

Why You Might Be Wrong About the Holy Spirit

You may be Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered and Spirit-sensitive, but do you really 'get' the third person of the Trinity?

I remember the first time I heard about "it." I was probably 12 years old, and our church was having a business meeting to discuss it. I really wasn't clear what "it" was, but it sure was causing a stir.

Years later, I discovered that our church was fighting about (uh, I mean discussing) a doctrinal issue concerning the "Holy Ghost." At the time, it was all very confusing because lots of people were saying that we had to stay away from other people who had "received the Holy Ghost."

It made sense to me. I mean, who wants to be around people who are hanging around with ghosts, right? From that moment, I was wary whenever I heard about people who were gullible enough to believe in the Holy Ghost. I thought they must be in some kind of hypnotic trance or belong to some crazy church.

As the years passed, I learned to dismantle my misconceptions and inherited prejudices about the Holy Spirit. One of the main reasons was because my own Christian experience—fueled mostly by my own efforts—ended up being a failure, to say the least. When I finally invited the Holy Spirit to fill me, my prayer was a mixed bag of double messages—something like this: "Holy Spirit, I want to receive You, but at the same time I don't want to lose control. I want You to come in on my terms. I'll receive You, but I still have some concerns about You and Your ways. If You can behave Yourself, then You're welcome to come in and stay awhile."

If it sounds like a halfhearted contract with an unruly tenant

instead of a commitment of love with the God of the universe, you're right. Like so many people, I'd let my religious prejudices taint my beliefs and color my perceptions. Finally, though, I said, "I want You and everything You have to offer—all of me for all of You."

It changed everything. I went from being a weak, milk-fed Christian to a radical, on-fire believer who couldn't stop reading his Bible and inserting Christ into conversations with my friends. The best part is I wasn't trying to be a "good Christian"! I was simply being myself and allowing the Spirit into my heart, my mind and my life. I surrendered all I'd heard about the Spirit so that I could experience the adventure of God's presence in my life .

I'm concerned that many people today are in the same place I was in—they misunderstand and misperceive God's gift to us of the Holy Spirit. Most of us understand God the Father because we all have an earthly father. We know what a father is like or what a good father should be like.

It's pretty easy to understand Jesus the Son, too. God with us in the flesh, Emmanuel, came to earth as a baby in a manger, died as a sinless man on a cross and returned to life as the radiant Son who made it possible for us to know His Father. Most of us have some understanding of Jesus because we've seen pictures and movies that depict Him, even if they're not close to being accurate.

But what's up with this Holy Ghost? If you're like I was for years, it may seem easier to stay away and avoid the topic altogether. We don't have a positive association with "ghosts" and all the spooky, supernatural mystery that surrounds them—who wants that? As it turns out, He's not a ghost at all.

Instead of some kind of spooky apparition, we need to go back to the Bible and look closely at what God tells us about this part of Himself. The word *spirit* is mentioned more than 800

times in Scripture. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word is *ruwach*, which literally means “a violent exhalation, a blast of breath, a strong wind.” In the New Testament, the Greek word for this same kind of breath is *pneuma*, which translates “a breath or wind, a current of air, a strong breeze”—not a ghost.

If the Holy Spirit is like breath or wind, then let’s think through the characteristics of wind and perhaps we can gain a clearer, more concrete idea of who the Spirit is and His role in our lives.

Invisible Wind

Wind is something we feel and experience but don’t see. While we can observe its effects and see its impact on leaves and trees, kites and windmills, we never actually see the wind itself. But the fact that we can’t see it doesn’t keep us from acknowledging it as a reality.

Similarly, we must realize that while the Spirit can’t be seen, He can be felt, experienced and observed in action. When our church was still meeting at a high school, I was shaking hands and talking with people as they left after one particular Sunday morning service when a man said something I’ll never forget. When I asked this first-time visitor if he enjoyed the service, he got a funny look on his face and said, “Preacher, there was something in that room today ... something *different*.”

He didn’t know what it was—he couldn’t see it—but it drew him back the next week. Simply put, it was the presence of God. The Spirit is undeniable and real.

We get frustrated sometimes because we can’t quantify and objectify the Spirit; we can’t catch Him and take Him apart and study Him in a scientific way. Instead, we must rely on faith. The Bible defines faith this way: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”

(Heb. 11:1, NIV).

Unpredictable Wind

From the cool summer breeze that caresses us on a front porch swing to the furious tornado whipping at more than 100 miles per hour, we know that wind changes speed and direction frequently. Despite the best efforts of our weather satellites and Doppler-radar reporters, we still experience the unpredictability of the wind. It goes where it wants.

The Holy Spirit moves in different ways as well. In fact, there's one instance in Scripture where English translators use the word *wind* instead of *spirit*. Jesus told the Pharisee Nicodemus, "The wind (*pneuma*) blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Jesus made it explicitly clear that the Holy Spirit moves like the wind—a seemingly unknowable way.

This unpredictability makes a lot of us uncomfortable. Most people like everything orderly and in its place. Yet the Spirit wind can blow through and quickly change that order. If this quality makes us so uncomfortable, then why does it seem to be a key part of the Spirit's essence?

I suspect if He were predictable, then we'd put our trust in a system—the structure, the kind of cause-and-effect behavior that leads to legalism rather than relationship. If we could consistently predict the Spirit's movement, then we would figure out a way to accomplish things without Him. God wants us to depend on Him and interact with Him on a daily, ongoing basis.

To receive all He has for you, you'll have to get comfortable with the unexpected and unpredictable. You'll have to rely on Him instead of just what your senses, scientific method or research experts tell you. You'll have to accept mystery as part of the relationship.

Powerful Wind

Wind can generate electricity, sail a ship or destroy an entire city. Wind has power. At the heart of it all, the Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is about power—supernatural power. This kind of divine, unseen, unpredictable power has been part of our faith since Pentecost.

In 19th-century America, revivalist Charles Finney, whose ministry reportedly led more than half a million people to Christ, was a major leader in the Second Great Awakening. While training to be a lawyer, Finney became intellectually curious about Christ but resisted turning his life over to God for a long time. However, he eventually felt so drawn to the Spirit he could no longer resist.

He later described his first encounter with God's Spirit like this: "The Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way. It seemed like the very breath of God."

All of us want that kind of power in our lives, even if we think it's easier to serve God on a merely intellectual level. If we can contain something in our thoughts, understand and analyze it, then we feel like we have at least some control over it. If we truly want to experience a breath of fresh air in every area of our lives, we have to allow God's breath to resuscitate us.

If I've learned anything in my 34 years with God, it's the importance of not holding back, of going all in. As Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." It can't be halfway. It must be total and beyond your control.

As you consider how to let go of your own fears and

misperceptions of God's Spirit, imagine that you're wading away from the shore of self into the open water of God's love (see Ezek. 47:3-5). God calls us to let go of our attempts to control and find the place where He directs us. In the shallow water, we tend to feel in control because we can touch the bottom. But in the middle, God invites us to swim, to immerse ourselves in all that He has for us.

Many of us prefer just to wade in the river, experiencing some of God's mystery while staying in control by keeping our feet firmly on the river bottom. Yet the Spirit of God invites us to go from an ankle-deep faith to one that's knee-deep, then waist-deep, and finally to one in which we can no longer touch the bottom at all. It's a faith where we dive into the middle and swim in the powerful current of God's love and joy.

So many people are afraid to jump in because they want to stay in control. But the truth is none of us can ultimately control our lives, nor do we really want to try. We long for the safety of our Father's arms and the intimate friendship of His Spirit. I dare you to go for what you long for most. I challenge you to put yourself on a spiritual adventure where you experience the breath of God's Spirit filling your sails.

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