

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

Some friends who aren't Christians simply don't understand the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit really is a person and not a thing. Most popular theology comes out of movies like "Star Wars," and so many people think that the Holy Spirit is just the "Force" with a different name.

Followers of Jesus know that the Spirit is powerful, able to be felt as a strong and miraculous presence. But the Holy Spirit is much more than that. The Spirit is a person who stands with us, empathizes with us, and acts for us. It was Paul who said,

do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)

This spirit isn't an object, like a hammer or a chain saw. The Spirit's a person with feelings, desires, and hopes. The Spirit is able to act powerfully alone, or to with Jesus and God the Father as a team that is joined together in love.

What does the Spirit do?

It's through Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit that all who follow him become children of God. As Paul says,

because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Romans 8:14)

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. (Romans 8:15)

This includes every one of the followers who were in the room when the Spirit came on Pentecost and every one of those on the street who heard the word from Peter and believed.

It also includes every one of us who, so many years later, hear the word and also come to believe. The joy is there for each of us and for all of us, because the adoption into the family of God is there for us too. Paul says,

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:17)

The Holy Spirit is still alive and active in the world today. The Spirit guides us as we face the many kinds of craziness in the culture around us. In fact, the culture we live in is probably more like the culture of the Roman Empire than any time between then and now. We need the power of the Spirit on a daily basis to do what Jesus promised the Spirit would do for us:

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. (John 16:8-11)

What can the Spirit do now?

We need this Spirit, especially when so many voices around us lie in so many different ways, to remind us about righteousness, sin, and judgment. We need the Spirit to remind us that no matter how bleak our situation may be, the powers of this world have been defeated already.

Jesus already won, and the final victory of goodness and righteousness is secure. We're living in the clean-up operation, where those who belong to Christ have a reserved seat on the way to eternity. It's a time when those who don't want to be with him have their final chance to change their minds.

The Holy Spirit is here with us now. Sometimes the Spirit's presence shines out for all to see it, the way it did at that first Pentecost. Sometimes the Spirit's work is hidden in individual hearts and lives. But the work of the Spirit goes on, sometimes more visible and sometimes less visible, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The work of the Spirit, with or without the fireworks, continues to be a part of our lives every day.

The Spirit reminds us where our loyalty lies and gives us strength to persevere. The Spirit accompanies us on every step of our journey. The Spirit is our advocate, even in when we pray. As Paul said to the Romans,

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

What is the Spirit doing for us?

The Spirit is present to us and a part of our lives from the first moment that we came to faith. In fact, preparing our hearts to be open to receive the God's message is the Spirit's work too. Our faith is a gift of God's kindness and nothing we can do for ourselves. It's the Spirit who opens our hearts to make everything possible. It was the Spirit who does God's work of preparation, softening the ground and opening us to the impossible possibility of God's love, well before we're even aware of it.

The Holy Spirit was present, doing the work behind the scenes, when we were first baptized. Baptism is a sacrament, and it's the Holy Spirit who does the holy work behind our washing with water. The Holy Spirit wipes away all the sin in our lives, and marks us as belonging to Jesus. It's the Spirit who welcomes us into God's family as brand-new brothers and sisters through Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is with us, working inside of us, every day of our lives as followers of Jesus. It's the Spirit who does the work called sanctification deep in our souls that helps us to grow to be more like Jesus. Sometimes we work with the Spirit, and sometimes we drag our feet or rebel, but the Spirit never gives up on us.

It's the Spirit who shows us the meaning of God's word and leads us to understand what we hear in the scripture. The Spirit is our teacher, using the holy words we hear to bring us closer to holiness ourselves.

The Holy Spirit is present in our worship and in the ordinary moments of our days, bringing our Jesus to us. It's the Spirit who brings us into his presence in prayer, and the Spirit who makes it possible for us to share his company and be his friend. It's the Holy Spirit who makes the miracle in our communion service, bringing us all together in sharing his life. The Holy Spirit is our connection to Jesus and to each other.

If you ever doubt the Spirit's power to bring us to love, try reaching out to forgive someone who has wronged you. If you're like me, you might approach that person with a righteous sense of your hurt and their villainy. But if you ask the Holy Spirit to work through

you, you might find resources you never thought you had. The Holy Spirit, freed to fill you with loving care, can transform your hurt, anger, and pain into an unexpected peace and healing. The Spirit is always there, available and willing to work this transformation in our hearts.

It's the Holy Spirit who does for us happened to the disciples that first Pentecost—frees our voices and gives us the power to speak. It's the anointing of the Holy Spirit, not our own courage or eloquence, that makes it possible for us to share the good news of God's love through Jesus.

The gift of evangelism is rare and precious, but the gift of being able to share encouragement with a friend or a neighbor can happen any day of our lives. When we're reluctant to talk about such a personal thing as our faith, it's the Holy Spirit who gives us the confidence and the words to speak out. The Holy Spirit is the one who anoints each of us, giving us the authority and the ability to speak in the world, as representatives of Jesus.

How can we cooperate with the Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is always present as our teacher and guide. How do we respond to the Spirit's leading? Did you have to go to dancing classes when you were growing up? I remember that I did. You had to dance in couples, and the boy had to lead, or at least try to lead. We girls were supposed to learn how to tell what the boy wanted to happen next. Sometimes it was a matter of reading the signals that the boys were supposed to be giving. Sometimes it was just a matter of getting your feet out of the way of where your partner was about to step. Either way, we sort of learned to muddle along together, mostly going in the same direction.

I think that learning to follow the guidance of the Spirit is a lot like learning to dance as couples. We need to get to know our partner well enough to be able to figure out what's coming next. As we spend days listening for and responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit, we get better at it. We can tell when we're on the right track, and we can tell when we're about to take a big step in the wrong direction. Our goal these days is to listen and feel for the Spirit's leading, so that we can move smoothly from one step to the next, working together.

A little while back, I began to think about the leading of the Spirit in an even more responsive way. I had this picture of a hand in a glove, with the Holy Spirit being the directing hand and me being the glove that responds to do the Spirit's work. At first, we're like those big metal gauntlets that knights used in suits of armor, very rigid and only good for forceful motions. Then we become more responsive, like those robot gloves people use to work with things that need to be in a sterile environment.

As we get better and better at being the Spirit's gloves, we become more flexible and more responsive, like rubber kitchen gloves or even like those thin plastic gloves that people can use for so many different things, from painting to counting money. The more practice we get at doing the Spirit's work, the thinner and less in the way we are, and the more the power of God shows through.

Is the power of the Holy Spirit still at work in the world today? Never doubt it. The Spirit is empowering and inspiring folks all around us. The Spirit guides us, helps us understand what's going on, and helps us when we ask. I challenge you to welcome the Holy Spirit's presence into every part of your life, to strengthen you, to inspire you and lead you in the path of holiness.