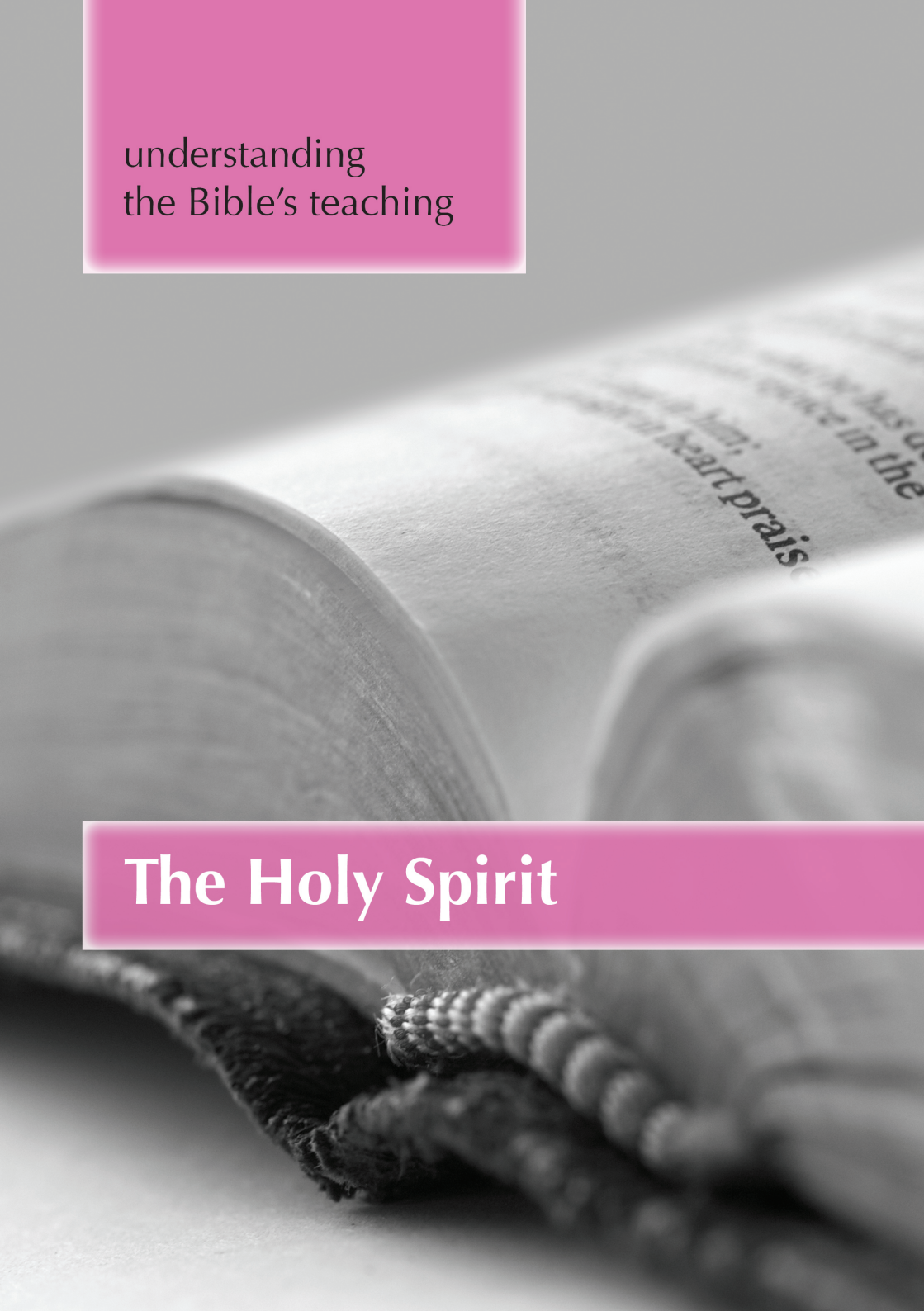
understanding
the Bible's teaching



The Holy Spirit

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Published by
The Dawn Book Supply
66 Carlton Road, Nottingham NG3 2AP, UK

The Holy Spirit

About two thousand years ago, a group of people assembled in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. The book of Acts in the New Testament records what followed in these words:

> '...suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them forked tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2.2-4).

This is the account of the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the disciples of Jesus. It was a momentous occasion and was to have a profound effect on the First Century Christian church. The immediate result of this strange phenomenon was that ordinary men were able to speak in other languages so that visitors to Jerusalem, who had travelled there from many parts of the Roman world to celebrate the feast of Pentecost, could understand the message in their own languages when the disciples preached the Gospel (the good news of the coming kingdom of God). On that day alone three thousand new believers were baptized in Jerusalem.

What is the Holy Spirit?

Traditional Christian teaching claims that the Holy Spirit is part of the Godhead – the third person of the Trinity. Many Christians also claim that they possess the power of the Holy Spirit and, like those first century disciples, are able to speak with tongues and perform miracles. The Bible, however, does not give support to either of these claims.

The 'Holy Spirit' and 'The Spirit of God'

The phrase *'Holy Spirit'* occurs almost exclusively in the New Testament. However, it is clear that the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is the same as the Spirit of God referred to in the Old Testament. Two examples in the New Testament will illustrate this point. On the occasion of Pentecost, referred to above, the Apostle Peter explained to the amazed crowds that this wonderful display of Holy Spirit power was in fulfilment of God's Word spoken some eight centuries previously through the prophet Joel (see Joel 2.28, 29):

> 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on my menservants and on my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy' (Acts 2.17, 18).

Jesus himself drew the same inference after he received the power of the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Preaching to the Jews in the synagogue, he read these words of the prophet Isaiah (See Isaiah 61.1, 2):

> 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD' (Luke 4.18, 19).

When Jesus had finished this reading, he added these words: *'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'* (Luke 4.21). Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, applied the words of that prophecy to himself.

The Spirit is God's power

In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word translated Spirit is *'pneuma'*. In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament the word is *'ruach'*.

Both these words mean 'breath' or 'wind', giving the idea of an invisible, immaterial and impersonal power; they are used in association with God and both refer to His power. For example, in the Genesis account of Creation we read of the creative power of the Spirit of God:

> 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Genesis 1.1-3).

Compare this with some words of the prophet Jeremiah: *'I have made the earth, the man and the beast that are on the ground, by my great power…'* (Jeremiah 27.5) and *'He (God) has made the earth by his power…'* (Jeremiah 51.15). From these two references we see that the power of God is the same as the Spirit of God referred to in the Creation account (Genesis 1.2).

The Spirit or power of God also continuously sustains the beings that God created. This was recognised by Elihu when he spoke to Job about the greatness of God. He acknowledged that he was created by the power of God. He also recognised that it was God's Spirit or breath which kept him alive and that God could withdraw that breath of life whenever He wished:

> 'The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life...If he should set his heart on it, if he should gather to himself his Spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.'
>
> (Job 33.4; 34.14, 15)

God's power used for specific purposes

Not only does God use His Spirit power to create and sustain all life, He also uses it in particular ways to further His specific purpose which is, ultimately, to fill the earth with His glory (see Numbers 14.21). The word 'holy' in both Hebrew and Greek means 'separate' or 'set apart'. In both

the Old and New Testaments the Holy Spirit refers to the power of God used for His specific purpose with mankind. This purpose involves a 'calling out' (a separation) of a people for His holy Name.

God declared that He is holy and so He called out His people, Israel, to be holy also (see for example Exodus 19.5,6; Leviticus 20.26 and Deuteronomy 7.6-9). This separation of God's people from the unholy, pagan idolatry of ancient Egypt involved God showing *'signs and wonders'* (Deuteronomy 6.22) when he brought supernatural plagues on Egypt and caused the miracle of the dividing of the Red Sea to release His people. He then miraculously fed and clothed His people for forty years throughout their wilderness journeys.

There are many other instances recorded in the Old Testament where God gave His Spirit to individuals so that He could work out His purpose with His people. In the period of the Judges, when the nation of Israel was establishing itself in the promised land, God endowed certain men with His Spirit. We read for example that *'the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah* (Judges 11.29). The Spirit of the Lord also came on Samson (Judges 13.24, 25). Through the Spirit of the Lord these men performed mighty deeds by which they were able to defeat the enemies of God's people.

David, Israel's great king and prophet, was inspired to write many beautiful songs when he was moved by God's Holy Spirit power. David acknowledged that his Divine gift was received from God when, after his great sin with Bathsheba, he pleaded: *'Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me'* (Psalm 51.11).

The prophet Isaiah too, under Divine inspiration, foretold several hundred years beforehand, the sufferings and death of Christ. He spoke of his rejection and suffering at the hands of men; of the fact that he refused to argue with his accusers; how he made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death; and how he would be raised from the dead (see Isaiah chapter 53). Here is thrilling evidence of the Spirit of God at work.

The Apostle Peter tells us that the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures were written under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit:

> 'for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.'
>
> (2 Peter 1.21)

The Greek word for *'moved'* used by Peter is *'phero'* which according to Vine's Expository Dictionary, means 'impelled' indicating the irresistible force of the Spirit of God. The writers of the Holy Scriptures were unable to resist this power of God. Paul also refers to this power of God when he wrote: *'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...'* (2 Timothy 3.16). Literally this means by the breath of God – that is through the Spirit of God. Clearly the Holy Spirit and the inspiration of God are one and the same power.

The Holy Spirit in the First Century AD

There was a most notable pouring out of the Holy Spirit in New Testament times. This period was a time of transition from the Old Testament Mosaic era to the establishment of Christianity and the spread of the Gospel message to all nations. Jesus, the long promised Jewish Messiah, foretold by the Old Testament prophets, was born by the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke records the angel's words to Mary before he was born:

> '..."The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God."' (Luke 1.35)

In these words of the angel to Mary, the phrases *'the Holy Spirit'* and the *'power of the Highest'* are interchangeable, which confirms that the Holy Spirit is none other than the power of God and not a separate person. This angelic announcement cannot be reconciled with the man-made concept of the Trinity – the concept that Jesus was fathered by God the Holy Spirit, was the son of God the Father, and yet was also co-equal and co-eternal with them both!

At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended in bodily shape like a dove upon him and, full of the Holy Spirit, he returned from Jordan. He went throughout the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea teaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God and performing miracles. By the power of the Holy Spirit he healed the sick, made the blind to see, the deaf to hear and caused the lame to walk. He even raised the dead.

We read in John's gospel record why Jesus performed miracles: *'…these* (signs) *are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'* (John 20.31). The Bible teaches that human sickness and death have come into the world because of sin (see Genesis chapter 3). Because Jesus was sinless, he was able to forgive sins, the root cause of human problems.

On one occasion Jesus turned water into wine and this was the beginning of his miraculous work. However, we are not told that he continued to turn water into wine. On another occasion he performed miracles when he multiplied five loaves and fed some five thousand men and on another occasion seven loaves to feed four thousand. Yet Jesus did not solve the world's hunger problems – he did not perform miracles just out of compassion or to satisfy curiosity but specifically to testify to the fact that he was the Son of God and that the words he spoke were from God. In this, the crowds had indisputable evidence to believe on him, confess their sins and follow him.

The teachings of Jesus ran contrary to established orthodox Jewish religious teaching. The power of the Holy Spirit gave Jesus authority to challenge the religious leaders in Jerusalem and gave the people evidence that his power was from a higher authority. The record tells us that *'he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes' (*Matthew 7.29). Jesus was able to do this through the power of the Holy Spirit received from his Father. As he said to the Jews: *'…the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do'* (John 5.19).

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus promised his disciples that they too would receive the power of the Holy Spirit, to enable them to witness to

the truth of Jesus and his resurrection *'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'* (Acts 1.8). We have already noted the amazing effect this had on the disciples, how that visitors from all over the Roman world were able to hear the Gospel message in their own language.

The apostles went on to perform many wonderful miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit including raising the dead (Acts 9. 36-40). We read how the Apostle Peter made a man walk who had been lame from birth (Acts 3.7). The purpose of the miracle was made clear when Peter preached to them and exhorted them to repent from their sins and be converted so that their sins would be blotted out (Acts 3.12, 19). Also in the book of Acts we read of *'unusual miracles'* that the Apostle Paul performed by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19.11, 12). This same apostle, having been miraculously delivered from a shipwreck, was bitten by a viper on the island of Melita (Malta) on his way to Rome (Acts 28.1-5). The terrified islanders waited for him to fall down dead. The fact that he did not was a fulfilment of the words of Jesus when he sent out the disciples to preach the Gospel:

> '...these signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover' (Mark 16.17,18).

The Apostle Paul was preserved from harm because his mission was not complete – he had to witness to Christ in Rome. So again the purpose of the Holy Spirit is seen to be specifically for the converting of men and women to Christ. Understanding this explains why the Apostle Paul, on another occasion, did not heal his beloved friend Trophimus of his sickness (2 Timothy 4. 20). Neither did he heal Epaphroditus (Philippians 2.25-27). Paul also pleaded with the Lord three times to remove a *'thorn in the flesh…a messenger of Satan'* that afflicted him (2 Corinthians 12.7-9).

The power of the Holy Spirit was used for witnessing to Christ, not for personal advantage.

Personification of the Holy Spirit

There are examples in Scripture where the Holy Spirit is personified or represented as a person. For example Jesus said to his disciples:

> 'And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that he may abide with you for ever...But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you' (John 14.16, 26).

Here Jesus does speak of the Holy Spirit using the personal pronoun 'he'. However, this is not unique and the Bible frequently uses figurative language including personification. For example, the quality of wisdom is portrayed as a woman in the book of Proverbs:

> 'Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you' (Proverbs 4. 5, 6).

The reader is not intended to understand wisdom to be a physical woman but a desirable quality that will lead the possessor of it to a better life. In the same way Jesus also refers to riches as mammon, or a master:

> 'No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon' (Luke 16.13).

Clearly, riches are not here to be understood as a person but are intended to be understood as a power that controls people's lives. So with the Helper, the Holy Spirit; this is none other than the power of God which was used to assist the apostles in their preaching.

Regarding the personification of the Holy Spirit, these words were written as long ago as AD 1605, by Rakow, in 'A Catechism of the Polish Brethren':

> 'The Holy Spirit cannot be a separate person for the following reasons: many of the things attributed to the Holy Spirit are not applicable to God, some not even to any person. For example, we read of the 'Spirit given without measure', that God pours it out, sheds it forth; that men drink into it; and are baptised into it; that there are fruits of it; that it is taken away; that at some time it was not; that it was quenched; also the Holy Spirit is said to be given to men, and subject to them. God is subject to no one. A Divine person cannot be bestowed on anyone; for he who is given or bestowed must be under the authority of another which can on no account be said of a Divine person which is the supreme God himself.'

Do believers possess the Holy Spirit gifts today?

The question arises – does the power of the Holy Spirit operate through believers today in the same way as it did in those New Testament times? A careful reading of Bible teaching indicates that it does not. Those gifts of the Holy Spirit were given for the specific purpose of establishing the early Christian church in a very hostile world. The majority of Jews refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah and killed him. Before his death Jesus had warned that false christs and false prophets would arise, who would show great signs and wonders and deceive believers (Matthew 24.24). Jesus was leaving the believers in a vulnerable state and he promised them help:

> 'But the Helper, the Holy Spirit…will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you' (John 14.26).

This was one of the reasons why *'the Helper'*, the Holy Spirit (Greek *parakletos* meaning *'called to one's side i.e. to one's aid' – Vine's Dictionary*

of N.T. words) was sent – to bring all things to their remembrance. When the New Testament Scriptures were completed this was no longer necessary.

The 'first-fruits'

When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, Peter recognised it as being a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. Now Peter clearly relates this prophecy of Joel to *'the last days'* and although this undoubtedly referred to the last days of the Jewish nation (Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70), a study of Joel will show that the complete fulfilment of this prophecy is still future. The feast of Pentecost however, was also known as the feast of first-fruits, a thanksgiving for the first-fruits of the harvest, a token of the greater harvest that was to come later in the year.

In the same way, this outpouring of the Holy Spirit was a 'first-fruits', a visible measure of the greater revelation of God's power that will be seen in the age to come. In the letter to the Hebrews we read about those who had partaken of the Holy Spirit as having *'tasted...the powers of the age to come'* (Hebrews 6.5). This revelation of God's power, however, was only a token of the greater fulfilment of Joel's prophecy at the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his kingdom.

A more excellent way

The Apostle Paul indicated that the gifts of the Holy Spirit would cease when a full knowledge of the Gospel was revealed. The various gifts were to enable the church to become an organic body working in harmony for the witnessing to Christ. He wrote to the Corinthians concerning *'a more excellent way'* (1 Corinthians 12.31) and emphasised the need for love, because:

> 'Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect (i.e.

complete or mature) has come, then that which is in part will be done away' (1 Corinthians 13.8-10).

Paul is referring here to the completion of the New Testament by the power of the Holy Spirit. Faith, hope and love were to remain, but the gifts of the Holy Spirit which had revealed knowledge and prophecies only in part, were to be succeeded by a more excellent way – the full revelation of the Gospel message through Jesus Christ in the New Testament Scriptures. Once the Holy Scriptures had been completed by the writings of the apostles, the Holy Spirit gifts were gradually withdrawn and so the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians wrote: *'And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love'* (I Corinthians 13.13).

Believers today, waiting for the return of Jesus, do not have the power of the Holy Spirit, but they do have God's Spirit Word by which they live their lives in faith, hope and love. When Christ's kingdom comes, faith will give way to sight and hope will give way to realisation but love will always remain.

This understanding that the gifts of the Holy Spirit would be withdrawn, was acknowledged by the early church fathers. John Chrysostom (AD 347-407) spoke of the cessation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Augustine, another church father (AD 354-430), spoke of the gifts passing away. A certain John Owen, writing in AD 1679, commented '*that the dispensation of the spirit is long ceased and where it is now pretended … it may justly be suspected as an enthusiastic delusion'*. In AD 1843 James Buchanan wrote: *'the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have long since been withdrawn. They were used for a temporary purpose…'* ('Signs of the Apostles' by Walter J Chantry, pages 140-143).

There are Christians today who claim the need for the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to understand God's Word but this is not true. Paul wrote to Timothy:

> 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.'
>
> (2 Timothy 3.16, 17)

Clearly, this passage of Scripture is telling us that it is God's Word which is able to make a believer complete – not the possession of the Holy Spirit power. The same teaching is given in the Old Testament:

> 'My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God' (Proverbs 2. 1-5).

God's Spirit Word is living and powerful and by believing and obeying its teaching, we are born again to live our lives, no longer following the thinking of the flesh but following the teaching of God's Word. Do you believe this? If not, are you prepared to follow the example of the Bereans of the 1st Century of whom we are told:

> 'These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily **to find out whether these things were so**' (Acts 17.11).

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