

Who on earth is the Holy Spirit?

And other questions about
who he is and what he does



**Tim Chester &
Christopher de la Hoyde**



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Part of the *Questions Christians Ask* series

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Introduction



Gary was confused. He'd been a believer for a little while. He was growing in his knowledge of Jesus, and had got stuck in with a local church. But he was feeling unsettled.

He'd been told soon after he became a Christian that the Holy Spirit came to live in all believers. But what he heard people saying about the Holy Spirit confused him: things like, "the Spirit really helped me", or "I feel like the Spirit's really putting his finger on this thing in my life".

And sometimes people in prayer meetings encouraged those present to pray "as the Spirit leads you".

As he read in his Bible about "praying in the Spirit", having "joy in the Spirit" and being "filled with the Spirit".

The thing was, he wasn't sure he knew what any of that meant, or if he'd ever experienced any of that. Did he really have the Holy Spirit at all then? For that matter, *who on earth is the Holy Spirit?*

Do you ever feel like Gary? Many people are confused about the Holy Spirit—who he is, what he does, what he's like and what we should expect from him. And many people feel uneasy when talking about him.

In Galatians 3 v 2-5 Paul says:

Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it? I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ. *(New Living Translation)*

Paul's point here is very clear: *You began the Christian life by faith and in the Spirit. So why switch to living by law?* All the blessings you have received, you have received by faith and by the Spirit. So why switch to an alternative way of living?

But this argument only works if the Spirit is a noticeable experience. Verse 2 doesn't work if the Galatians aren't sure whether they've received the Spirit. Paul is appealing to their *experience*. You've all experienced the life of the Spirit, says Paul. How did that experience come about? By law or by faith? It was by faith. What's

assumed is that *they have all experienced the Spirit*. The Spirit's work is not an unseen or unfelt reality.

This means you can't experience the Holy Spirit without noticing!

Which leaves us with an important question: *Have I actually experienced the Holy Spirit? And what does it actually look like, or feel like to experience the Holy Spirit?*

Francis Schaeffer once said:

Supposing we had awakened today to find everything concerning the Holy Spirit and prayer removed from the Bible ... What difference would it make practically between the way we worked yesterday and the way we would work today, and tomorrow? What difference would it make in the majority of Christians' practical work and plans? ... Isn't much work done by human talent, energy, and clever ideas? Where does the supernatural power of God have a real place?'

Francis Chan poses a similar challenge:

If you or I had never been to a church and had read only the Old and New Testaments, we would have significant expectations of the Holy Spirit in our lives ... If we read and believed these accounts, we would expect a great deal of the Holy Spirit ... We would expect our new life with the

1 Cited in Edith Schaeffer, **L'Abri**, Tyndale, 1969, 64-65.

*Holy Spirit to look radically different from our old life without him.*¹

Are we missing out on the fulness of life in the Spirit?

Our aim in this book is twofold.

Reassurance

We want to reassure you. For some of us, life in the Spirit sounds intimidating. It seems to speak of an experience that's not ours. We think of people having visions or intense emotions and it all seems a long way from the mundane realities of our lives. As we describe the experience of life in the Spirit in these pages, we hope we'll describe *your* experience. The life in the Spirit is the life you lead—not fully, not perfectly, but you'll recognise the signs of the Spirit's work in your own life.

Expectation

But we also want you to be much more aware of the *work* of the Spirit. In recent years discussions about the the Holy Spirit have often focused on a narrow range of issues. We'll touch on some of these. But we want the focus to be on what we think are the *central* activities of the Spirit.

We want to raise your expectation of the Spirit's work in your life. When you pray, we want you to expect the Spirit to work miracles. When you talk about Jesus, we want you to expect the Spirit to create faith in people's

¹ Francis Chan, **The Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit**, David C. Cook, 2009, 30-31.

hearts. When you read God's word, we want you to expect the Spirit to create intimacy with the Father. When you're tempted, we want you to expect the Spirit to give you alternative desires.

In your daily life, we want you to expect the Spirit to show you how you can serve others in love. We want you to be able to appeal to the experience of the Spirit as Paul does in Galatians 3 v 2-5.

The Spirit of life



Jane was really pleased about her new church. She was particularly excited about their homeless ministry. And she was so grateful that after the first meeting she attended, she'd been invited back for a meal with a lovely group of people. But she'd woken the next day with a strange feeling, a feeling of insecurity. Towards the end of the afternoon, one of the girls had asked her whether she had the Spirit. "Yes," she said, "I think so". But it struck her that "I think so" perhaps wasn't a great answer. She thought she had the Spirit. But now she wasn't so sure. *What did having the Spirit look like?*

Maybe you can relate to Jane. You've been told you have the Spirit. But when you hear people talking about the Spirit's work in their lives, you begin to wonder if you really do. Let's start by looking at Titus 3 v 3-7:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions



and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3 v 3-7

Everything God does, he does as Father, Son and Spirit. God is a tri-unity or trinity, a unity of three persons. All three members of the Trinity work together in everything God does. And there's no exception here. Who rescues sinners? Is it the Father, the Son or the Spirit? It's all three together!

The Father started it all off. The plan of salvation was initiated by his love. It's his kindness that has appeared.

Why is the Spirit sometimes called "the Holy Ghost"?

When the early translators of the Bible into English used the word "ghost", it didn't just mean (as it does today) spooky things that haunt old houses. It meant what we now mean by the word "spirit". In old English the word for "spirit" is "gast". The equivalent word in German ("geist") still has the broader sense, as the word *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times) shows.