

6 The hand of God - What others believe

In this section we want to consider three topics:

- The teaching that holy spirit is the third person of the trinity.
- The belief that the holy spirit has guided the church in the development of its doctrines.
- The claims of many people today to experience gifts of the spirit, in particular speaking with tongues and healing.

The third person of the trinity?

We accept the fact that the Holy Spirit is God, just as much as God the Father and God the Son. But when it comes to explaining it, we are at a loss. ...

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a person. Jesus never referred to "it" when He was talking about the Holy Spirit. In John 14, 15 and 16, for example, He spoke of the Holy Spirit as "He" because He is not a force or thing but a person. Whoever speaks of the Holy Spirit as "it" is uninstructed, or perhaps even undiscerning.

Billy Graham 'The Holy Spirit', William Collins, Glasgow, © Billy Graham



Is it true that the holy spirit is described as a person?

Hebrew is like French in having two genders (masculine and feminine) for nouns, whereas Greek is like German, which has three (masculine, feminine and neuter).

You may find the table below interesting. The left hand columns list some key words from the Old Testament, and the right hand columns list words from the New:

Hebrew (OT)	Gender
Elohim, God	masculine
Adonai, Lord	masculine
Yahweh, LORD	masculine
Ben, Son	masculine
Ab, Father	masculine
Ruach, spirit	feminine

Greek (NT)	Gender
Theos, God	masculine
Kurios, Lord	masculine
Huios, Son	masculine
Pater, Father	masculine
Pneuma, spirit	neuter
Parakletos, Comforter	masculine

So while the words to describe God and the Lord Jesus are masculine, the word for spirit in the Old Testament is feminine, whereas in the New Testament *pneuma* is neuter.

This means that 'the spirit who ...' (as in the NIV translation of 1 Corinthians 2:12) is an interpretation; the word is neuter, and 'the spirit which ...' would be more accurate.

There are four passages, in John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7 where Jesus refers to the holy

spirit as the Comforter (AV) or Counsellor (NIV). This noun is masculine, but that does not mean that Christ was referring to another person. For example, in John 8:34 Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin”. The Greek word for sin, *hamartia*, is feminine – but Jesus is not referring to a woman.

The passages in John are telling the disciples that through the spirit Jesus would be with them, as in another place he says: ‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’. (Matthew 18:20).

What would you say of the quotation from Billy Graham at the start of this section?



Has the holy spirit guided churches in the development of their doctrine?

The statement below is about the holy spirit and the Roman Catholic church in the liturgy – the formal worship in the church.

In the liturgy the Holy Spirit is teacher of the faith of the People of God and artisan of “God’s masterpieces,” the sacraments of the New Covenant. The desire and work of the Spirit in the heart of the Church is that we may live from the life of the risen Christ.

The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, paragraph 1091.

The following encyclical letter from Pope Paul VI is an instruction to priests to follow the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church on matters relating to birth control. The reason given is that the church has in this matter been guided by the holy spirit.

To priests

... For it is your great and manifest mission - and We address especially those of you who are moral theologians - to promote completely and clearly the teaching of the Church concerning marriage. ... For truly, you know that you are bound to such obedience not only for the reasons given, but also on account of the light of the Holy Spirit, whose guidance the Fathers of the Church particularly enjoy when setting forth the truth...

Humanae Vitae, An encyclical letter on the proper regulation of the propagation of offspring, Pope Paul VI, 1968



Nearly all churches insist on the authority of scripture in their teaching; many go on, however, to add that the work of the holy spirit is to guide the church in its interpretation of scripture.

At times it is clear that this has gone far beyond anything that is declared in God’s word. Some clear examples, in the case of the Roman Catholic church for example, would be:

- The teaching, in *Humanae Vitae* quoted above, and in many other documents, that marriage is only for the purpose of procreation and that all artificial methods

of birth control are sinful.

- The practice of praying to dead 'saints' for special help – for example, to 'St Christopher' for help on a journey.
- Doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary – the belief that the soul of the virgin Mary was free from 'original sin'.
- Doctrine of the assumption of the virgin Mary - the doctrine that after her death the body of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was taken into heaven and reunited with her soul.
- Teaching about purgatory (a state in which souls after death are punished for, and purified from, unforgiven sins).
- Teaching about limbo (a place where the souls of the just in Old Testament times were said to be taken until Christ came; and where the souls of unbaptized infants are still said to go).

We could add to this list, in the case of many other churches:

- Ordaining women priests - in fact, ordaining priests at all.
- Accepting practising homosexuals into the church, as members and even as priests.

Not only are these teachings not to be found in scripture, but there are other churches, which would equally claim to be guided by the holy spirit, and which would not accept them.



Look at Acts 17:2-3,10-11. See how the Apostle Paul, despite authority that he could have claimed through the holy spirit, deferred to the Old Testament scriptures; and how the Bereans were commended because rather than accepting Paul's word for what he had to say, used their scriptures to confirm the accuracy of his teaching.



Read 1 John 4:1, and see how believers were exhorted to test what they heard, rather than simply accepting the teaching of anyone claiming to be a prophet.

So, has the holy spirit guided churches in the development of their doctrine?



What about speaking with tongues and healing?

Speaking in tongues

In recent years 'speaking in tongues' has become common in Pentecostal and in other evangelical churches, and in North America there are evangelists who do so in religious broadcasts. It consists of an individual producing sounds that are not in any known language. Someone who has experienced this will say that they found it a moving and valuable experience in their communication with God. Some questions that arise are:

- How important is this practice?
- Is this experience evidence that the beliefs of the person concerned are correct?
- If we do not speak in tongues, is that because there is something wrong, either with us or with our beliefs?

In the previous topic, we looked at the events recorded in Acts 2, where the apostles were enabled to speak in foreign languages so that all the people in Jerusalem could understand what they were saying.



Now look at 1 Corinthians 12:28-13:2. Where does speaking in tongues come in Paul's priorities? Look at some of the problems faced in the church at Corinth, in passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3; 5:1-2; 6:5-7, and so on. Does this indicate that the teaching of members of the church who spoke in tongues was sound?



If you have time, read the whole of 1 Corinthians 14. It is not clear here whether Paul is talking about real languages or ecstatic utterances, but it is clear that they were not understood by the rest of the congregation.

Look at the distinction that Paul makes between speaking in tongues which cannot be understood, and prophecy, which can. Who benefits from the practice, and what is the effect on everyone else?



'Speaking in tongues' is not only a Christian phenomenon

Finally, note the following extract, and consider how it helps you to answer the questions we listed above. You may like also to read 1 Kings 18:28-29 and see how what is written below may have applied to the prophets of Baal.

Prophecy in its fullest sense thus includes augury, divination, and oracles, which are techniques by which, it is believed, the will of the gods can be learned. Prophets have often spoken in ecstasy, a state that may be induced by various methods, including dance or music. The emphasis of the prophetic message has varied, some prophets stressing the cultic, others the moral, and still others the missionary aspect of religious life. Prophets have appeared throughout history and in virtually all societies.

"Prophecy," Microsoft® Encarta. Copyright © Microsoft Corporation

It is undeniable that there are significant abuses within some groups that believe in and practise the gifts of the Spirit. I have witnessed emotionalism, exaggerations, elitism, prophetic words used in a controlling and manipulative way, and a lack of spiritual foundation in various meetings and movements. I would not say, however, that this is true of the majority of groups that practise the gifts of the Spirit.

Surprised by the Power of the Spirit, © Jack Deere 1993, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Healing

In a manner rather similar to speaking in tongues, there are 'healing ministries' among evangelical churches, and the same sorts of questions arise.

Can we still expect that God will answer prayers, including those to heal the sick?

Look at the following passages, and summarise what they say



Matthew 7:7-11; John 15:7; 1 John 3:21-22; 5:14-15

Examples of miraculous healing are rare today, but many Christadelphians believe that God has healed physical illnesses in response to prayer. So what is different in churches where people are invited to come and be healed, and a public show is made of healing?

- The major difference is in the role of the one claiming to administer the healing. The public are invited to come and hear this or that pastor or teacher and to witness his use of healing power. This is not someone quietly and devoutly praying over, or for, a sick person, and then thanking God for his healing touch, but a public display. Compare this with the reaction of Christ in, for example, Matthew 12:38-39, when people came to see him in hope of seeing a miracle.
- It has to be said that in the majority of cases the claimed acts of healing are rather vague. Someone in the audience is declared to have been healed of arthritis, or of a pain in the back. This does not compare with the miracles of the Lord Jesus and his apostles, who were able completely to heal those who had been crippled or blind, - even to raise the dead. Some claimed miracle workers have been shown to have been fraudulent.
- It also has to be said that miraculous healing is not only carried out by Christians. There are many records of miraculous powers ascribed to witch doctors and others associated with 'magic arts'.

Look at Deuteronomy 18:10-12 and read God's condemnation on those who practised magic arts in the time of Moses. You may recall that the magicians in Pharaoh's palace were able to reproduce some of the miracles of Moses. Matthew 7:22-23 teaches the same lesson.

What would you conclude from these considerations?

