

What's New? The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

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We live in a time when there is a widespread hunger for a “new spirituality” or “spiritual renewal.” Outside the church it is expressed in the popularity of the “new age” movement. Among Christians it is expressed in the growth of pentecostal and charismatic movements within and outside traditional churches, and in the popular demand (also among “ordinary” Christians) for literature and study groups dealing with “spiritual development.”

However differently these insiders and outsiders seek to satisfy their spiritual hunger, they all talk about it in the same way. They feel oppressive boredom, meaninglessness, stagnation, burnout, hopelessness— deadness— in their individual lives, in their personal relationships, in their work (even “good works” in the service of justice and peace), in the political and social structures that shape their lives— and in churches that conduct business as usual while everything is falling apart in the lives of their own members and in the world around them. These people hunger for new freedom, joy, enthusiasm, and energy that make them “feel alive” again and enable them to hope that things can be different in their own lives and in the world. Their hunger for a new spirituality is hunger for new life in the midst of all the deadness in and around them. Whatever words they use to talk about it, they hunger for the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and Giver of new life.

Different people (including different Christians), however, have different ideas about what this new spirituality or new life would look like, and different ideas about the renewing spiritual power that is the source of it. In this chapter we will first seek to learn from scripture who the Holy Spirit is who is the true source of the new life for which we all hunger. Then we will consider the meaning of authentic Christian spirituality that is based on the presence and work of this Spirit. Finally, we will discuss the “gifts” of the Spirit that enable us to experience and live by such a spirituality.

WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the presence and work of the living God here and now in our individual lives, in the church, and in the world. In this section we will look at some of the implications of this one simple (not so simple!) statement.

A Personal Spirit

A common error is to speak of the Spirit as a neuter: “When it works in our lives” or “When it controls what we feel and say and do.” We have a tendency to think of the Spirit as an impersonal divine power or energy that somehow gets into people. A frequent but badly mistaken analogy is to think of the Spirit as something like electricity: If we can somehow be “plugged in” to God, a “power” will flow into us that makes the light shine in our hearts or “recharges our batteries.” Such an analogy depersonalizes the Holy Spirit, and it depersonalizes human beings. The Spirit is not some magical “something” that gets into us but Someone who comes to dwell in and among us. Nor are human beings objects like light bulbs or batteries to be “turned on” and controlled by some outside force; they are thinking, willing, feeling persons. We can avoid all kinds of superstitious ideas about the Holy Spirit if we think of the Spirit’s relationship with us as a personal relationship between God and ourselves.

What kind of person is the Holy Spirit? When we discussed the doctrine of the Trinity in chapter 5, we considered the suggestion that we should think of the Spirit as the feminine side of God. There is good reason to take this suggestion seriously. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the word for spirit (*ruach*) is feminine. In the New Testament, the beginning of Christian life is described as “birth” of the Spirit (John 3: 4– 6), and the comforting role of the Spirit (Acts 9: 31) reminds us of the God who cares for us as a mother comforts her child (Isa. 66: 13). Moreover, a theology of the “maternity” of the Spirit could counterbalance male imagery of God as “Father” and “Son.” So there is no reason why we should not, and good reason why we could, use feminine as well as masculine imagery in thinking and talking about God and the Spirit of God. But “the Triune God is neither an exclusive fraternity nor a company composed of two males and a female.” 1 God (especially God as “Spirit”) is beyond all our gender distinctions. All our language about God is analogical or metaphorical language used to talk about God’s relation to us. In order to keep this in mind, we will avoid speaking of the Holy Spirit as “she” just as we have avoided speaking of God as “he.”

Who, then, is the God who is present in and among us here and now as personal Spirit? The Trinitarian God we learn to know in the scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments.

The Spirit of the God of Israel

The Old Testament tells us several things about the Spirit of God that Christians who think exclusively of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament are prone to forget.

1. The Spirit is at work in God’s creation and preservation of the world and human life in it (Gen. 1: 2; 2: 7; Ps. 104: 30). In both the Old and New Testaments the word spirit means literally “wind,” then “breath of life” (the wind we breathe in and out in order to stay alive), and finally simply “life.” It is no accident that the Nicene Creed calls the Holy Spirit “the Lord, the Giver of Life.” God’s Spirit is the source and “livingness” of all life— first of all simply physical, creaturely life. Wherever there is life instead of death in the world (in human beings and in the natural environment of human beings) and wherever life is respected, preserved, and defended— there we may recognize the creative, life-giving Spirit of God at work.

2. In the Old Testament the Spirit of God is the source of all human culture, art, creativity, and wisdom (Ex. 31: 1– 6; 35: 31; Job 32: 8; Dan. 1: 17). Perhaps we can recognize an echo of this “worldly” work of the Spirit in Phil. 4: 8– 9, where Paul tells the Christians in Philippi to “think about” a list of virtues that were the highest virtues of ancient “pagan” Greek culture. We may recognize all such “nonreligious” gifts as gifts of God’s Spirit wherever we see them outside or inside the circle of believers.

3. Finally, the Spirit is the Spirit of the God who is on the side of all who are helpless, poor, wretched, and oppressed because they have been forgotten or excluded by the rich and powerful (Ps. 103: 6 and Ps. 146). The Spirit of the Lord is therefore present in (or “upon”) leaders and prophets who demand and promise political, economic, and social justice for the victims of injustice (Isa. 11: 1– 5; 42: 1– 4; 61: 1– 4). Wherever such justice is done in the world (even if it is by those who do not know God), there the Spirit of the Lord is at work. And wherever such justice is not done (even if those who allow or cause it are pious believers), there the Spirit of the Lord is absent.

In the New Testament the Spirit is present and at work primarily in individual Christians and in the Christian community. But the New Testament itself tells us that the “wind” (Spirit) blows where it will (John 3: 8). And the Old Testament tells us specifically that this means also in the world outside the circle of believers however and by whomever natural and physical human life is maintained; wherever there is wisdom, beauty, and creativity; wherever justice is done for the sake of the poor and oppressed. The Holy Spirit does not belong to us Christians and is not trapped in our hearts or in our church. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of a God who is Creator, Preserver, and Defender of the life of all God’s creation and all God’s creatures.

The Spirit Who Was Present in and Sent by Jesus Christ

According to the New Testament, if we want to know who the Holy Spirit is, we have to look first at Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament connects the Spirit and Jesus in two ways: Jesus is one who received and bore the Spirit, and one who promised and sent the Spirit.

The Old Testament prophets spoke of a coming Messiah who would be filled with the Spirit (Isa. 11: 1– 2; 42: 1; 61: 1). The Gospels tell us that their prophecies were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. He was conceived by the Spirit (Matt. 1: 20). At his baptism the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove (Matt. 3: 16). By the power of the Spirit he healed the sick, cast out demonic forces that destroyed people’s minds and bodies (Matt. 12: 28), and brought the kingdom of God to the poor (Luke 4: 18). Peter later summed up his whole story by proclaiming Jesus as one whom God anointed “with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10: 38).

At this point we do not have to think of Jesus specifically as the Son of God or God-with-us. The Gospels teach us to think of him also as a human being who at every point in his life, in everything he said and did, was filled, led, inspired, and empowered by God’s Holy Spirit. Look at Jesus, they tell us, if you want to know what it means to have the Holy Spirit dwell within you. He is our prime example of what it means to be a Spirit-filled person.

What kind of life is that? It is not the kind of life people in his time (as in our time?) expected of a “spiritual” person. Rather, it was the life of a person who went to parties, ate and drank, had a good time. He talked more about what people did with their money than about their sexual purity and was as interested in the health of their bodies as in their souls. Jesus was the friend and companion not just of the morally pure and pious but of immoral, unbelieving sinners. He defended the cause of those who were rejected and despised by polite society and the religious and political establishment. He believed that human need takes precedence over strict conformity to the law. He came to serve other people, not to assert his moral and religious superiority over them. He loved his enemies and did good to those who hated him. He trusted and served the God he called Father even when it did not pay off in personal success and happiness, even when it meant giving up his own life for unworthy, no-good sinners. His life was the life of one who prayed even when everything he had worked and hoped for was denied him and he felt forsaken by God. That is the kind of life that is the result of God’s Holy Spirit coming to dwell in a person.

Jesus was not only filled with the Spirit himself; he promised the coming of the (his) Spirit to his followers. In his “farewell speeches” in John 14— 15, Jesus spoke about an “Advocate,” the Holy Spirit, who will come after he is gone. Here we learn several new things about who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does: (a) The Holy Spirit comes in Jesus’ name (John 14: 26), is in fact Jesus himself with his followers in a new way (John 14: 16). To put it in Paul’s

language, the Holy Spirit is none other than the risen Christ himself, continuing the work that the earthly Christ began, (b) The coming Spirit will be a “teacher,” the “Spirit of truth,” who will remind Jesus’ followers of what he taught them in the past and who will have new things to say to them (John 14: 26; 16: 12). (c) The Spirit is promised to the community of Jesus’ disciples. This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost when the Spirit came when “they were all together in one place” (Acts 2: 1). The promise of the Spirit, in other words, is first of all a promise made not to isolated individuals but to the church— not just for its own sake but for the sake of its service of the kingdom of God in the world. We will return later to the significance of the last two of these points. Right now it is the first that interests us: If we want to know who the Holy Spirit is and what the Spirit does, and if we want to know what a Spirit-filled person looks like, we have to look first at the story of Jesus. The Spirit is by definition the Spirit who dwelt in Jesus, comes from him, and continues the work he began.

The Unique Work of the Holy Spirit

We have said that the Spirit is the Spirit of God the Creator, the Lord of Israel, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. But the Spirit is not just the agent or instrument of God the Father and God the Son. According to the New Testament, the Spirit does something that is the Spirit’s own unique work. It can be summarized with the word new. The Holy Spirit brings new creaturely life that is stronger than sickness and even death itself; gives new beginnings to people whose lives seem to be at a dead end; brings new wisdom and guidance from God; calls, holds together, and sends out a new reconciled and reconciling community called the church; works in the world to create a whole new humanity and a whole new creation. When the Spirit breaks in, old ways of thinking and living are left behind and new ways of thinking and living begin to take over. Old boring, oppressive, and dead social structures and institutions are transformed into exciting new, liberating ones. It may not happen all at once, but when the Holy Spirit comes there is the dawn of a new day, hope for a new and different future, and courage and strength to move toward it.

People who like things the way they are, who benefit from the status quo, who therefore value stability, permanence, and order above all else— they are suspicious and afraid of the Holy Spirit, and too much talk about the Spirit makes them nervous and defensive. But people who suffer and see no way out of suffering, who are enslaved and oppressed by their own or others’ sinfulness and injustice— they yearn for the coming of the Holy Spirit and cannot talk enough about it. For the Spirit is not just the Lord and Giver of Life but the Lord and Giver of new life— to individuals, to churches, to the natural environment, to political, social, and economic structures.

Discerning the Spirit and Testing the Spirits

Not every new thing is the work of the Holy Spirit— not every shattering emotional experience that changes a person’s life, not every new insight into the meaning and purpose of life, not every new vision and plan for correcting what is wrong with the church and the world. Moreover, some established ways of thinking and living that have become familiar to us may be the result of the renewing work of the Spirit that began before we came along. (Protestants, for instance, believe this about the new insights and goals of the Reformation.) But if any and every new thing does not automatically indicate the presence and work of God’s Spirit, and if

everything that seems “old” to us does not indicate the absence of the Spirit, how can we recognize the Spirit’s word and work among us?

The question is made even more difficult because the Spirit works inwardly in human hearts and minds, and there is therefore the danger that we will confuse the Spirit’s inspiration with our own ideas and opinions, and the Spirit’s guidance and empowerment with the fulfillment of our own personal or collective wishes, desires, and ambitions. Psychologists (confirmed by the history of religion) have shown that the ecstasy of religious experience is sometimes only thinly veiled sexual ecstasy. Social analysts have noted ironically how strange it is that both Christians who defend and those who protest against the present situation in church and society are sure that the “Holy Spirit” supports the self-interest of their particular gender, race, class, nation, and religious group. Church members are not always wrong in suspecting that their leaders sometimes claim to be “led by the Spirit” when they are simply defending their own conservative or liberal ideological biases, just as church leaders are not always wrong in suspecting that church members can do the same thing.

The Holy Spirit, in other words, is not the only spirit at work in and among us. There are also other spirits: our own individual spirits, the spirit of the times, the spirit of this or that particular interest group. There are also the spirits of envy, revenge, malice, greed, lust for power, and other evil spirits (at work in Christians inside the church as well as in non-Christians outside the church!).

Scripture tells us not to “believe every spirit” but to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4: 1). How can we do that? Both a negative and positive answer can be given. The negative answer is that the Holy Spirit is not to be confused with any feeling, thought, or desire within us, or with any liberal or conservative movement in the church or in the world outside the church. That does not mean that the Spirit is the Spirit of an unknown God whose will and work we have to figure out for ourselves from our own personal experience or from an analysis of the world around us. For (and this is the positive answer to the question) the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the God we know from the pages of the Old and New Testaments— the God of Israel, the God who was uniquely present and at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and continues to be present and at work in the risen Jesus and the community gathered to bear witness to him. The Holy Spirit may— will!— say and do unanticipated things that are new to all of us (conservatives and liberals alike), but they will always be new and surprising things that are the will and work of this God. To know who the Spirit is does not automatically solve the problem of deciding what we will think and do if we are Spirit-filled Christians. Nor does it automatically tell us what the church should say and do if it is a Spirit-filled church. But if we know what kind of personal and communal life is willed and created by the triune God we come to know in scripture, then we will know where we have to look to find the answers.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Having spoken about who the Holy Spirit is and having established the criteria for testing the spirits and discerning the Spirit, we now return to the hunger for a new spirituality or for spiritual renewal we spoke about at the beginning of this chapter. What would a Christian spirituality that comes from the life-renewing Spirit of God look like? We will answer this question first by describing some general characteristics of an authentic Christian spirituality.

Christian spirituality begins by looking outside, not inside, ourselves. A very long tradition that began in classical Roman Catholicism and has continued to be popular with many Protestants assumes that spiritual renewal begins by looking deep within our own souls and our private religious experience. Behind this assumption is the belief of the ancient Greeks that the human soul is a “little piece of divinity” in us, so that to get in touch with ourselves at the deepest level is to get in touch with God or the Spirit of God. It is true that God’s Spirit comes to dwell within us. But we have just seen that it is not necessarily the presence of the Holy Spirit we discover when we analyze and meditate on our inner selves and the religious significance of our personal experience. It may be only our own finite and often sinful human feelings, wishes, longings, and ambitions. If we want to distinguish between God’s Spirit and our own spirits, we said, we have to look at what scripture tells us about who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does. This means (in direct contrast to a common approach in spiritual development programs today) that if we want to recognize and experience the presence of God’s life-renewing Spirit in us, we must be willing first to look away from ourselves, outside ourselves, beyond our personal experience.

If I want to know what God is doing and promises to do in my life, I cannot just analyze and tell my little story (or listen to the little stories of others); I must interpret my story (and theirs) in light of God’s story with ancient Israel and the first Christian community. If I want to know what it would mean for me to be a truly spiritual person, I must first of all look at the life of Jesus Christ and the kind of person he was, not at my own life and the kind of person I would like to be. If it is really God’s agenda in our lives and not our own that we are interested in, and if it is a genuinely Christian spirituality and not just some kind of self-concocted spirituality we want, we must first follow Calvin’s advice to “get out of ourselves,” “forget ourselves,” stop circling round and round our own personal feelings, needs, problems, fears, and hopes, even our own “spiritual journey” (Institutes 3.7.1– 5). We must first let ourselves be told something we cannot tell ourselves about the work of the Spirit of the God of the Bible who does indeed come to us but not from us. We will see later that this happens as we come together with fellow Christians in the church who gather week after week to understand their individual lives in light of the story of the God who has been at work in the world long before they came along and will still be at work in the world long after they are gone; and in light of the story of the Christ who is not just “my” Lord or the church’s Lord but Lord of the world.

The first thing to be said, then, about Christian spirituality in distinction from other forms of spirituality is that it is not self-centered but God-centered and Christ-centered. We need not be afraid that we will be left out if we forget ourselves (at least for a little while) and focus on what the Bible tells us about the Spirit and the Spirit’s work. For the Spirit is the Spirit of a God who cares for each of us, knows better than we ourselves what we need most, and promises to be present and at work in our hearts and lives with renewing power just as we give up a self-centered preoccupation with ourselves to think about the Holy Spirit of God who comes not from inside but from outside us.

Christian spirituality is this-worldly, not otherworldly. Some Christians think that to be “born again” of the Spirit means to experience renewal that is purely private and religious. Spiritual life has to do with prayer, seeking personal inspiration from Bible-reading, and feeling the presence of God when we withdraw from the world to commune with God in the company of a

few like-minded Christians. Spirituality has nothing to do with such “unspiritual” things as bodily needs and pleasures, how we make and spend money, or the social arrangements that shape our public lives. Again and again in this book we have run into this kind of spirituality that identifies Christian life with indifference toward or contempt for everything that is physical and this-worldly, and longs to escape into the higher and purer life of the soul. Now we have to criticize this false spirituality in order to take seriously what the Bible tells us precisely about the presence and work of God’s Holy Spirit.

We have seen that the Spirit we meet in scripture is the Spirit of a this-worldly God— a God who (1) created, blesses, protects, and defends the physical life of all God’s creatures; (2) is at work to establish just social conditions that provide for the welfare especially of those who are most unable to care for themselves; (3) came to us in a flesh-and-blood human being who was the friend of worldly sinners and gave his life to reconcile all kinds of people to each other as well as to God; (4) called together the Christian community not just to enjoy fellowship with each other but to be empowered to serve the world God loves; (5) promises not only a new heaven but a whole new earth.

The Holy Spirit of this God enables people not to escape from the world but to live in it in such a way that not only their personal lives but also the world around them begins to be made new. Truly spiritual people, therefore, are not recognized by how suspicious they are of physical needs and pleasures but by how joyfully, thankfully, and responsibly they acknowledge them as good gifts of God. They are recognized not just by how much they pray but by how much they pray for the world. They are recognized not just by how much they “praise the Lord” for what “the Lord has done for me” but by how sensitive their praise makes them to the needs and hurts of other people and the protection of the natural environment in which they live. They are recognized not just by how much they read the Bible, but by how their Bible reading influences their business practices, political commitments, and social relationships. They are not recognized just by their testimonies to how God befriended and came to their aid when they were lost in sin, but by the way they befriend and come to the aid of other lost sinners.

A spirituality that retreats from the world into the self-serving safety of a private religious life (either alone or in the company of other religious people) is a false spirituality that flees the Spirit of God. True Christian spirituality cheerfully and confidently plunges into the life of this world, for there is where we meet the Spirit of the God of the Bible who is at work not to save us from but in and for the sake of the world.

Christian spirituality recognizes the presence and work of the Holy Spirit as much in ordinary as in extraordinary events. Some Christians expect and find evidences of the Spirit’s work only when they see (often through the agency of Christians of great faith and charismatic power) miraculous restoration to health when the doctors have said there is no hope, or astonishing deliverance from trouble and hardship when all human wisdom and resources have been exhausted. God’s powerful Spirit can, of course, work in such inexplicable, miraculous ways. Why should there not be some Christians with “faith that can move mountains”? But Christians who know the Spirit of the God of the Bible also expect and find the work of the Spirit in ordinary, everyday human experience when there seems to be no supernatural intervention. They recognize and thank God for the life-giving power of God’s Spirit when health is restored and life is saved in a hospital by the scientific knowledge and technical skill of doctors and

nurses who may or may not be Christians. They recognize and thank God for the justice-bringing work of God's Spirit when they see justice done by a "secular" court of law or governmental body (sometimes despite the indifference or opposition of some very "spiritual" Christians and churches). They recognize and thank God for the work of the Spirit of the risen Christ when alienated marriage partners are reconciled through the mediation of an agnostic therapist. Knowing the great Spirit of the great God who is free to "blow where it will," Christians expect and recognize the work of God's Spirit wherever, by whomever they see life preserved, justice done, hostile individuals and groups reconciled, new beginnings and new life. It does not matter to them whether they, the church, or even God "get credit" for it. They rejoice and their faith is strengthened wherever in the world they see evidences of God's life-renewing Spirit at work, and they gladly join hands to cooperate also with non-Christians or questionable Christians through whom they see their God at work, grateful that everything does not depend on us Christians and our church.

It is a sign of false spirituality and weak faith when people are unwilling or unable to recognize the work of the Spirit in ordinary processes of everyday life as well as in miraculous interruptions of it, through people who do not even know by whose Spirit it is that they know what they know and do what they do, as well as through Christians of great faith.

Christian spirituality recognizes the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in bad as well as in good times. The spirituality of some Christians is based on their experience of how God has helped them to solve insoluble problems, saved them from sickness or trouble, or given them what they prayed for. Their faith is strong so long as they can bear witness to such experiences, but without them their faith crumbles. Spirituality that depends on "success stories" is shallow and short-lived. Genuine Christian spirituality, on the other hand, is that of Christians who are indeed grateful for concrete, visible signs of the life-giving work of the Spirit but whose faith does not depend on these signs. It is spirituality like that of Jesus who trusted God and entrusted his life to God even as he suffered and died feeling totally godforsaken. It is spirituality like that of the apostle Paul and countless Christians through the centuries like him who understand that no more than their crucified Lord are they spared the hardship, suffering, and dying that is the lot of all finite creatures; who understand in fact that for them as for him added hardship and suffering come to those who serve the unqualified compassion and the unrelenting demand for justice of the kingdom of God that breaks into a hostile world. True spirituality is that of Christians who know that "in the suffering of this present age" (between the times), the Spirit does not always save us from our weakness but helps "in our weakness" to give us the comfort, help, courage, and strength to endure and entrust our lives to God, knowing that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 18, 38).

True Christian spirituality is not based on and does not depend on present experience of the power of God's Spirit over sickness, suffering, and death. It is based on and lives by Christians' memory of what the God who raised Jesus from the dead has done in the past, and therefore is their sure hope for what this God will do in the future— for them and for all people, everywhere. When we speak of faith and hope like that, we have already begun to speak about the gifts of the Spirit that are the source and norm of all the aspects of genuine

Christian spirituality. These gifts make true spirituality possible, and they tell us how it is concretely expressed in the everyday life of Spirit-filled Christians.

THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

The New Testament mentions a large variety of the Spirit's gifts. ³ Not all of them are given to every Christian, but even those that are given only to a few are given for the sake of three gifts promised to all: new life, new truth, and new community. These three gifts always go together. Each of them is a test of whether we have truly received and understand the other two. As we consider them, we will also ask what we can do if we want to receive them.

The Gift of New Life

In 1 Corinthians 12—14, Paul mentions such sensational spiritual gifts as the ability to speak in unknown tongues, work miracles, heal, and impart supernatural wisdom from God— gifts that some Christians consider the highest and most impressive evidence of the working of the Spirit. But then Paul says there are still “greater gifts” than these, “a more excellent way.” What could be greater than those extraordinary gifts that so obviously set some Christians apart from others? Love! Not just love as a sentimental feeling but the kind of no-strings-attached, no-one-excluded, no-cost-too-great love of God in Jesus Christ. That is the theme of 1 Corinthians 13. Without love like that, speaking even the language of angels (the greatest ecstatic religious experience) is just plain noise. Without such love, the most profound knowledge of all the mysteries of God (the greatest spiritual wisdom) is nothing. Without such love, the most committed service of other people and the most heroic self-sacrifice (even for the cause of the justice and peace of the kingdom of God) are worthless. The gift of love, Paul says, is even greater than the gifts of faith and hope (though, as we have seen, they too are indispensable parts of the new life of Christians).

What does it mean for the Spirit of God to break into our lives? Perhaps it does mean a tremendous emotional experience for some. And why should it be inconceivable that the Spirit should enable some to accomplish miracles or know what no one else knows? But even more important than that, the presence of the Spirit means a new relationship with God that is expressed in a new kind of relationship with other people. What greater miracle and what greater healing is there than the ability to put away “all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,” and to be “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Eph. 4: 31–32)? What greater “fruits of the Spirit” can be imagined than “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5: 22–23)?

Perhaps the best way to “test the spirits” and to discern a true spirituality in our own lives and in the lives of others is to ask whether our personal and corporate worship, our religious feelings and experiences, and our faith and hope in God are accompanied by openness and sensitivity to all the people we encounter every day. No matter how intensely pious or moral or orthodox we are, we have not yet known the presence of the life-giving Spirit of God in our lives until the love the Spirit brings shapes the relationship between employers and employees, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, family members and strangers, people like us and people different from us. According to Gal. 5: 19–21, to be really spiritual people means that along with immorality, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, and carousing,

also other “works of the flesh” such as strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, and envy begin to disappear in all areas of Christians’ lives— including the church community, which is not immune from these works of the flesh!

How, then, can we have this new life of love that is perhaps the clearest and most important sign of the genuine spirituality of Spirit-filled Christians?

First, if such a new life is a gift of the Spirit, we cannot give it to ourselves. Not only the New Testament but also our own experience tells us that we cannot simply decide to love other people with the same unqualified love with which God has loved us. Sometimes when we most desperately want to, we find that we simply cannot.

Second, there is nothing we can do to force the Holy Spirit to come to us and give us this (or any other) gift. We cannot manipulate the Spirit to work according to our desires and schedule. There is no more guarantee that the Spirit will come with renewing power if we turn off the lights and sit in the dark than if we sit in broad daylight. The Spirit is no more bound to come in a church sanctuary or home prayer group than in a restaurant or in the work place. The Spirit is no more summoned by sentimental spiritual songs and highly emotional preaching than by sixteenth-century chorales and colorless preaching— or vice versa. The Spirit is free to work when, where, and how the Spirit chooses.

That does not mean we can do anything we please or nothing at all, excusing our unloving attitudes and actions by complaining that the Spirit has not chosen to come to us to enable us to love. Although we cannot control the Spirit’s coming and going, we can place ourselves in situations in which we open ourselves to the possibility of the new life of love promised by the Spirit.

Perhaps we do not and cannot love people who are different from us, who seem undeserving and unworthy of our love, whose way of thinking seems so wrongheaded and way of living so unacceptable to us. But we can take the initiative to seek out their company and invite them into our company (including the church), sit down in the same room with them, and talk and listen to them. Who knows how the Holy Spirit might open our closed minds and warm our cold hearts if we were willing to do that? How can we ever learn to love others if we refuse to have anything to do with them, if we only look at them from a safe distance?

Perhaps even when we do care about others, we are reluctant to get involved with them because their problems and suffering are so great that we are afraid we will not be able to give them the help they need, because we are afraid that we will say or do the wrong thing, or because we know that it will be too painful to expose ourselves to their pain. But despite all the good or bad reasons we can find to hold back, we can go to them, put ourselves in their presence, and share their needs and hurts even when we cannot “fix it” with our prayers, good advice, or help. How will we ever learn what the Holy Spirit can enable us to do if we are afraid to plow into difficult situations in which we might find out?

We cannot force the Spirit to empower us with the ability to love, but we can risk the threat and cost of putting ourselves into situations in which we are in a position to receive the Spirit’s gift of love. If we are unwilling or afraid to do that, is the problem that the Spirit has abandoned us or that we have abandoned the Spirit whose gift of love we say we want?

We saw earlier that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator who is the source of all true wisdom and truth in the world, and the “teacher,” or “Spirit of truth,” whom Jesus promised he would send to his followers not only to remind them of what he had taught them but to lead them to new truth (John 14: 26; 16: 13). When we think of the gifts of the Spirit, then, we must speak of the gift of wisdom and understanding, the gift of truth.

There are Christians who believe that true spirituality has only to do with feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It is to experience and bear witness to the overwhelming joy, peace, comfort, security, and assurance of salvation we feel when the Spirit touches our lives. To think too much about the Christian faith, on the other hand, is dangerous because a “cold intellectual approach” destroys people’s personal relationship with God and leads them to doubt their personal experience of God’s saving grace. It is in feeling not thinking, emotions not the mind, that people are receptive to and actually experience the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. True Christian fellowship, therefore, is one in which people have had the same life-changing religious experience and share it with one another, not one in which people argue and fight about the truth of the Christian faith.

It is true that when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, “our hearts are strangely warmed” by the assurance of God’s saving grace (Wesley). It is also true that there is a kind of sterile intellectualism (dead orthodoxy or arrogant liberalism) that can “quench” the Spirit and destroy Christian fellowship. But the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth that enlightens our minds as well as warms our hearts, enables us to understand and live by God’s truth as well as feel God’s presence, gives the Christian community a common mind to serve God and God’s world as well as a common religious experience to share with each other. To be Spirit-filled Christians, then, is to love God with our whole mind as well as with our whole heart and soul. True Christian spirituality is more than a matter of bearing witness to the personal experience of God’s grace in our own lives; it is also a matter of seeking to understand and witness to the truth of God’s grace that was already at work in and for the world before we experienced it, and continues to be at work in and for the world even in times when we do not experience and recognize it.

If the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, then we seek and claim the gift of the Spirit when we study together as well as when we pray together, when we share our thoughts as well as when we share our feelings, when we work together to understand the truth of God and what it means for our lives in the world as well as when we share our personal experience of God’s grace. Our talk about the truth of the Christian faith will be unconvincing to ourselves and to other people if we cannot talk about how it has touched our hearts. But it will also be unconvincing if we cannot talk about it in a way that makes sense. If we are afraid to examine our personal Christian experience in light of the truth of the Christian faith, how can we know whether our faith is anything more than a self-deceiving, self-serving spirituality based only on our own subjective feelings and emotions? How can we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of truth if we are unwilling or afraid to ask and talk about what the truth is that is the gift of the Spirit?

What can we do, then, to receive the Spirit’s gift of truth? As with the gift of love, we cannot give it to ourselves. Personal experience can tell us how we feel about God’s presence in our lives. Rational analysis of our own lives and the world around us can tell us what we think about God. But only God can tell us the truth “for sure.” That does not mean, however, that we

can sit around waiting for God to reveal that truth “out of the blue.” Although we cannot tell ourselves the truth, we can open our minds to learn the truth God has already given us in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

But reading the Bible in itself is not enough. Unless the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds, we cannot understand the truth contained in this ancient book and how it helps us make decisions about our lives here and now. Are we once again left hopelessly waiting for a gift we cannot give ourselves? No. Although we cannot force the Spirit to come to us, even when we read the Bible, we can do at least three things to open ourselves to recognize and receive the Spirit’s gift of truth to guide and help us.

1. In reading the Bible, we can ask ourselves constantly whether we really want to hear the truth it offers. Do we want to find there only confirmation and support for the opinions, prejudices, and desires we already have? Are we willing to let scripture change and correct what we want and what we think we already know? If we use the Bible only to justify our liberal or conservative opinions, we do not really want the guidance of the Spirit, nor can we expect it. If, on the other hand, we go to the Bible and listen to it preached with a sincere willingness to learn, change our minds, and be corrected, then we will be open to hear what God’s Spirit has to say to us.

2. We can remind ourselves of what the Bible tells us about the truth that is the gift of God’s Spirit. It is truth we recognize outside as well as inside the circle of believers wherever we see the Creator God we come to know in scripture at work to maintain the life, health, and welfare of all God’s creatures, especially those who are poor, excluded, and oppressed. It is truth that we recognize outside as well as inside the Christian circle when we see the love of God in the risen Christ at work reconciling all kinds of people to each other (including people who are not “our kind” of people in what they think and how they live). It is the truth that we recognize outside as well as inside the Christian circle when the new life, new love, new justice, and truth that are the transforming work of God’s creative and reconciling Spirit become visible in the lives of individuals and human society.

Indeed, if we really want the Spirit’s gift of truth, we will not be afraid of truth from any source that echoes and points in the direction of the will and work of the triune God of scripture— whether it comes from Christians or non-Christians, religious people or “secular” scientists, psychologists, or sociologists. If, as Calvin taught us (Institutes 2.2.15), the Spirit of God is the source of all truth, we will recognize the Spirit’s truth wherever it might appear. If we are unwilling or afraid to do that, then we do not really want the guidance that comes from the Spirit of God to whom scripture bears witness, nor should we be surprised that we do not receive it.

3. Finally, if it is really the Holy Spirit’s gift of truth we seek when we read the Bible and seek to discern the will and work of the Spirit in the world around us, if it is not just support for our own personal and social self-interest, then we will seek the truth in the company of other Christians. We will not seek it alone, depending on our own experience and insights. Nor will we seek it only in the company of a few other Christians whose religious experience is the same as our own; whose race, class, and political convictions are the same as ours. We will do it in the company of other Christians who are different from us. They have their biases and limited vision too. But if we read the Bible and seek the truth together, then we show our willingness mutually to correct each other’s biases and limitations so that it really is God’s truth and not

just “our” truth we seek. If we are unwilling or afraid to risk the disagreement, conflict, and possibility of change it takes to do that, then once again we do not really want the guidance that comes from God’s Holy Spirit, nor should we be surprised that we do not receive it.

Even when we do everything we can genuinely to open ourselves to receive the Spirit’s gift of truth, there is no guarantee that we will truly and accurately perceive it. But insofar as we remain willing to recognize that “we know only in part” and that we “now ... see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13: 9, 12); insofar as we are willing to admit that all the truth may not be on our side (even on the side of us Christians); insofar as we recognize that we are not the only ones seeking the truth of God and that others may have learned from God’s Spirit some things we need to learn too— to that extent we may count on the faithfulness of the Christ who promised to send us the Spirit of truth to enlighten our minds and guide us in our individual lives, in the church, and in the world where we are called to love and serve the truth— God’s truth.

The Gift of New Community

We have seen that Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to the community of his followers, not just to isolated individuals. The Spirit first came when “they were all together in one place” (Acts 2: 1). The gifts of the Spirit are given to individual Christians not just for their own personal benefit and enjoyment but “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12: 7), to “buildup the church” (1 Cor. 14: 4), “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4: 12). The gift of the Spirit is the gift of community. True Christian spirituality, therefore, is spirituality that is born in the church, is nourished and grows in the church, and exists for the sake of the church’s ministry to the world.

Some Christians (as well as non-Christians) are suspicious of the “institutional” church or the church as an “organization.” They find its worship and preaching a boring and irrelevant routine without passion or commitment, its teaching the half-hearted communication of Christian truth by half-converted leaders, its fellowship one of “merely nominal” Christians whose lives have not been touched by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. They often believe that the only way to find and nurture genuine spirituality is to form a small group of truly Spirit-seeking and Spirit-filled Christians like themselves outside or perhaps within the larger church— separated in one way or another from “those other” Christians who are not real Christians at all.

We must take very seriously this criticism of the church. Later we will give a whole chapter to the “problem” of the church. But those who reject the larger church and seek the presence of the Spirit by withdrawing from it into small groups of “real” Christians cut themselves off from the very Spirit they seek. This becomes clear when we look at two things the New Testament tells us about the inseparable connection between the Holy Spirit and the church.

First, according to the New Testament, the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” is a fellowship of people who are different from each other, not one of congenial people whose religious experience, interests, and goals are exactly the same. In the early church it was a community of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female— people who were united in Jesus Christ by the Spirit of Christ despite all the religious, social, and political differences that in the surrounding world separated them from each other and made them hostile to each other. And so it is in our time too. The Holy Spirit does not bless but overcomes the animosities and

exclusiveness that divide people into “insiders like us” and “outsiders like them.” How can Christians expect to experience the reconciling and uniting power of this Spirit in their own lives if they are unwilling and unable to live in community even with fellow Christians who are different from them (not to mention other people)? How can they expect others to be impressed with their witness to the reconciling and uniting power of the Spirit if they themselves only echo the “us-them” mentality that divides the world into hostile groups? More specifically, how can Christians hope to receive the Spirit’s gift of love (by definition, the mutual love of people who are different from each other) if they cannot or will not even love fellow Christians who are different from themselves? How can they expect others to believe what they say about the Spirit’s gift of love if they are unwilling and unable to demonstrate it in their own community? How can they receive the Spirit’s gift of new truth if they are unwilling and unable to learn even from fellow Christians in the church whose Christian experience, faith, and life are expressed in ways different from their own? How can they expect others to be open to learn new truth that comes from God if they themselves are unwilling and unable to learn it in their own community? To withdraw from the larger church into the company of a few “real” Christians just like us is to refuse the true spirituality that comes from God’s Holy Spirit. It is to flee from the very gifts of the Spirit we seek for ourselves and to belie the very promise of the renewing power of the Spirit we proclaim to the world. When we confess our faith with the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the Holy Spirit” and “the Holy Catholic Church” go together.

Second, among the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are whole lists of gifts promised specifically to the “organized church.” Paul identifies as gifts of the Spirit functions such as preaching, teaching, leadership (administration!), pastoral guidance and ministry, and prophecy (probably the gift of some to bring the Word of God to bear on contemporary social and political situations). We may think here also of rituals of the church such as baptism (which in Acts is always connected with the Spirit’s gift of faith and new life) and the Lord’s Supper (which nourishes and strengthens the faith and life of the church). The preaching and teaching of the church may indeed often seem uninspired and unconvincing, even false. Its sacraments may indeed often seem “empty rituals.” The work of its professional leaders and incessant committee meetings may indeed often seem more a matter of maintaining an all-too-worldly organization than of nurturing a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It may indeed sometimes seem so concerned about doing “good works” in the world that it neglects the spiritual needs of its own members. But according to the New Testament, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit are promised and experienced precisely in the church’s Sunday-by-Sunday preaching and teaching of the Word of God, its not-too-exciting everyday life, and its ministry to the world outside its own membership. Of course, the Holy Spirit can work when, where, and how the Spirit pleases, even apart from the church. But when spiritually hungry Christians reject the life and work of the organized church and encourage other spiritually hungry people to do so, when they withdraw from the church themselves and invite others to do so in order to tend to their own spiritual development apart from the church—then they deprive themselves and other people of the very renewing power and gift of the Spirit they yearn for.

Like the other gifts of the Spirit, the gift of community is one we cannot give ourselves. But what we have just seen about the nature of the new community that is the gift of the Spirit indicates some things we can do to open ourselves to receive this gift we cannot give ourselves:

1. If we really want the true community that is the gift of the Holy Spirit, we will listen very carefully to fellow Christians and others who criticize the church as it is. In fact, just because we yearn for the true fellowship of the Spirit, we will ourselves be the church's most severe critics. But we will criticize it as its "loyal opposition" who seek to correct and build up rather than to reject and tear down. We will criticize it as insiders who love the church rather than as outsiders who leave it altogether or form within it little groups of "true Christians" who have the same spiritual experience (or the same "politically correct" liberal convictions or "theologically correct" conservative convictions) in opposition to "those others" whom we suspect may not be real Christians at all.

2. If we really want the true community that is the gift of the Holy Spirit, we will criticize our own as well as other Christians' or "the church's" understanding of Christian faith and life. We will ask ourselves whether the spiritual gifts we want or think we have already received contribute to the "common good" of the whole Christian community and contribute to the mutual love, encouragement, comfort, and help of all its members— or whether they only satisfy our own personal needs and those of others like us.

3. If we really want the true community that is the gift of the Spirit, we will seek the gifts of the Spirit for the sake of the church's ministry in and for the world, not just for the sake of the warm fellowship Christians enjoy with each other.

4. If we really want the true community that is the gift of the Spirit, we will always be ready to recognize and receive the new life and new truth of the Spirit that is offered in the ordinary "routine" preaching, teaching, worship, and life of the church as well as in the experience of extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit in our private worship or in the company of a few like-minded Christians who gather for prayer and praise. Instead of setting the public, institutional life of the church as an organization in opposition to our private or small-group exercises in spiritual development, we will let each of these mutually inform and correct the other.

5. If we really want the true community that is the gift of the Spirit, we will remember that there are "varieties of gifts" of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12: 4), "gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom. 12: 6). Christian unity does not mean Christian uniformity. Different Christians have different gifts. No one has all the gifts. The Christian community needs this variety and diversity to be a whole community. We will prove our desire for such a community when we gladly welcome other Christians whose gifts are different from our own; when we are grateful for other Christians who contribute experiences, insights, and abilities to the church we ourselves cannot offer it; when we rejoice in the opportunity to learn what genuine Christian love means in the company of other Christians who are different from us.

The gift of a new life of love, the gift of new truth, the gift of a new community different from other communities— these are inseparable gifts of the Holy Spirit and marks of true Christian spirituality. We cannot give them to ourselves. But if we earnestly desire them and do what we can to open ourselves to receive them, then we may pray an ancient prayer of the church, confident that it will be answered in surprising ways in our own lives, in the church, and in the world around us: "Come, Holy Spirit."