

# Holy and Unholy Spirit

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## Introduction

Before I was baptised over 62 years ago, I was taught that the Holy Spirit is the power of God, but also that:

- we do not receive the Holy Spirit today because it was withdrawn when the last of the Apostles died;
- we are not born of the Spirit today because, when Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be ‘born of water and the Spirit’<sup>1</sup> he meant baptism now and a change to a Spirit-nature at Christ’s return; and
- the only way God is active in the life of the believer is through divine Providence and the ministration of Angels.

These propositions seemed to suggest that the Spirit has little relevance to our everyday life as disciples of Christ.

As time went on, I began to question these and other teachings, although sometimes it got me into hot water! I now believe that scripture teaches the active presence of God and Jesus in the life of the believer by the Spirit. I also believe that the reason the Spirit is sometimes called ‘holy’ is to draw a distinction between the holy Spirit of God and our naturally unholy spirit.

These refreshing and reassuring conclusions encourage us to accept God’s help to reflect his holy character in our lives. This article aims to outline the linguistic and scriptural reasons behind my conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup>John 3:5

## Words

I have a longstanding interest in language and the meaning of words and, although I have no formal qualifications in the field, I have found that understanding aspects of linguistic theory helps me in reading the Bible and unfolding its meaning. For example, I have come to understand that the meaning of a word is not primarily inherent in the word itself but has to be determined by its relationship to other words in the context of a given occurrence. Additionally, the meaning is affected by the contrast the word forms with other potential meanings of the word.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the English word ‘spirit’ is used of the Spirit of God, but also, for example, of evil spirits, or the life-giving principle in human beings, or temperament and disposition, or distilled alcoholic liquor. In each case, context is used to explain which meaning is intended.

In Hebrew, the word *rûach* has the basic meaning of wind or breath and is typically translated into English as ‘spirit’ but other words are sometimes used where the context requires it. In addition to translating *rûach* as spirit (or Spirit with an initial capital letter – a dilemma I will deal with later), the New International Version (NIV) also translates it as wind or winds, breath, blast, mind, heart, and in several other ways.

Similarly, in Greek, the word *pneuma* has the same basic meaning of wind or breath, though the range of English words used to translate it tends to be more limited than in the Old Testament equivalent.

## Divine activity

Spirit (wind or breath) is a very appropriate word for the power of God. The movement of air is intangible, but it can release immense energy. On a recent walk along the coast of Cornwall in south-west England, my wife and I saw trees alongside the path that were bent and stunted because of the force of the wind. We couldn’t see the wind, but we could see and feel the energy it produces. The movement of air also occurs when we speak or sing. Air is exhaled, enabling us to express thoughts and feelings.

Now consider these inherent metaphors as scripture describes the activity of God in the opening verses of Genesis:

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Moisés Silva: *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, p202, Zondervan Publishing House, 1994

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit (rûach) of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.*

*(Gen 1:1-3)*<sup>3</sup>

The Spirit of God was active in creation. God ‘breathed out’ his will, which was then accomplished by the same boundless energy or Spirit.

Throughout scripture God’s Spirit is seen in action: forming and sustaining his creation, as well as guiding, encouraging, and warning – both individuals and nations. For example, Ezekiel wrote: *Then the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet.* Paul prayed that *out of his glorious riches [the Father] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.* And John found himself *in the Spirit* on the Lord’s Day.<sup>4</sup> There are many other examples in Scripture of people and nations who were directed by God even though they were not always aware of his guidance.

Just like the wind, we cannot see the Spirit of God, but we may still be aware of God’s hidden presence. This idea is so important that Scripture has many metaphors which express the idea of God reaching out to the created world. Examples are the arm, hand, mouth, or face of the Almighty.<sup>5</sup> Scripture repeatedly encourages us to think of God as being engaged with his creation for its good. Jesus endorsed this and associated himself with the constant activity of God when he said, *My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working*<sup>6</sup>

## Printing conventions

Let’s go back to words for a moment, and consider printing conventions – the way a word is physically represented as text. Capitalisation in particular can have a profound effect on the way we read *Spirit* versus *spirit* and the meaning we draw from that distinction:

*... English conventions often force a decision as to when to use a capital S for Spirit, indicating that it is divine, and when to spell it with a small initial. Ancient Greek manuscripts did not make such a distinction; modern German usually spells all nouns with*

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations from the New International Version (1984 edition) unless otherwise stated

<sup>4</sup> Ezek 3:24, Eph 3:16, Rev 1:10

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Gen 16:7-11, Ex 8:19, 9:3, 31:18, Deut 7:19, Jer 31:32 (quoted in Heb 8:9)

<sup>6</sup> John 5:17

*a capital anyway. But the English translator of the New Testament, if he follows ordinary convention, has to make a choice, and the predicament in which this often lands him is itself instructive.*<sup>7</sup>

This means that the translator must consider the evidence and distinguish between passages that are about the Spirit of God and those that are about the human spirit (or spirit in one of the other legitimate senses). In the 16th century William Tyndale always used a lower case ‘s’ when translating the New Testament, leaving the reader to decide, but subsequent translators have attempted to guide the reader, with sometimes misleading or confusing results. For example, the original 1611 edition of the King James Version (KJV) reads *that which is born of the spirit is spirit*<sup>8</sup> using a lower case ‘s’ each time, but when the KJV was revised in 1769 the translators inserted an upper-case ‘S’ in the first instance but retained a lower-case letter in the second. The NIV does the same, but provides a footnote using lower-case letters in both cases as an alternative.

The same issue arises from the way the compound term ‘Holy Spirit’ is printed in our Bibles. Almost all translators presume this to be the divine name of the third person of the Trinity, so they capitalise both words. However, it far more consistent with overall biblical practice to understand holy as an adjective attributing a characteristic to the noun ‘spirit’.<sup>9</sup> Reading the phrase ‘holy spirit’ lands very differently on a reader, and recognising that ‘holy’ is an adjective describing the character of God’s Spirit is a valuable step towards a rounded understanding of the language of scripture.

## ‘Holy’ spirit

Many Christadelphians repeat the claim that the Spirit is only called ‘holy’ when it is applied to some specially directed work by God, but I find that this is not born out by the facts. Instead, scripture frequently points to a contrast between the holy Spirit of God and the unholy or profane spirit of human beings.

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<sup>7</sup> C F D Moule: *The Holy Spirit*, p7, Continuum, 2000

<sup>8</sup> John 3:6

<sup>9</sup> In many other places ‘holy’ is used as an adjective and is consistently printed with a lowercase initial letter: e.g. Matt 4:5, 24:15, Mark 8:38, Luke 1:35, Acts 7:33, Rom 1:2, 1Tim 2:8, 1Peter 2:5

In the Old Testament there are about 75 verses referring directly to God's Spirit but only three of these describe the Spirit as holy. One is in Psalm 51 where David shows that he was well aware of the unholy depths to which he had sunk in relation to adultery with Bathsheba and conniving the death of her husband Uriah. David pleads with God:

*Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. (Ps 51:11-12)*

Hebrew poetry is often structured in couplets which describe the same idea in two ways. Here, the first couplet equates being in the presence of God with not losing God's holy Spirit. In the second, David makes a parallel between experiencing the joy of God's salvation and having a willing spirit sustaining him.

The other two examples are in a passage about the failure of the nation of Israel to respond to the kindness of the LORD:

*In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them. (Isa 63:9-10. See also verse 11)*

Israel's rebellion is contrasted with the holiness of God's spirit. In parallel ideas, many other parts of the Old Testament describe their repeated rebellion – unholiness – and repeated judgement by God with the promise of forgiveness and restoration if they again trusted the LORD – holiness.<sup>10</sup>

The adjective 'holy' is attached to Spirit much more frequently in the New Testament, especially by Luke in his gospel and Acts, and a similar pattern emerges where the unholy human spirit is often contrasted with the holy Spirit of God. For example, we read of those who blasphemed the holy Spirit or who lied to the holy Spirit. Similarly, Simon the Sorcerer's heart was not right when he tried to buy access to holy Spirit gifts. One time Paul was described as filled with the holy Spirit contrasting with Elymas who was described as a child of the devil and

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Jud 2:9-20, Jer 3:12-13, Hosea 14:1 onwards

the enemy of everything that was right. Similarly, Stephen was full of the holy Spirit but his accusers, he said, resisted the holy Spirit just as their fathers had.<sup>11</sup>

The weight of scriptural usage is that the adjective ‘holy’ is used primarily to draw a contrast between the holy Spirit of God and the unholy or profane spirit of men and women. This is reinforced by the encouragement of Peter in his first letter where he quotes from the book of Leviticus:<sup>12</sup>

*As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy because I am holy.’ (1Peter 1:14-16)*

Peter is not implying that holiness results from adhering to a set of rules or from merely separating ourselves from others who do not share our faith. Nor is he suggesting that, if we have above average will power, we may make some progress along the road to salvation. The total transformation God seeks cannot be achieved by willpower alone.

Paul develops this point at length in Romans 8 where he writes about two ways of living – by flesh or by Spirit – and comes down firmly on the side of living by the Spirit, knowing that ‘the Spirit will help us in our weakness.’<sup>13</sup> Paul reinforced this when writing to Titus:

*But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom [or which] he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour... (Titus 4:4-6)*

## God who works in you

No one doubted the words of Paul who, having written to the church at Philippi about the humility of Jesus Christ, continued:

*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Phil 2:12-13)*

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<sup>11</sup> Matt 12:22-32, Acts 5:3, 5:9, Acts 13:9-10, Acts 7:51 (an allusion to Isa 63:6-10)

<sup>12</sup> Lev 11:44-45, 19:2; 20:7

<sup>13</sup> Rom 8:26

It is evident from the context of these verses that Paul is not writing about some irresistible force that compels believers to fit a predetermined mould, taking away free will. Rather, he is describing a power and guide that is available to those who seek fellowship with the Father and the Son. Paul connects the need to *work out your salvation* with the fact that it is *God who works in you*. Neither is complete on its own.

Within our community we have not been particularly good at balancing these two aspects. Instead there has often been an undue emphasis on working out our salvation, as though the more we work, the greater our hope of the kingdom. And equally, there has been an unwillingness to use language about the Spirit as the means by which God works in us. Often there is a ready acknowledgement of the work of the Angels and the role of Providence in our lives but without recognising that the energising and activating force is the power of the Spirit working for and amongst God's people.

This leads us naturally to consider the meaning and significance of the gifts of the Spirit that are referred to in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> There is a tendency in popular religion to identify all manifestations of the active presence of God with the marvellous and the inexplicable. In contrast, the New Testament mostly concerns itself with the constant presence of God and the Lord Jesus in the life of the believer. The special manifestations – speaking in tongues and healing sickness, for example – are consequences of specific and unique gifts of the Spirit. The gifts are quite different from the overall emphasis of scripture, which is on the character of the Spirit. It is the Spirit of holiness, leading us towards holiness if this is what we desire.

Perhaps the common emphasis on the miraculous is an escape from the ordinary and the mundane. One of the paradoxes of the Christian life is that faithful Christians may, nevertheless, be stricken with disease, suffer accidents, and endure the breakdown of relationships. In such circumstances we do well to remember that God does not promise immunity from suffering, but he does promise his abiding presence to help us see beyond present suffering, acknowledging that *in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See particularly Rom 12, 1Cor 12, Eph 4. For an analysis of these passages see John Greenwood: *The Spirit of God*, p87-89, Lulu Publishing, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Rom 8:28

## Lives transformed

Paul encouraged believers to *live by the Spirit*. He followed this by listing acts of the sinful nature and then contrasting these with the fruit of the Spirit:

*... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

*(Gal 5:22)*

Two things strike me about this passage. The first is that Paul describes fruit, not fruits. We cannot choose to be patient but not kind; or gentle but not self-controlled. We must seek God's help in every aspect of our lives.

The second is that this is fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of human endeavour. Undoubtedly faithful disciples will want to follow their Master's example, but it is by keeping *in step with the Spirit* that we allow God to work in us and with us. Elsewhere, Paul explains that this is how we are *being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*.<sup>16</sup>

Our natural excitement about the future kingdom can diminish our appreciation of what God promises for the present. Scripture brings the two into harmony. In Hebrews, enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the holy Spirit, and tasting the goodness of the word of God in the present are all linked to savouring the powers of the coming age.<sup>17</sup> The principles of the kingdom – love for God expressed in trust, faith and service – are not incidental. They are the essence of living in the presence and power of God. Similarly, self-denial is not to be regarded as negative and empty but as the true way to find self-fulfilment to the glory of God.

The Spirit binds together the present and the future. Paul writes that in one sense our resurrection is already past, but in another it is still future.<sup>18</sup> In one sense we are already redeemed but in another we await redemption.<sup>19</sup> In one sense we already have a new life but in another we await the gift of eternal life.<sup>20</sup>

Neither our present Christian experience nor our future blessing would be possible without the power and presence of the Spirit of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Gal 5:25, Eph 2:22

<sup>17</sup> Heb 6:4-6

<sup>18</sup> Compare Col 2:12 and 3:1 with Rom 6:5 and 8:11.

<sup>19</sup> Compare Rom 3:24 and Eph 1:7 with Rom 8:23 and Eph 1:14

<sup>20</sup> Compare Rom 6:4 and 2Cor 3:6 with Rom 6:22 and Gal 6:8