

The Holy Spirit

How to recognize him at work

Pentecost 2020

Numbers 11:24-30 (ESV)

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

²⁶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, “My lord Moses, stop them.” ²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21 (ESV)

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

2 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Peter's Sermon at Pentecost

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ ““And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;

¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;

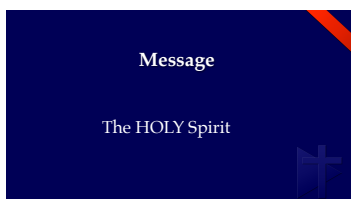
²⁰ the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

John 7:37-39 (ESV)

Rivers of Living Water

³⁷ On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.



Introduction:

This message has been 42 years in preparation since one night in July 1978 when the presence and power of God ignited within me as people prayed for my ‘Baptism in the Holy Spirit.’ In the teenage language of the time, I was ‘zapped’ by God.

In what I have just shared it is obvious that I did not have the theology or adequate language to describe what I had experienced.

The main conclusion I drew from my experience was simply that God was undeniably real. That was enough: God is real and I needed to take him seriously and this is going somewhere.

I look at the stories of people like Abraham and Moses and Peter and Paul where I see similar experiences of impact that resulted in lives lived in reference to God by people who could never walk away or choose otherwise. The Holy Spirit has a way of ruining people for anything else.

Since then I have had many opportunities to learn about the Holy Spirit that became real to me at age 17. There have been many distinct experiences since then and an ongoing awareness ever since.

Then over the last 18 years I have been here pastoring a church with believers from all over the world. My operating slogan became ‘Assume nothing’. In particular, whatever is said in English could mean things I would never have expected. I learned to listen carefully. One such word that could mean a variety of things is ‘spirit’. So before I talk about or pray for the ‘Holy Spirit’, let’s try and get clear on the issues around ‘spirit’.

Development

I recognize that many people through history and across the cultures have spiritual experiences of God. The Bible bears witness to that too. Before we look at some of that diversity: good, bad and ugly, the thing I want to get across today more than anything else is that **the Spirit of God we refer to as the ‘Holy Spirit’ comes and works totally in reference to the Word of God revealed and given to us in Jesus Christ.** The Holy Spirit is all about Jesus.

The distortions of this I see in contemporary Christianity around the Holy Spirit all typically involve a splitting away of spirituality, spiritual gifts and Holy Spirit ministries from the Person and the Word, of Jesus Christ.

I’ll come back to this later and repeat it because it’s so crucial!
African, Asian and European-ish friends all need to hear this.

It seems that all peoples through history have recognized and usually feared spiritual power yet some play with it.

When people see someone who lived bigger and stronger than everyone else the cause was seen as spiritual. The god(s) must be with him or her.

When David, in purity, courage and skill slew Goliath the people -both enemies and friends- concluded: This is spiritual, a great god -or the only god- is with him. Watch that boy. Remember his name.

At the same time when people knew fear and felt small, they called out for spiritual power of their god to give them the strength they lacked. It was said in WWI that there were no atheists in the trenches. Fear led many to call out in prayer.

All this happened in a worldview where spiritual power was believed to be available from the gods, or the heavens, if you know how to access it.

In many cultures there were people who were believed or known to be expert in these things. Priests, witchdoctors, shamans, spiritual healers, tribal elders, or versions of ‘holy-man’ etc. are all examples of this. They were the ones who supposedly knew how to call on the spiritual powers people could sense existed, be they gods, demons, angels or local spirits. From within the light of Christ this is all very murky and dark.

The basic idea was to harness the power of spiritual entities through prayers incantations, rituals, drugs, music, etc.

The nature of all this is typically manipulative. It’s about getting something from someone that might not be right to have like the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden or the Tower of Babel. It’s about manipulating or snatching a blessing that may come with very bad complications.

The Bible is aware of all this. This is what the Nations or Gentiles do. It is spiritual, but not holy.

From recent personal experience I can say that in Africa and India there is a huge crisis among Christians today around the person and nature of the Holy Spirit. The reason I am so sure of this is because of the number of pastors I meet in person or hear on-line who consider themselves an assigned pipeline of the Holy Spirit. When I hear people like this speak it’s all about them. They themselves are the holy or spiritual one. Their focus seems to be getting people to believe in them rather than to know and trust Jesus.

Speaking about one’s own spiritual experience is something I do carefully. I started this sermon that way but imagine if 20 minutes or more later I was still setting out my spiritual credentials and building the picture that I have the power and the favour of heaven so if you want something from God you can come to me.

The cosmic view behind this is that God gives spiritual power to a few people and everyone else needs to connect to them. They become the go-to guru, the priest on tap, the serviceable shaman etc etc. This seems to be a natural assumption if not archetypal.

For those who like dependency and co-dependency it's a perfect fit. It's a very small step from this to commercialization or validating a social structure.

What I am saying is that many modes of spiritual ministry -past and present- have nothing or little to do with the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as the Bible describes it. Something else is going on.

yet around the world this is very much alive. There are multiple examples of how Christian ministers operate in this model and so I consider them behaving more like witch doctors than ministers of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the West this awareness of spiritual power has largely faded compared to Africa and Asia, but not entirely. I would say that the cosmic view of Star Wars has -since the late 1970s- expressed it as ‘The force be with you.’ So whatever it is that makes the difference in the space-time reality it was depersonalized as something that was acknowledged but nothing more. It’s as personal as an algorithm. This is very different from the *Logos* described in John’s Gospel, the One through whom everything came into being who came into the world.

Texts:

In today's readings I see a few indications of what I have been sketching here. [Numbers 11:24-30] In the Exodus, Moses was the man of God and he is still remembered as 'The Prophet'. The Lord God's spirit was upon him and his words were heard as the Word of the Lord. Then if people had a complaint against the Lord they took it to Moses even to the point where he feared for his life.

So on a certain day Moses and 68 of the 70 elders of Israel go to the tent of meeting. The way Moses spoke for God was seen flowing from the 68 at the tent and the 2 who had remained in the camp. The Spirit of the Lord had overflowed Moses and this had possible implications.

Joshua was watching Moses' back and he was concerned. The whole social-political setting could be disturbed. This is very familiar. People often want the Spirit of God to confirm existing orders of society and 'church' but God sometimes empowers people irregardless of who they may be in the social scheme, or in this case, whether they were on consecrated or unconsecrated ground.

I take this as an early sign that God will empower who he wants, when he wants. As Paul would later write to the Corinthians, "The Holy Spirit gives gifts where he wishes."¹ Those who want religion to be a stabilizing glue for society or empire always have a problem with this because it actually ruffles stable arrangements. More of this is to come.

Then as regards the Acts 2 account of the Pentecost moment - which archeology suggests happened here on the Southern steps of the temple- we hear an account where no person is directing or facilitating the drama.



It's a happening everyone can notice involving wind, fire, noise and multiple languages being spoken. There is much commotion.

¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

There is something extraordinary happening, something beyond the world we know.

The very best question asked here is: "What does this mean?"

Is this the God of Israel or something else such as a drunken celebration of the harvest among Galilean fishermen and peasants come to town?

It is this question that brings forth the first sermon of the church from Peter. This was Q&A preaching!

Our reading today only covered Peter's opening response where he links what is happening to the prophet Joel. Then from verse 22 he makes the necessary connection between the spiritual activity everyone is observing and Jesus Christ.

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—
²³ this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

What does this mean?

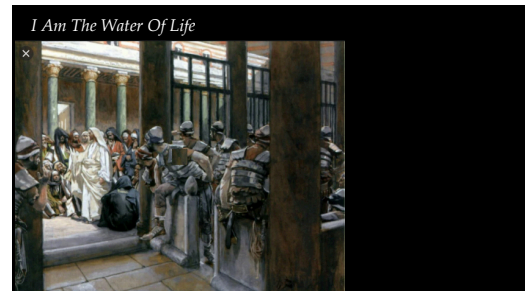
What you see happening, as predicted by the prophet Joel is all about Jesus the Messiah of God, whom you killed. But God raised him – so there is a serious issue for you to consider!

¹ 1 Corinthians 12.11

Jesus had earlier made this connection between the flowing activity of the Holy Spirit and himself very clear to both his disciples and everyone else.

If the temple authorities kept a record of known disturbers of the peace, Jesus would have been on it repeatedly. Several times he hijacked the key liturgical moment of great feasts by referring it all to himself. This is such an example:

³⁷ On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”



It's so clear! If you believe in him as being who and what he says he is, The Holy Spirit of God will flow out of you. That is the connection! That ensures it's the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

I did not know that 42 years ago.

My spiritual experience was from God but I did not understand the connection to Jesus.

Like many others I tried to logically map out The Trinity as a way of getting it clear but it's not the solution.

What I want to so stress to you all as the family of God, is that the Holy Spirit flows in and out of us when we believe in Jesus as God's gift, God's message, God's salvation, God's blessing, God's deliverance to us.

In Christ Jesus God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing under heaven.² This flows when we come to Jesus and abide in him.

So to the repetition I promised:

The 'Holy Spirit' of God comes and works totally in reference to the Word of God revealed and given to us in Jesus Christ.

When we genuinely come to Jesus in faith as Lord and Saviour, the Holy Spirit flows within us and from us.

The river flowing from us is one that others will recognize as holy, if there is any spiritual discernment. If not the question will be asked again: "What does this mean?" Some will mock and others consider more.

So to end, let me hammer this again,

Christian Spirituality is all about Jesus.

The Holy Spirit of God acts as an advocate for all things Jesus.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the trigger. Come to Jesus and the Spirit works.

Those who seek spirituality or minister spiritual power without Jesus are off track and possibly dangerous.

Jesus is God's Word to us and God's Holy Spirit flows when we come and abide in Him.

Amen?

² Ephesians 1.3 ff.