

**WHAT IS
THE
HOLY SPIRIT?**

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Bible quotations are from the Revised Version
unless otherwise indicated.

In considering this question, we must bear in mind that the Bible sets the truth forward in a positive way, that is, it does not examine alternatives in order to arrive at truth. We will not find it stated in Scripture that the Holy Spirit is *not* a person coequal with God. Instead, there are a great number of positive statements concerning the Spirit's functions and qualities. By considering these statements together, knowing that one scripture does not contradict another but complements it, we may arrive at an understanding of what the Spirit is. At the same time, what it is not should become readily apparent.

In the Old Testament, the name 'Holy Spirit' is used infrequently, and the more common expression is 'the Spirit of God' or 'the Spirit of the Lord'. There is, however, no special distinction to be drawn, and we may regard these terms as synonymous.

The Hebrew and Greek words translated 'spirit' (Hebrew: *ruwach*; Greek: *pneuma*) are equivalent, both meaning 'wind', or 'breath', by resemblance 'spirit' [Strong's Concordance].

The word 'spirit', as it appears in the Bible, is used in two broad senses. First and most often, it denotes a quality, usually possessed by individuals, occasionally by groups of people collectively (2 Chronicles 21:16), of a nation (Isaiah 19:3), even of the world (1 Corinthians 2:12). The second use of 'spirit' is to denote a spirit being, divine (John 4:24), angelic (Hebrews 1:14) or demonic (Mark 3:11). Every use of 'spirit' falls into one of these two categories. Determining in which group the Holy Spirit belongs will assist us greatly in understanding what the Spirit is.

The Holy Spirit as power

It is significant that, with few exceptions, what is said in the Bible about the Spirit of God has to do with the Spirit's effect upon men. This effect is most conspicuous in the giving by God to chosen individuals abilities above man's natural capacity, for the accomplishment of God's purposes. Moses was given the power to prophesy and the wisdom to judge Israel. His gift was also delegated to others (Numbers 11:16-29). To certain of the Israelites under Moses, God gave the skills necessary to make the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant and the other special furniture of the sanctuary (Exodus 31:1-11). Samson was given immense physical strength, which God used to punish the Philistines (Judges 13:24,25; 14:5,6). Throughout Israel's history God also put His words in the mouth of His prophets for the guidance of His people:

2 Peter 1:21

For no prophecy ever came by the will of man:
but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost.

At His baptism, the Lord Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit from heaven and performed many miraculous works in the years following. During this time He also conferred the Holy Spirit in miracle-working power upon the apostles, and later appointed seventy others who also received miraculous gifts (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:29-34; Matthew 10:1-20; Luke 10:1-16). On the Day of Pentecost, in fulfilment of Jesus' promise (John 16:7), the Holy Spirit was poured out from heaven upon the apostles and other believers gathered in the upper room (Acts 2). From that day forth, during the time of the apostles, those who believed on Jesus Christ were privileged to have special abilities bestowed on them by the Spirit.

These things were all examples of God exerting a powerful effect upon men, but to say that the Holy Spirit is purely the power of God is not an adequate description.

The Holy Spirit as God's influence

Before the Flood, in a time when intense evil prevailed on the earth, God said,

Genesis 6:3

My spirit shall not always strive with man,
for that he is also flesh;
yet shall his days be an hundred and twenty years.

There is no suggestion here that God's power was insufficient to deal with man. Rather, God set a time limit upon His efforts to persuade "the world that then was" to turn from its wicked course. In this case, the Holy Spirit is the influence of God.

The spirit of man

Though he is a created being, man is also credited by Scripture with a spirit. In some cases the original word has been translated 'spirit' when the more literal meaning, 'breath', would have better suited the context. In Ecclesiastes we read,

Ecclesiastes 8:8

There is no man that hath power over the spirit,
to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death.

Here 'spirit' indicates a man's power to live, literally his 'breath', but in most occurrences of the word this is not the case, and 'spirit' is an accurate rendering.

We have said that the Spirit of God may be His power or influence. Let us consider in this connection the spirit of man. We find in Genesis 41, concerning Pharaoh's dream,

Genesis 41:8

And it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled.

We could not say in this place that Pharaoh's 'power' was troubled, or that his 'influence' was troubled. Nor would we do justice to the context with the literal translation, "in the morning Pharaoh had trouble breathing". Clearly, Pharaoh was troubled in his mind.

When Moses called for voluntary offerings for the tabernacle, the response of the Israelites is recorded thus,

Exodus 35:21

And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up,
and every one whose spirit made him willing

In other places, the spirit of individuals is described as 'jealous' (Numbers 5:14), 'hard' (Deuteronomy 2:30), 'sad' (1 Kings 21:5), 'anguished' (Job 7:11), 'contrite' (Psalm 34:8), 'broken' (Psalm 51:17), 'faithful' (Proverb 11:13), 'hasty' (Proverb 14:29), 'haughty', 'humble' (Proverb 16:18,19), 'patient', 'proud' (Ecclesiastes 7:8), 'perverse' (Isaiah 19:14) 'erring' (Isaiah 29:24), 'grieved' (Isaiah 54:6), 'ready' (Mark 14:38), 'meek', 'quiet' (1 Peter 3:4).

In all these instances the context shows that the spirit has to do with the inward man; that is, the word 'spirit' has been used to indicate the state of mind of the person concerned.

Elsewhere, the spirit of groups of people is described, where a particular mentality exists in common. Israel's idolatry is portrayed this way,

Hosea 1:12

the spirit of whoredom hath caused them to err,
and they have gone a whoring from under their God.

The "spirit of whoredom" was the disposition to be unfaithful, spiritually promiscuous, so to speak, as displayed in those who turned from Yahweh to serve other gods. Their outward acts of idolatry demonstrated their inner 'spirit', or mental attitude. And we find that in almost every case, the 'spirit' of a man is a function of his mind.

God's Spirit and the spirit of man

Our examination of man's spirit in endeavouring to find out about the spirit of God is valid, because the Scripture itself makes such a comparison. In First Corinthians, Paul wrote,

1 Corinthians 2:11

For who among men knoweth the things of a man,
save the spirit of the man, which is in him?
Even so, the things of God none knoweth,
save the spirit of God.

Here the apostle has told us that the spirit of a man knows “the things of a man”. A man's spirit is therefore not only a function of his mind, but a conscious function (the words ‘conscious’ and ‘conscience’ both derive from the Latin, meaning ‘with knowledge’). And there is a comparison made: we are familiar with man, and the Scripture uses what we can understand about ourselves to tell us something about God. It says, “even so”, that is, ‘similarly’, “the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God”. We cannot escape the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is a function, or characteristic, of the mind of God.

Paul specially qualified his statement here concerning man in two ways; firstly, he says, “who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man ...”. God is able to perceive the features of a man's spirit even before that spirit becomes manifested in words and deeds; we are unable to do that. We can, as the verse suggests, by introspection make some judgements concerning ourselves, but in the case of another we can only detect the mind of that person by what they show us, through what they say and do. Similarly, we can only perceive the things of God as He is pleased to reveal them. Secondly, Paul said, “the spirit of the man, *which is in him*”, but did not restrict God's Spirit with the same wording. God's Spirit is not confined to a particular location, but is able to proceed from Him for the accomplishment of His purposes (John 15:26).

The meaning of "holy"

The word 'holy', in the mouth of God's prophets, only ever refers to God Himself, and to persons and things associated with God or His worship. The Hebrew root means literally "to be clean", and is therefore a reference to the purity of God's character. By extension, it means 'sanctity', and indicates God's separateness from all unrighteousness. The word in the Greek scriptures also means 'sacred'; physically 'pure', morally 'blameless' [Strong's Concordance]. When used of persons or things associated with God, both words mean 'consecrated' or 'dedicated' to God.

We are now in a position to frame a tentative answer to the question, What is the Holy Spirit?

Generally speaking, we may say that the Holy Spirit is a function, or property, of the mind of God, inseparable from His divine character. Where the Spirit proceeds from Him, and exerts an effect upon man, it is God's power or influence. It remains for us to see if there is any mention in Scripture of the Holy Spirit that cannot be accommodated in these terms.

Spirit and will

It is important for us to carry our examination of the spirit of man a little further. We can see that a man's spirit has been in some cases opposed to God, and censured by the prophets, and in other cases approved of by God (Numbers 14:24; Psalm 34:18; Isaiah 57:15-21), making that individual eligible for God's blessings. But man is not a helpless victim of his own spirit; he has control over it. We have seen from Paul's words that a man's spirit "knoweth the things of a man" and therefore has to do with the conscious mind. The spirit of man must then, at least in principle, be under the control of man's will. God knows that this is so; in the closing chapters of the Old Testament, Malachi rebuked Israel, saying,

Malachi 2:16

... take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

In these few words, “take heed to your spirit”, it is implied that a man may undergo an alteration in spirit, if he is willing. Were that not possible, there would have been no point in the prophet saying the words. God’s desire in speaking thus through Malachi, indeed through all the prophets, was that those to whom the prophet spoke might heed the word of God, and change their minds.

A man’s will stands between his spirit and the word of God.

Acts 7 records the inspired testimony of Stephen before the Jewish council. Having laid before them the shameful history of Israel’s apostasy, he said,

Acts 7:51

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears;
ye do always resist the Holy Ghost:
as your fathers did, so do ye.

A man cannot resist God, except in his mind. The Jews against whom Stephen witnessed had filled up the measure of their fathers in refusing to submit to the words of God’s prophets. They had opposed their wills to God, shutting out His influence. Their minds could not be changed and their spirit was unaltered, manifesting itself in their actions. They had already betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, Jesus Christ, and upon hearing Stephen’s testimony against them, they took him and stoned him to death.

Their wills were involved in this course of events in two ways. Firstly, they had the choice to receive Stephen’s testimony or to close their minds to it; they chose the latter. The phrase, “uncircumcised in heart and ears”, described their state of mind in terms they would well have understood. Circumcision was a sign in the flesh of Israel’s consecration, or dedication, to God. “Uncircumcised in ears” - unwilling to commit their hearing to (or heed) God’s word; “uncircumcised in heart” - unwilling to commit themselves to God in trust; in short, lack of faith. Secondly, though they refused to hear

God's word, they still had a choice regarding their actions toward Stephen. They were not compelled to kill him, even though they made a pretence of obeying the Law; they chose to do it.

So we see that a man's will stands guard on the way into the mind, and also on the way out. If a man is guided by his spirit, then his state of mind is revealed to us in his speech and actions. We refer to this as character. Likewise, the things which God has said and done and caused to be recorded reveal to us His divine character.

A new spirit

During the Babylonian captivity, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, saying,

Ezekiel 36:25-27

And I will sprinkle clean water upon you,
and ye shall be clean;
from all your filthiness, and from all your idols,
will I cleanse you.
A new heart also will I give you,
and a new spirit will I put within you:
and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh,
and I will give you an heart of flesh.
And I will put my spirit within you,
and cause you to walk in my statutes,
and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them.

The spirit which God would put in His people would not be 'new', in the sense of an innovation; it would be His Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Malachi 3:6

I, the Lord, change not.

But in man, it would indeed be new. A new heart and a new spirit would amount to nothing less than a radical change in the inward man, with a corresponding change in character; and because the new spirit would be God's Spirit, the resulting new character would

necessarily be like God's. They would walk in His statutes and keep His judgements not from any external constraint, but from the heart, because they and God would be of like mind, and His standards would be reflected in all their thinking.

It is a fundamental principle of God's dealings with the human race that He will not override the will of man in order to make unfaithful men faithful; the choice has always belonged to man to respond to God or to turn away from Him. It was true of Adam (Genesis 2:17; 3:3,6), of Abraham (Genesis 22:2,12,18), of Moses (Hebrews 11:25-27) and the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 30:19), of Christ (Matthew 26:39; Hebrews 5:7,8); it is so now (Hebrews 4:7,11; 10:26,38; 12:25) and it will be so in the Kingdom age, for it says in Revelation,

Revelation 22:17

He that will, let him take of the water of life freely.

A man's spirit will not be changed unless he is willing for that change to take place. The "new spirit" of which Ezekiel prophesied would consequently find no place in a man, without that man first opening his mind to the influence of God. We see therefore that what Ezekiel spoke of would involve an alteration of man's spirit, indeed a transformation of that spirit, through God's influence.

It was prophesied that this change would follow a cleansing process; the Lord said, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you".

The apostle Peter, addressing the men of Israel on the Day of Pentecost, urged his hearers,

Acts 2:38

Repent ye, and be baptised every one of you
in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins;
and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Spirit]

(RV & margin)

In this one sentence, the steps toward a change in spirit have been concisely set forward. “Repent ye ...”: the Greek word *metanoeo* means, quite literally, ‘to change the mind’. Repentance is proof that the way to the mind is not closed. The preaching of the word of God is recognised as truth, leading to a man’s acknowledgement of his former disobedience, and his humble request for God’s forgiveness. This act of contrition is a sign that the mind has been opened to the influence of God and that a man is willing to act in accordance with the knowledge that he has received.

“be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins ...”. We see now what the Lord’s statement in Ezekiel, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you”, referred to: not the act of baptism, but the remission of sins through a man’s repentance and faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice. As it is written,

1 John 1:7, 9

... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin ...

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The “filthiness” of Israel was its unrighteousness.

“... and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Spirit]”. A blessing from God is not forced upon any man, but must be received voluntarily, in this case by the fulfilment of the conditions set down by God. The implanting of the Holy Spirit in the believer depends upon his willingness to receive it.

It is quite understandable that God’s cleansing of the believer from unrighteousness required Christ’s blood to have been shed. It is perhaps not quite so apparent why the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was also held back until this time, but the two things are linked. There is a fundamental difference between the Jewish age and the Gospel age, expressed in John thus,

John 1:17

For the law was given by Moses;
grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

Grace is the favour of God toward us, manifested in justification by faith, which is the reckoning by God of righteousness to the believer on account of that individual's faith in Jesus Christ. It is God's free gift (Romans 5:15-18).

Truth is that revelation of knowledge given to us by God. It comprises the whole body of Scripture, of which the New Testament is the key.

Conscience

In repenting, we have opened our minds to the influence of God. Our new-found knowledge of God's grace then manifests itself in the cleansing of our conscience (Hebrews 10:22), and that forms the basis of our spiritual change by removing the impediment of guilt and self-reproach. This was not possible under the Law.

'Conscience' is not instinct or emotion, nor is it something we are born with. By definition it has to do with knowledge and understanding; it is formed from what we have learned and believe to be correct, and is our standard of truth, justice and morality. It is the 'inner judge' by which we also assess our own thoughts and conduct. The Jew under the Law Covenant would not have felt guilt had he not known that the Law condemned him for the smallest infringement (Romans 7:7; James 2:10). The Law was in his conscience, sitting in judgement upon him and condemning him, without reprieve (Zechariah 9:11). Because of this, his 'spirit', or state of mind, was one of bondage, bound for life to the service of the Law, striving to be righteous but because of the weakness of the flesh always falling short of the Law's standard of righteousness.

Our conscience could not be cleansed if we did not know that God has reckoned us righteous, and we learn this from His word.

Romans 8:15

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear;
but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry,
Abba, Father.

The old spirit of bondage (Jews to the Law, Gentiles to false gods) and constant fear of retribution and death is gone. We no longer have any reason to fear, knowing that if we confess our sins He is just to forgive us, for Christ's sake, and we are able to continue in a cleansed and justified condition, in perfect covenant-relationship with God, not having fallen from His favour because of the weakness of our flesh.

For despite our best efforts we continue to commit sin (1 John 1:8-10), and justification is a means which God has provided to allow us to be received as sons. With this assurance, the change in our state of mind is profound, especially in our attitude toward God (Hebrews 10:22).

Upon this spiritual foundation, our conscience is restructured by the word of God. With the New Testament the vital key, the whole Bible now reveals to us the mind and character of God. Above all, we have the perfect example of the Lord Jesus. With patient attention to the scriptures and prayer for understanding, our conscience is built anew according to divine standards and becomes available to us as a guide in every judgement that we are called upon to make.

With a conscience of truth, its influence is no longer solely on the outside, but exists within. Jesus prayed to His Father, "Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth". The Greek word translated "sanctify" means 'make holy'; we are made holy by the influence of God's word.

Faith

Grace, truth; there remains one other factor in our spiritual change, and that is the inner commitment to be guided by the knowledge that we have received. This commitment is faith.

The fact that miraculous abilities were given by God to believers at and after Pentecost should not distract us from the principles involved. Essentially, those special gifts were no different from the manifestations of the Holy Spirit recorded in earlier parts of the Bible, and had no direct effect upon the character of those who possessed them. The miraculous gifts existed for a particular purpose in the early Church, and when that purpose had been served, they ceased. They were a means to God's end, and not an end in themselves. Their function was to establish the Church, firstly by demonstrating that the preaching was God-ordained and secondly, in the absence of the New Testament, to provide the substance of that preaching. Once the New Testament had been delivered to the Church, there remained no further need for inspired human witnesses, and the miracles ceased.

It does not fit into the present phase of God's plan for us to work miracles, nor would it suit His purpose, with respect to our mental processes, to perform miracles on us. What God desires in us is the development of the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is Himself the image of the Father (Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 4:4). The outward likeness in character cannot be produced without our minds being formed in the image of His mind: does not the apostle say, "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16)? Our knowledge is not to be compared with His for completeness, nor are our faith and self-control to be compared with His for strength, but the principle is the same. As displayed in the man Christ Jesus, character is the product of a consecrated will guided by the knowledge of God.

Conclusion

The answer to our question, ‘What is the Holy Spirit?’, may be summed up in this way: firstly, the Holy Spirit is a quality of the mind of God; secondly, where it proceeds from Him for the accomplishment of His purposes, it is His power or influence. Lastly, where the Holy Spirit is said to be within the believer, it is a renewal of mind, after the pattern of Christ, through the word of God. Paul wrote,

Ephesians 4:17-22

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord,
that ye no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk,
in the vanity of their mind,
being darkened in their understanding,
alienated from the life of God
because of the ignorance that is in them,
because of the hardening of their heart;
who being past feeling gave themselves up to lasciviousness,
to work all uncleanness with greediness.
But ye did not so learn Christ; if so be that ye heard him,
and were taught in him, even as truth is in Jesus;
that ye put away, as concerning your former manner of life,
the old man, which waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit;
and that ye be renewed in the spirit of your mind,
and put on the new man,
which after God hath been created in righteousness
and holiness of truth.