

The Holy Spirit through the New Testament

Part 1 – The Story: Synoptics and Acts

Bren Hughes

The Greek word *pneuma* (379 times in the NT) means the same as the Hebrew *ruach*, denoting invisible movement, whether that is air, human emotion, or divine activity. The title “Holy Spirit” is found 90 times in the NT, along with “Spirit of God” (19 times), “Spirit of Jesus” (twice), “Spirit of the Lord” (5 times), and “Spirit of Christ” (5 times).

First, we will study how the Spirit functions in the story of Christ and the early church (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts). Then, in part 2, we will examine NT material which reflects on the Holy Spirit from John and the letters.

Part 1 – The Synoptic Gospels

In the Gospel story, the Holy Spirit is an entity that is separate from Jesus himself, but which acts upon him and through him. It is on him; it fills him and leads him, and through the Spirit Christ speaks. He has the Spirit in power and without limit (John 3:34). It appears that this spiritual indwelling and empowerment takes place immediately following Christ’s baptism. And it is the Spirit which raises him from the dead.

The Holy Spirit comes *upon* **Mary** and causes her virgin conception (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35; Gal. 4:29).

John the prophet is *filled* with the Holy Spirit from birth (Luke 1:15). His mother **Elizabeth** becomes *filled* with the Holy Spirit and blesses Mary as baby John leaps in her womb (1:41-45). John’s father **Zachariah** also becomes *filled* with the Holy Spirit and *prophecies* (1:67). John later proclaims that the Messiah will *baptize* the people “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (3:16).

The Holy Spirit is *upon* **Simeon**, to whom the Holy Spirit had *revealed* that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Simeon is “*moved* by the Spirit” into the temple court, where he meets the holy family and prophecies (Luke 2:25-32).

Right after his baptism, the Holy Spirit of God *descends* upon **Jesus** “in bodily form like a dove,” as a voice speaks from the sky (Luke 3:22; Mark 1:10; Matt. 3:16; cf. John 1:32-33). Jesus is then said to be “*full* of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1). The Spirit then “*leads*” or “*sends*” Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasts and faces temptation. He then returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” and begins his ministry (Luke 4:14). “The Spirit of the Lord is *on* me,” he announces in Nazareth (Luke 4:18; Isa. 61:1; cf. Matt. 12:18; Acts 10:37; Isa. 42:1). In Luke 10:21, Jesus says a prayer of thanksgiving while “full of joy through the Holy Spirit.” Christ drives out demons “by the Spirit of God,” which is a sign that “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

Jesus' Teachings on the Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels

“But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say. . . At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father *speaking* through you” (Matt. 10:19-20; cf. Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11-12).

“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt. 12:31-32; cf. Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10).

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . .” (Matt. 28:19).

“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

Part 2 – The Acts of Apostles

Some have suggested that “Acts of the Holy Spirit” is a better name for this book, for the Spirit drives all the action and occurs as a character throughout.

Several times in Acts, the Old Testament prophets are said to speak the words of the Holy Spirit (1:16; 4:25; 28:25).

Jesus gave instructions *through the Holy Spirit* to the apostles (1:2). He tells them,

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the *gift* my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. . . But you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:4-5, 8).

In chapter 2, the sound of a violent wind and tongues of fire appear as the 12 apostles (or perhaps the 120 disciples) are all “*filled* with the Holy Spirit and began to *speak* in tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (2:4). Peter says this is what the prophet Joel had foretold:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy (2: 17-18).

Jesus was raised from the dead, Peter says, “Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (2:33). When the crowd is moved to respond, Peter tells them to

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and

your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (2:38-39).

In Acts 4:8, Peter is “*filled* with the Holy Spirit” as he appears before the rulers, elders, and teachers of the law, and *speaks* to them (in fulfillment of Luke 12:11-12). When he returns to the believers, the whole group prays, and then “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit and *spoke* the word of God boldly” (4:31).

In Acts 5, Ananias lies to the Holy Spirit, and his wife tests the Spirit of the Lord (5:3, 9). Later in that chapter Peter and the other apostles are summoned to appear before the Sanhedrin and the high priest. “We are *witnesses* of these things,” the apostles say, speaking of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, “and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has *given* to those who obey him” (5:32).

Stephen, a man “*full* of faith and the Holy Spirit,” is chosen along with six other men “known to be *full* of the Spirit,” to be the first deacons in Acts 6:3, 5. Stephen is “*full* of God’s grace and *power*,” doing “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people” (6:8). His opponents “could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by which he *spoke* (6:10), so they put him on trial. “You are just like your fathers,” he tells the Sanhedrin, “You always resist the Holy Spirit” (7:51). Again, Stephen is said to be “*full* of the Holy Spirit” as he sees a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God (7:55).

Acts 8:14-25 contains an interesting story:

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaia had accepted the word of God [through the preaching of Philip], they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon [the former sorcerer] saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, the Spirit tells Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it” (8:29). After the man’s baptism, “the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again” (8:39).

In Acts 9, Saul/Paul is blinded on the way to Damascus. Placing his hands on Saul, Ananias tells him that Jesus sent him “so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17). Then Saul regains his sight and is baptized.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (9:31).

The Spirit is also involved in the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile disciple. The Spirit tells Peter to go with Cornelius’ messengers (10:19-20; 11:12). Then the following happens:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (10:44-48).

This is the second instance of the phenomenon known as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As Peter explains the incident with Cornelius,

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us. . . who was I to think that I could opposed God (11:15-17; cf. 15:8-11)?

Barnabas is another man “*full* of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24). Agabus predicts famine “through the Spirit” (11:28).

In chapter 13, the Holy Spirit tells the Antioch church to commission Paul and Barnabas for foreign mission (13:2). They are “sent on their way by the Holy Spirit” (13:4). Paul is “*filled* with the Holy Spirit” and speaks to Elymas, cursing him with blindness (13:9-11).

The Holy Spirit restrains Paul and Silas from preaching in Asia (16:6, 7).

Acts 19 has an interested account of some disciples in Ephesus:

[Paul] asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all (19:2-7).

The Spirit is the driving force behind Paul’s movements in the final part of Acts. He is “compelled by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem, although “in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (20:22-23). The disciples at Tyre urge Paul “through the Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem (21:4), as does the prophet Agabus (21:11).

Summary

In Acts, the Spirit fills people and gives them power so they can speak and act as witnesses to the Christ event. The promise of the Spirit is a gift for all disciples, but some are also given the ability to speak in tongues or perform other miraculous signs through the baptism of the Holy Spirit or the laying on of the apostles’ hands. The Spirit speaks to and through certain people, and orchestrates Paul’s (and Philip’s) missionary activities.