

# What Is The Holy Spirit?

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Acts 2 records the event of God's pouring out of His Spirit on the church, as well as the accompanying manifestations that testified dramatically that something extraordinary was taking place. Subsequently, the Holy Spirit is a significant theme throughout the rest of Acts, as the gospel was preached and more people were called into the church. The epistles of Paul, Peter, and John likewise feature the Holy Spirit frequently. Yet, for all that is written about it, the Holy Spirit is still commonly misunderstood. Many theologians claim to know what the Holy Spirit is, yet they simultaneously profess it to be an incomprehensible mystery!

Part of the difficulty in understanding God's Spirit comes from the common challenges that arise whenever a text is translated from one language, with all of its nuances, into another. In this case, the Greek word translated as "spirit" is *pneuma*. E.W. Bullinger, in *The Companion Bible*, catalogs fourteen different meanings or usages of that one Greek word. It should not be surprising, then, that when Greek texts are concisely translated into English, some of what is intended by *pneuma* can become clouded.

Further confusion has been introduced by the so-called "early church fathers," whose writings are often looked to for guidance in understanding early Christian doctrine. They may have been early on the scene, yet they were also influenced by Greek philosophy, Plato in particular. Plato's worldview—one not based on the Bible—promoted a triune godhead or a single god that mysteriously expresses itself in three different persons or personalities. Plato himself developed this view from much older trinities found in the Babylonian mystery religions, as well as Egyptian beliefs.

One of the more rare usages of the word *pneuma* is "a spirit being," thus it was not a great leap for early scholars—looking through a lens of pagan concepts—to regard the Holy Spirit as a third God-Being. Because those involved were already inclined to think in terms of a god consisting of three persons, they were able to find "evidence" of such an idea in the Scriptures.

It has been said that heresy crawls in its first generation, it walks in the second, and then it runs. Once the notion of the Holy Spirit being a third person got its start, it walked and then soon sprinted throughout the Western world with such force that now the overwhelming majority of professing Christians take the idea as a given.

It is worth remembering that there is indeed a spirit being striving for equality with the Father and the Son, but that spirit—Satan the Devil—is anything but holy. He has, though, created a place for himself in the minds of millions by guiding Catholic and Protestant doctrine to include a mysterious third spirit being within a three-part godhead, just as the ancient pagan religions held. Yet, that construct is nowhere found in the Hebrew Scriptures, nor is it unambiguously seen in the Greek Scriptures. It is a doctrine that must be read into the Greek text, but doing so only creates contradiction and confusion—neither of which are from God (John 10:35; I Corinthians 14:33).

**"The Spirit of God"**

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul gives a simple framework for understanding spirit in general, as well as the Holy Spirit:

But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:9-16)

Verse 11 teaches that each person has a spirit: “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” This echoes Job 32:8: “There is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.” In this usage, the word “spirit” is synonymous with “heart” or “mind.” This is the intelligent, non-physical part of a person that allows him to think, reason, and comprehend. Verse 11 teaches that a person’s spirit is the source and overseer of his thoughts. This spirit in man is not another being within the person but simply the person’s center of reason.

Next, verse 12 reveals that the world has a spirit. Like the spirit in man, this spirit is also not a separate being. But this usage of “spirit” is slightly different. Rather than being the center of reason, the spirit of the world is the world’s *attitude*, its inclination, tendency, atmosphere, mood, or frame of mind. The spirit of the world is also the motivating impulse of the culture, which can manifest in many ways, but it will always be anti-God (see Romans 8:7).

Paul describes this spirit in Ephesians 2:2-3, saying that we “once walked according to the course of this world.” The course, or way, of the world is the invisible and immaterial motivating impulse at work in the sons of disobedience. The spirit of the world moves people whom God has not redeemed to conduct themselves in lust, fulfilling the desires of their flesh and mind, putting themselves under the wrath of God. The spirit of the world sweeps mankind along a spiritual channel to keep them in opposition to their Creator.

While spirit cannot be seen, we can see the effects of spirit. It is not a coincidence that the word for “spirit,” *pneuma*, can also be translated as “wind” or “breath”—just as Job 32:8, quoted above, parallels the spirit in man to “the breath of the Almighty.” We cannot see the moving air molecules in wind, but we can observe leaves and branches being moved and know that wind is present. In the dry areas of the West, tumbleweeds roll along and dust-devils form, spin, and disintegrate, revealing that the wind is at work.

In the same way, we cannot see spirit, but we can see the actions and attitudes of mankind, and thus find evidence of the spirit that is working. The spirit of the world influences and stirs up the spirit in man, inducing the individual to think and feel in a certain way, and ultimately, to act.

## Not a Being

Returning to I Corinthians 2:12, Paul mentions a spirit that we have received. This is in addition to the spirit in man, with which we were born, and in opposition to the spirit of the world. This additional spirit is from, and of, God. We can conclude that, like mankind, God also has a Spirit. God has a mind, one of unfathomable depth, capability, and intelligence. But more than simply an overwhelming intellect, God's Spirit includes His attitude, principles, thoughts, feelings, temperament, character, disposition, and will. To put it simply, God's Spirit is the essence of His incredible mind, and it is the new motivating principle that God's children receive.

I Corinthians 2:16 shows that God's Spirit is not another supernatural being. It begins with a quotation of Isaiah 40:13 ("who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?"), but then Paul follows up with, "But we have the mind of Christ." This is Paul's explanation of the spirit we have received. It is a principle, a disposition, a motivating influence that comes from God Himself. "Spirit," "heart," and "mind," while not identical, are used interchangeably. It is the mind of Christ that we have received that allows us to know the things of God, to know what God has prepared for us, and to know the things that have been given to us. Thus, Paul equates the Spirit of God to the mind of Christ. The essence of His mind enhances our minds, giving us spiritual understanding.

The Father and the Son are *one*, not in the sense of being the same Person, but in the sense of being perfectly united in will, thought, and intent. They are of the same mind, the same heart—the same spirit. It is that Spirit that we receive when we are baptized and have hands laid on us. As a result, we can begin to understand the things of God, which the world cannot understand. Without God's intervention, mankind is only influenced by the spirit of the world, which has its source in "the prince of the power of the air."

Because God is holy, His Spirit is also holy. God has many facets and qualities, yet the four living creatures in Revelation 4:8 praise Him day and night for being "holy, holy, holy." The fact that they say "holy" three times does not mean that He is three persons. It means His holiness is superlative—it is the very highest possible. Our holy God's Spirit, the essence of His perfect mind, is also holy. That holiness is not merely an attribute, but it is also what God's Spirit will incline His people toward: holiness in conduct, in attitude, in speech, in every facet of living. God says, "Be holy, for I am holy," and His Spirit will move us toward His holiness, *if* we cooperate.

Paul further describes the Holy Spirit in II Timothy 1:6-7:

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

As before, the apostle is talking about a spirit that has been "given [to] us." It is identified here as a "gift of God," and it is something that can be "stir[red] up." It is bestowed through the laying on of hands, as we see throughout Scripture. Paul says that God's Spirit is not about human fear. Later in this letter, he reproaches Timothy for being ashamed of the gospel message and of Paul. The younger man seems to have been in some danger of letting down and needed to be admonished to be strong and to endure hardship. All of this is part of the fear toward which Timothy was apparently inclined.

Paul contrasts the frame of mind—the spirit—that would curtail Timothy’s effectiveness with the Spirit given by God. Paul calls the latter “a spirit . . . of power and of love and of a sound mind.” Again, God’s Spirit is linked with *mind*. If we are yielding to His Spirit, then our minds will be sound; they will be disciplined and self-controlled. Our minds will be sensible, sober, balanced, and restrained, and we will have wisdom, discretion, and solid judgment. Through the guidance of God’s Spirit, our minds will operate in a way different from, and often incomprehensible to, those in the world, because we are being impelled by the essence of God’s own mind, which is the absolute epitome of sound-mindedness and the opposite of the course of this world.

### **Love and Power**

The Spirit of God is also a spirit of *love*. We can combine this with Romans 5:5: “. . . the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” Along with that, the first element of the fruit of God’s Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). Godly love is an action—doing the right thing toward God or another person, regardless of the personal cost involved. Its foundational definition is in the commandments of God. A fear of sacrifice—a fear of giving up what is valuable to us—comes from the spirit of the world, but God’s Spirit enables us to love through doing what is right and trusting that God will work things out.

The remaining attribute listed here is *power*. It is the Greek word *dunamis*, which can also be translated as “ability,” “strength,” or “mighty works.” *Dunamis* is the capacity for achieving or accomplishing. The Holy Spirit gives a person the capacity for God’s will and work to be done through him. But this is not a personal power. Even the miracles with which Jesus Himself is associated were actually performed by the Father (John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). Thus, the power of the Holy Spirit is the outworking of God the Father, rather than something we can use for our own ends.

It is critical to understand that the power of God’s Spirit is under the constraint of the love and sound-mindedness of God’s Spirit. In other words, it is not simply power for the sake of power, nor is it for self-gratification or self-glorification. The evident power in the Acts 2 account of Pentecost has given rise to churches that seek after similar supernatural displays, yet those displays are entirely divorced from the love and sound-mindedness of God.

People can seek this power for the wrong reasons, and it can be misused. Simon Magus tried to buy the power of God to use for his own ends (Acts 8:9-24), and even the congregation at Corinth had to be admonished because they were not using their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the Body (I Corinthians 12). In the midst of his discussion of God’s various gifts, which are simply the outworking of God’s power, Paul spends a whole chapter explaining godly love (I Corinthians 13), implying that the Corinthians’ approach to those gifts did not include enough love or sound judgment.

He spells out that anything they received—such as spiritual wisdom or the ability to heal or do other miracles, to prophesy, to discern spirits, to speak in tongues, or to fulfill the office of apostle, prophet, or teacher—whatever the spiritual ability, God’s Spirit is the source of it all, so there is no ground for boasting. The use of the power of God has to be constrained by the love and sobriety befitting the Most High God, so that *He* is the focus, not the individual.

### **Witnesses of God**

Acts 1:8 provides the underlying reason for the visible manifestations of power shown in Acts 2. The resurrected Christ tells the apostles, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Again, God’s Spirit is linked with power—the effective capacity for God to work through a person. But this also shows what God intends when He gives the power of His Spirit: That person is to be a witness of Jesus Christ and ultimately of our Spiritual Father. This capability is not just for the apostles. We may not receive this power in the same dramatic way, and we may not be used in an apostolic role, but everyone who has received God’s Spirit has the capacity to be a witness of God.

Remember that the Spirit of God, which is the same Spirit motivating Jesus Christ, imparts spiritual knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. It impels us toward holiness. It is a Spirit of power, love, and sound-mindedness. It is the essence of God’s mind and enables the outworking of His will. God gives a measure of His own remarkable Spirit to incline His children to think the same way as He thinks and to live as He lives.

The more that we yield to, and make use of, God’s Spirit, the more He gives. As we seek God’s direction and instruction, and are careful not to quench or grieve the Spirit of our holy God (Ephesians 4:30), His character image takes shape in us. And as we grow in His image, we become witnesses of Him—our lives become testimonies of the goodness of God, the mind of God, the love of God, the holiness of God, the stability of God, and so much more. God gives us the essence of His mind so that we can reflect His glory to the world, through becoming just like Him.