

Three New Testament Witnesses to the Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Our hope is that the following sets of notes may provide some ideas and starting points for preaching and for Bible study groups.

Paul's experience, understanding and teaching

For Paul, the Holy Spirit is inseparable from Jesus, as these two passages demonstrate:

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:9-11)

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "*Abba, Father.*" (Galatians 4:6)

For Paul, the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives is identified with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the end age, promised by Israel's prophets, as for example:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

And afterward,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days. Joel 2:28-29)

The presence of the Holy Spirit was a sign of restoration to God's favour: grace, forgiveness, redemption. He is identified as the one who, by his presence in the lives of the recipients, makes it possible for them to enjoy the great eschatological restoration promised in the Hebrew Bible - the New Creation.

The Holy Spirit brings a wonderful foretaste of the complete fulfilment of this messianic age, which is yet to come. He acts as the seal and guarantee of what is not yet fully here:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our

inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The Holy Spirit also brings into our lives the first fruits of its full experience:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8: 22-23)

Luke's experience, understanding and teaching

When we think about the gift of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians, we see that the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts is the Holy Spirit of prophecy as he ministers to and through us. In Luke-Acts, the Holy Spirit comes powerfully upon people to empower them for prophetic proclamation. Again and again, the sign of the Holy Spirit's presence is bold prophetic speech.

However, if we look first at Luke's gospel, we find exceptions to this focus in relation to two pivotal points in *Jesus'* life. First of all, we have the account of Jesus' baptism, where the emphasis is quite different from the empowerment to prophesy. The emphasis is on the public identifying of Jesus as God's Son, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to confirm Jesus' identity:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

This seems to build on two messianic texts from the Hebrew Bible:

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father. (Psalm 2:7)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1)

The dove here may symbolise the beginning of a new creation, a new life with God. This would link with striking verses in Genesis. The Holy Spirit creates order and beauty out of chaos:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:2)

The Holy Spirit also shows us that salvation is at hand:

Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of

the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him. (Genesis 8:8-12)

This understanding of the Holy Spirit as the one breaking into the present age at the baptism of Jesus to be the bringer of the experience of the new creation resonates well with Paul's emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the guarantee, seal and first-fruits of the coming age.

The second exception relates to Jesus's period of testing in the wilderness:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness ... When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. (Luke 4:1, 13-14)

Here, the Holy Spirit has authority with Jesus. He leads him into the dark place of the wilderness, allowing the devil to test him.

[Later on, following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we learn that it is Jesus who has the authority to send the Holy Spirit on God's people:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. 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. (Acts 2:32-33)]

However, it is interesting to note that if we set to one side Luke's account of Jesus' genealogy, which in Matthew's version is placed right at the start of his gospel, we see Luke embedding the whole start of the public ministry of Jesus in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. (Luke 3:21-22a)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. (Luke 4:1)

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. (Luke 4:14)

Nonetheless, Luke's focus on the presence of the Holy Spirit as the one who empowers us to proclaim the gospel also comes to the fore in Luke's presentation of the effective start of Jesus' public ministry. We note that only Luke gives us this episode in Jesus' life:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21)

This quotation from Isaiah 61:1-2 sets the programme for Jesus’ ministry in Luke’s gospel, describing all that would result from the Holy Spirit’s presence with Jesus, the Anointed One. Jesus, the Messiah anointed by Holy Spirit, inaugurates the fulfilled Year of Jubilee in which debts will be forgiven, slaves set free and property recovered. Here we see Jesus associating the Holy Spirit with prophetic power.

After his ascension, this prophetic anointing comes on Jesus’ disciples:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

The link between the anointing of Jesus and that of his followers, are the statements which promise a transfer of the Holy Spirit from the ascended Jesus to his disciples:

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. (Acts 1:8)

No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and 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.

I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

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. Peter replied, "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." (Acts 2:16-21, 33, 38-39)

Perhaps because of his focus on the Holy Spirit as the anointer for prophetic proclamation, Luke does not emphasise any *explicit* link between the Holy Spirit and the performing of miracles. This does not mean that he did not believe that the Holy Spirit empowers believers to perform miracles, but this is not something he highlights.

For example, Matthew tells us that Jesus said the following in the famous Beelzebul episode:

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matthew 12:28)

However, in his account of the same episode, Luke tells us that Jesus said the following:

But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Luke 11:20)

[We note in relation to this that in a preaching episode involving Peter and John, the believers are urged:

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:30)

It is also the hand that God uses here, and this is linked to the name of Jesus, not to the Holy Spirit directly.]

It is also interesting to note that Luke does not *explicitly* link the Holy Spirit with the work of salvation. Receiving the Holy Spirit is closely related to water baptism, but receiving the Holy Spirit may take place before or after water baptism in the name of Jesus:

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 Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their 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. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. (Acts 10:44-48)

When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:15-17)

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and 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 in 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. (Acts 19:1-6)

In Acts, Luke also underlines for us that the Holy Spirit produces good character in those anointed by God. We see this with respect to

- the good reputations and wisdom of the seven chosen to serve:

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:3)

- Stephen's faith and wisdom:

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit ... Now Stephen ... performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose ... But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. (Acts 6:5-10)

- Barnabas's goodness and faith:

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:24)

John's experience, understanding and teaching

John, in his own way, agrees with Paul that the Holy Spirit's ministry is inseparable from that of Jesus.

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father - the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father - he will testify about me. (John 15:26)

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 16:13-15)

Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room bears witness to the Holy Spirit being a distinct personality, though the Holy Spirit ministers by bearing witness to Jesus.

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:25-26)

This passage also tells us something else about the particular ministry of the Holy Spirit. The word translated here by 'Advocate', is the famous term, 'Paraclete'. It is also commonly translated as 'Comforter', or 'Counsellor, meaning someone who comes alongside you in difficult times. However, it is not quite right to understand this in what we might call a passive, or easy, way. We sometimes talk about comforting someone as meaning that we put an arm on their shoulder, say, 'there, there', and make them a cup of tea.

This Greek term is associated with the legal language of advocacy. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' witness-advocate, the one who knows him so well that he can really witness to him and really represent him. It is as if the Holy Spirit's ministry is to persuade us of the value of following Jesus. This is the language of the true and faithful witness, the one who can bring strong, active comfort to us, strengthening our faith and our own witness.

In his own way, John also agrees with Luke in not associating the role of the Holy Spirit *explicitly* with the performance of miracles.

There is an episode, unique to John, where Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23)

The account of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto the disciples confirms Jesus words in the passages quoted above, when Jesus speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit as a future event. For John, the death and resurrection of Jesus were necessary prequels to the coming of the Holy Spirit into our own lives and ministries.

In the first of John's letters, the presence of the Holy Spirit is the evidence that the believer has come to share in the life of Jesus.

The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (1 John 3:24)

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:13)

If the Holy Spirit is in us, then like him, our lives and words will testify to Jesus.

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. (1 John 4:2-3a)