sanctification, as well as for ministry and worship.”*

### A) Introduction

As Paul maintains in [Ephesians 4:1-6](#), the Holy Spirit is a unifying Spirit. Sadly, this is often not the case in the contemporary Christian world where discussions about the ministry of the Holy Spirit tend to be reduced to the debate about the presence or absence of certain gifts. The Bible presents a far broader ministry to which we would do well to pay careful attention.

### B) Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is a Divine Person. In [Acts 5:3](#) both of these things are made clear when Peter rebukes Ananias: *“why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit... you have not lied to man but to God.”* The Spirit is a “He”, not an “It” – He is not a force or mystical energy source but a real person for Whom we were created for personal relationship. We understand more of the Spirit’s person and work through His titles:

He is the Spirit of God (e.g. [Genesis 1:2](#)). Both Hebrew and Greek terms are also the words for wind and breath, picturing powerful energy at work. The Holy Spirit is a powerful Agent who brings the will of God into effect.

He is the Spirit of holiness (e.g. [Romans 1:4](#)). Holy stands in contrast with common or ordinary. The Spirit is sacred and transcendent – set apart from the created world. We would do well to regularly be reminded that the One who dwells within us when we trust in Christ is holy.

He is the Spirit of Christ (e.g. **Romans 8:9**). The implications of this are worked out in some detail in **John 14-16**. The Holy Spirit brings the presence of the risen and exalted Christ to each believer. He takes what is Christ's and applies it to us.

He is the Spirit of truth (e.g. **John 15:26**). The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus, who is "*the truth*" (**John 14:6**). He is the ultimate Author of the Bible (**2 Timothy 3:16**) – "*men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" (**2 Peter 1:21**) The Spirit's active assistance is therefore essential in the proper understanding and application of the Bible.

### C) How do we experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit?

The Spirit's ministry is multi-faceted. In terms of His ministry to all humanity, we experience His ministry through the common grace of life. The Spirit is at work in creation (**Genesis 1:2, 2:7**) as well as in the sustaining of creation (**Psalms 104:30**).

In terms of His ministry to God's people, the Spirit is active in many different ways. Firstly, we experience His ministry in our salvation. As Jesus taught, "*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" (**John 3:5**) Regeneration, conviction, repentance, faith, forgiveness and adoption are the work of the Holy Spirit in us (see **Romans 8:2, 14**).

Secondly, we experience His ministry in our progressive sanctification – our ongoing growth in holiness. It is the Spirit's indwelling power that enables us to resist the desires of our sin nature (**Romans 8:13**), and creates within us Christlike virtues (**Galatians 5:22-23**). In addition, He gives us assurance that we belong to the Father (**Romans 8:16**).

Thirdly, we experience His ministry in worship and in ministry. Worship acceptable to the Father is worship "*in Spirit and truth*" (**John 4:23-24**). And the Spirit blesses our ministry by furnishing us with gifts (e.g. **1 Corinthians 12**) for the edification of Christ's body.

## D) How do we discern a true work of the Spirit?

Much that occurs within the contemporary church is attributed to the working of the Holy Spirit – be that at a corporate level or in the individual lives of believers. But how do we test such claims? **1 John 4:1-6** provides a very helpful guide to discerning true marks of the Spirit's ministry.

In this letter John seeks to reassure believers who have been troubled by false teaching (see **1 John 5:13** for a purpose statement for the letter). Within this passage he urges his readers to *“test the spirits”* (**1 John 4:1**) – that is, to test the teaching that they receive so as to discern whether it originates from *“the Spirit of truth”* or the *“spirit of error”* (**1 John 4:6**). There are three clear tests to conduct.

### 1. Test 1 – A true work of the Spirit exalts the true Jesus

John's readers faced false teaching that had imbibed the dualistic worldview of the surrounding culture. It was believed that the material world was inherently inferior to the spiritual world, and that therefore it would be impossible for God to inhabit a physical body. Thus they denied the true incarnation of Christ. Hence John writes: *“every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God”* (**1 John 4:2**).

A true work of the Spirit will always magnify Jesus, as revealed in Scripture, since one of His primary ministries is to *“bear witness”* about Jesus (**John 15:26**). Where Jesus is adored for who He is and what He has done, and when His saving work is lived out and proclaimed to those who don't know Him, then the Spirit is surely at work.

### 2. Test 2 – A true work of the Spirit overcomes the world

John describes the false teachers as coming *“from the world”* – from the system of unbelief that is the realm of lost humanity. By contrast Christians are described as those who *“have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”* (**1 John 4:4-5**) The world is expressed through its beliefs and practices. Christians

overcome the world through the Holy Spirit – false beliefs are rejected by the Spirit's truth and sinful practices are resisted by the Spirit's indwelling power (see the contrast Paul makes between the Fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh in **Galatians 5**).

When the Holy Spirit is present and at work, God's people will reject the false philosophies of the world and grow in holiness.

### 3. Test 3 – A true work of the Spirit emphasises the importance of God's Word

Within this letter, John emphasises the unique role played by the apostles. They were the ones who heard, saw, looked upon and touched "*the word of life*": the Lord Jesus (**1 John 1:1-4**). He reiterates this unique and foundational role by stressing "*We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us... By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.*" (**1 John 4:6**). From the earliest days of the church, Christians devoted themselves to "*the apostles' teaching*" (**Acts 2:42**).

Where the Spirit is at work, God's Word will be held in high esteem. This is highlighted when comparing **Ephesians 5:18** and following with **Colossians 3:16** and following. It is clear that "*be filled with the Spirit*" is essentially synonymous with "*let the word of Christ dwell in your richly*". If the Spirit is moving, the Word will be open.

### E) Conclusion

The work of the Holy Spirit is essential and we rely upon Him for all aspects of life and godliness. We must not let our contemporary obsession with certain debates set the parameters for our theology of the Holy Spirit. His work is wide and glorious.

### Recommended reading

Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*