



Finding Power to Live a New Life *Discipleship and the Holy Spirit*

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This article originally appeared in the Spring 2012 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

In recent issues of *Knowing & Doing* we have looked at Christ's call to discipleship and at the cost of discipleship. Understanding and embracing these truths is essential to becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ. But knowing what we must do and even committing ourselves to doing it, though necessary, is not sufficient. We need power to live out our commitment. And if we lack it we will become discouraged, then disillusioned, then settle into a life of spiritual mediocrity. This has happened to many would-be followers of Jesus over the centuries.

Jesus tells us very clearly that the power to live as his disciple comes from the Holy Spirit. With this assertion, no one who takes the Bible seriously, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox, would disagree. But, for a variety of reasons, in many churches today there is a lack of clear, in-depth, practical teaching about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in relation to discipleship. As a result, many people struggle in their spiritual lives, and their discipleship is weak and anemic.

In a brief article it is impossible to give a full account of the work of the Spirit in discipleship (the Christian life). What we can do, however, is look at some important truths about the Spirit that will help us faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

Who or What Is the Holy Spirit?

We live in a culture that is significantly influenced by eastern religion, New Age thinking, and other worldviews, all of which can confuse our understanding of the Holy Spirit and his work. As these nonbiblical systems of thought have gained strength over the

past fifty years, there has been a corresponding decline in biblical literacy in the culture and the church. As a result, many in the church today have very little understanding of the Bible and what it teaches about the Holy Spirit. For example, it is not uncommon to hear professing believers refer to the Holy Spirit as "it." From this and other anecdotal evidence, it appears that many people think of the Spirit as an impersonal force or power like "the Force" in Star Wars. Because of the vague and erroneous ideas that many have about the Spirit, we need to begin by briefly clarifying who the Holy Spirit is.

Although the Holy Spirit is quite prominent in the New Testament, that is not the case in the Old Testament. He was present and active at creation, was active in inspiring the prophets and anointed and empowered various leaders of Israel, including judges and kings. However, he is not described as empowering the ordinary Israelite living under the Old Covenant. And his Personhood is very much in the background, with his work often (but not always) described in ways that suggest impersonal divine power or agency. This "low profile" and involvement chiefly with the leadership in Israel is a major difference between the Holy Spirit's work in the Old Testament and New Testament.

The Holy Spirit begins to come out of the shadows so to speak in the New Testament. He first causes the conception of the Messiah, then later anoints and empowers his ministry (Matt. 1:20–21; Luke 1:34–35, 3:21–22). Then at Pentecost he breaks forth in full



Thomas A. Tarrant

intensity, launching, empowering, and guiding the church and its mission. This inaugurates the Age to Come, sometimes called the Age of the Spirit, which was prophesied in Joel 2:28–32 and was announced by Peter at Pentecost. From this time forward, all of God’s people—masters and servants, male and female, old and young—will receive the Spirit, and “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).¹

In the fuller light of Jesus and the church, the Holy Spirit’s personhood and his crucial role in the work of the kingdom and discipleship becomes evident. Jesus speaks most fully about the Holy Spirit in John 14–16. In these chapters, we see that far from being an impersonal force, the Spirit is a person, “another counselor” who takes Jesus’ place when he returns to the Father; the Greek word for another means one of the same kind. The Spirit is a divine person just like Jesus but, unlike Jesus, he has not become incarnate, taking on human nature and a physical body. Yet the Spirit carries on the work of Christ and makes him personally present to us in this world. (Note the way the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Christ in Romans 8:9–11.) In John, Jesus goes on to say that he teaches, brings to remembrance (14:26), bears witness (15:26), convicts (16:8), guides, hears, speaks, and declares the future (16:13).

This picture is further developed in Acts, where we read that the Spirit can be lied to (Acts 5:3–11), speaks (10:19; 11:12; 13:2; 21:11), and confers (“it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” [Acts 15:28]), and forbids (Acts 16:6). And in Paul’s epistles we read, “the Spirit intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:26), wills/decides (1 Cor. 12:11), can be experienced in fellowship (2 Cor. 13:14), can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), speaks (1 Tim. 4:1), and can be quenched (1 Thess. 5:19). In each instance, these are the actions of a personal being, not an impersonal force.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit is a divine person. And this divine person is the third person of the Trinity, as is evident in a number of other places in the Scriptures, including the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19, “baptizing them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and Paul’s benediction, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14). By including the Holy Spirit with God the Father and Jesus the Son, the authors are making it very clear that the Spirit is also God.

Discovering that the Holy Spirit is not just an impersonal force but a divine person dwelling within them has revolutionized the lives of many believers. If your

understanding of the Spirit has been a bit vague, ask God to give you clarity and study the passages above.

What Is the Work of the Holy Spirit?

When we survey the New Testament, we see that Jesus Christ secured our redemption; the Holy Spirit applies that redemption in our lives. Having accomplished all that the Father had given him to do, Jesus returned to heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father from whence he will one day come back to judge mankind and establish his eternal kingdom. However, he did not leave his people as orphans. Shortly after his ascension, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus and the Father sent forth the Holy Spirit to establish the church and to carry on all that Jesus had initiated on earth. The Spirit now carries forward the work of Christ by glorifying him and applying all the benefits of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension in the lives of his people and extending his kingdom throughout the earth.

In terms of discipleship, the Holy Spirit, as his name implies, works to make people holy. He brings God’s people to salvation in Christ and then conforms them to his likeness (Rom. 8:29) and sends them out into the world in ministry. This covers the full spectrum of our life in this world. Some examples of the Spirit’s work include empowering people to preach the gospel message (Acts 1:8; 4:31; 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 1 Thess. 1:4–5); convicting the lost of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11); bringing spiritual regeneration or new birth to those who trust Christ (John 3:5–6); incorporating them into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13); adopting believers into the family of God and assuring them of sonship (Rom. 8:15–16); dwelling within believers (John 14:16–17; Rom. 8:9ff; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; Eph. 5:18; Col. 1:27); giving them a deep knowledge of Christ and his love (Eph. 3:19); illuminating the truth of Scripture (1 Cor. 2:6–13; Eph. 1:16–20); empowering believers to put to death the works of the body/flesh (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:16); producing the character of Jesus (fruit of the Spirit) in believers’ lives (Gal. 5:22–23); imparting gifts for ministry (1 Cor. 12:11); guiding in ministry (Acts 13:1–3; 16:6–10), and more. As we can see, from the time we are first drawn to Christ until the day we are actively engaged in ministry and beyond, the Holy Spirit is at work in us making it happen. In which of these ways are you experiencing the Spirit’s work in your life?

What Is the Holy Spirit's Work in Discipleship?

As we have seen, the Spirit is involved in every aspect of discipleship from start to finish. John the Baptist proclaimed that the Messiah would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). This appears in each of the Gospels as one of the distinctive features of the Messiah's work. In John's gospel, we get the fullest picture: Jesus is described as “the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29) and “he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (1:33). The former we see on the cross, the latter on the Day of Pentecost. After his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). This was fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Spirit created from a prayer group of 120 people, a community of empowered disciples that quickly grew to more than three thousand. Their corporate life was so attractive in joy and generosity and so electrifying in signs and wonders that it drew in many more nonbelievers to Christ (Acts 2:42–47).

Through the Spirit's presence and power, the church grew by leaps and bounds, even in the face of intense persecution. The effects of this mighty movement of the Spirit are seen throughout the book of Acts, as more and more people are swept into the kingdom of God as it spreads through the Roman Empire. The Spirit created a community of disciples, filling and refilling both the apostles and ordinary believers as circumstances required, empowering them to live boldly and faithfully and to speak God's word powerfully, expanding the church.

And note: these early believers were disciples of Jesus in the same sense of that word in Luke's gospel, as evidenced in Luke's use of the word disciple twenty-eight times in the book of Acts to describe ordinary believers. (Later, when the gospel reached Antioch, the disciples were given the nickname “Christian” [Acts 11:26]—a name that today often no longer means disciple.) Thus the basic New Testament paradigm of the church is a community of Spirit-filled disciples, engaged in advancing the kingdom of God. This is what many congregations need to recover today.

How Do We Experience This Life in the Spirit?

Life in the Holy Spirit begins when the Spirit regenerates us and gives new birth. Prior to that we were dead in sin; afterward we are alive to God and

Jesus Christ. Like the blind man whom Jesus healed, we can say, “one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). This conversion may be sudden, as with Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–17), or gradual, like Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15), who came to faith through the nurture of his mother and grandmother. It may be dramatic, like Cornelius and his friends and relatives (Acts 10:34–48), or quiet and gentle, like Lydia (Acts 16:14). However, one thing will be true in all cases: the man or woman has come alive to God.

From new birth forward and throughout our life on earth, we are meant to live daily in the fullness of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the key to authentic Christian life—to discipleship—and without his empowerment, teaching, and guidance it is impossible to live faithfully. Is such a life available to us today? Yes, just as much as it was to the first believers. Indeed, Scripture enjoins us to seek it. How do we live such a life? An important starting point is to “believe everything the Scriptures teach about the Holy Spirit, and expect all that the Scriptures promise from the Holy Spirit.” Summarizing all of that information in a brief article is impossible, but in what follows we will look at several important insights about living in the Spirit that can help significantly. I trust this will inspire each of us to do a careful Bible study about the Holy Spirit on our own or in a group.

Seek to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit

Early in his letter to the believers in Ephesus, the apostle Paul remembers how, “when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, [you] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13). Then a couple of chapters later, he says that he is asking God, “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:16–19). This remarkable prayer for a deeper experience of the Spirit and the love of Christ certainly shows that we cannot rest on one experience of the Spirit at conversion. This prayer should be a top

concern for every disciple of Jesus, not only for oneself but for others in the church.

Paul has yet more to say to the Ephesians, “do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (5:18). The Greek verb for be filled is present tense, plural, passive voice, and imperative mood. In this text, the present imperative is a command to continuous action. Thus, Paul is commanding (imperative mood) the entire congregation (plural) to “allow yourself (passive voice) to be continuously (present tense) filled with the Holy Spirit.” What does this mean in daily life? It has often been pointed out that when a glass is filled with water there is room for nothing else; the water is in full possession of the glass. It is the same with us and the Spirit; to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to give him full possession of our lives.

In the verses that follow, Paul describes in practical terms how being “filled with the Spirit” is worked out in relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters. This verse, too, highlights the fact that we cannot rest on one experience of the Spirit at conversion but need to be filled with the Spirit again and again. Why is once not enough? “Because,” as someone said, “we leak badly.” That is, we yield to sin, which interrupts our fellowship with the Spirit until we confess, repent, and seek to be filled afresh.

Walk in the Spirit

In his letter to the Galatian church, Paul says, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16). Here walk is also a present imperative verb, indicating continuous action. The word walk is a figurative term in the New Testament for one’s personal conduct, the way one lives his or her life. Like the Ephesians, the Galatians had received the Holy Spirit at conversion (3:3). Paul is here exhorting them to continue living in the Spirit’s power and resist the temptation to live under the law and in the flesh.

How this works in daily experience is clarified when he speaks of serving one another through love, which occurs as they are “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:18). Here again we have a passive voice in led, meaning they are to allow themselves to be led, directed by the Spirit. They are to yield, surrendering themselves to the Spirit’s moral guidance. If they do so, they will neither “gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16) nor live “under the law” (5:18). And the result will be that the Spirit will be able to manifest his indwelling presence in their lives in the form of “love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (5:22). This is a good description of the character of Jesus, into whose likeness the Spirit is seeking to shape all believers. But this isn’t just a matter of personal holiness. Each of these characteristics has an interpersonal dimension. Thus, as these disciples walk by the Spirit, their congregational life as a whole will reflect Christ to the watching world.

Do Not Grieve the Holy Spirit

Paul describes the attitudinal and behavioral implications of the new life in the Spirit in several places, including Ephesians 4. In the immediate context of sins of the tongue, he warns the believers in Ephesus: “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (v. 30). This is a very serious warning, evidenced by Paul’s use of the formal description “the Holy Spirit of God.” Perhaps he was also thinking of Jesus’ words, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37). In today’s church, many people do not appear to be aware of the seriousness of sins of the tongue or the connection between sinful words and our fellowship with the Spirit. We must always remember that the Holy Spirit is holy and therefore easily offended and grieved by sin. Our unholy words and attitudes cause him to withdraw and distance himself from us. And when he does so, we will have not only a diminished sense of his presence but also a reduction of his power. This makes us more vulnerable to other, greater sins and temptations. As James 3:6 says, “the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the whole course of life, and set on fire by hell.”

What specific sins does Paul have in mind when he says do not grieve the Spirit? From the context, it is clear that any form of unwholesome or corrupting talk is in view. Gossip, slander, cursing, dirty jokes, lies, critical comments about others are some obvious examples. Such evil speaking offends God, can corrupt others, and can lead them into the sin of spreading an evil report. And not least, it can trigger a ripple effect that does great damage to those who are the object of our sinful comments.

If we would walk in the Spirit and not grieve him, if we would enjoy close fellowship with him and have his power to overcome sin and grow in Christlikeness, we must bridle our tongue. If we cannot speak well

of another, we should remain quiet. And whenever we do speak, we must be careful to “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). In other words, our speech is never to be sinful but always to be gracious and uplifting to those with whom we speak, as befits people of grace and love. If we will discipline our tongues, James 3:2 tells us that we will be able to bridle our whole body. This is a major key to walking in the Spirit. Many of us have sinned with our tongues. It is one of the most common of the “respectable sins” believers regularly commit. But confession and repentance opens the door to restored fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Grieving the Holy Spirit and impairing our fellowship with him obviously is not limited to the misuse of the tongue. There is a wide range of other sins that have the same effect.

Do Not Quench the Spirit

Quenching the Holy Spirit is quite different from grieving him. In his closing instructions to the believers in Thessalonica, Paul says, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:19–22). The gift of prophetic utterance was among those the Spirit had distributed to believers after Pentecost and was highly commended by Paul (1 Cor. 14:29–33, 39). Those who exercised this gift received messages from God to share with individuals or the congregation (Acts 11:27–29; 21:10–12; 15:31; 21:8–9). This was not prophecy on the level of that given by the Old Testament prophets (and thus inspired Scripture or doctrine) but was focused on circumstances of personal or church life, as in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14. It is very likely that this is what Paul is addressing in Thessalonica. Today, many in the church around the world believe this gift is still in operation. Others disagree and believe that it was phased out after the canon of Scripture was finalized. However, one’s position on this question does not change the relevance and application of Paul’s exhortation.

The larger point of this passage is that we should not despise any communication which might be from God. Rather, we should test and discern whether it actually is from God. It is our responsibility to discern the teaching of that word to ensure it is correct. We are to be like the Bereans, whom Luke commended: “they received the word with all eagerness, examining the

Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Any message, sermon, lecture, or prophetic utterance must be tested by its agreement with what the Spirit has already said in Scripture, for he is the Spirit of Truth, who inspired the writing of the Scriptures and cannot contradict himself. When Scripture speaks, God speaks. What agrees with Scripture we are to hold fast, embrace, and obey. What does not, we must reject. As we carefully study the Scripture and obey it as God’s direction for our lives, we will grow and mature in Christlikeness.

The life of discipleship is possible only through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Discipleship, the Christian life, does not work on any other basis. Only as we daily allow him to fill us by consciously yielding ourselves to his presence and direction can we walk as Jesus walked, do the work he has called us to do, and experience transformation into his likeness.

This article has only touched briefly on a few important aspects of the Holy Spirit and his work. There is much more to learn. If you want to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, a thorough study of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit is essential.

Notes

1. Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

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