

Holy Spirit: His Presence

A compilation of writings by Gordon Fee

The Holy Spirit ... who is he and what does he do? Where does he fit in our understanding of our relationship with God? The focus of this article is to begin to answer these questions and to help in applying this understanding, as you discover the riches of what you can experience in the Christian life.

The Gift of Presence

Presence is a delicious word—because it points to one of our truly great gifts. Nothing else can take the place of presence, not gifts, not telephone calls, not pictures, not mementos, nothing. Ask the person who has lost a lifelong mate what they miss the most; the answer is invariably “presence.” When we are ill, we don’t need soothing words nearly as much as we need loved ones to be present. What makes shared life—games, walks, concerts, outings, and a myriad of other things—so pleasurable? Presence.

God has made us this way, in his own image, because he himself is a personal, relational being. The great problem with the fall is that we lost not only our vision of God (that is, his true character has been distorted) but also our relationship with God, and thus no longer knew his abiding presence. For Paul the coming of Christ and the Spirit changed all of this forever.¹

Our images [of the Holy Spirit] are biblical, but they are also impersonal. He is wind, fire, water—comes to us as influence, or whatever. But he is also the one in whom and by whom we are sharing in the very love and grace and life of God himself. And I do not mean in some mystical way. Our problem is that the language of Father and Son evoke personal images; but Spirit evokes that which is intangible, not quite real. But, Paul’s prayer is that we might know the grace of Christ, the visible historical expression of the love of God, because as people of the Spirit we live in constant, empowering fellowship with God himself. This is how the loving God and the gracious Lord Jesus Christ are now present with us.

What Sets Us Apart As Christians?

God’s empowering presence - that is what “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” means. God’s empowering presence: that the Spirit is the way God has come to us in the present age, to be with us, to indwell us, both corporately and individually, to fellowship with us, and to empower us for life in the present as we await the consummation [which is the return of Christ]. By the Spirit our lives are invaded by the living God himself. God himself is present in and among us. This is an Old Testament theme that for Paul finds fulfillment in Christ and the Spirit.

The Spirit and The Scriptures

The theme begins in Genesis, in the Garden; the first result of the Fall was that the man and woman “hid themselves from the presence of God.” The presence of God is the key to our understanding the book of Exodus, and the awesome events of Sinai. God was present on the Mount, first in the bush that burned but was not consumed, later in great and awesome displays of power that Israel could not go near. But Moses was brought up to the Mount to be in the presence of God. There he received not only the Book of the Covenant, but the directions for building the Tabernacle, by which God’s presence was to leave the Mount, as it were, and accompany Israel. God’s presence among them—this was to mark off God’s people from the rest. But between the giving of the pattern for the Tabernacle, and its construction, there is the story of the debacle - Israel’s eating and playing in the presence of a golden calf.

¹ Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 9

In chapters 32-34 we see God's response to this terrible sin. "You take them up," God says to Moses; "my presence will not go with them." "No," Moses prays, "if, your Presence does not go with us, don't take us up from here, for how else will anyone know that we are your people, and that you are pleased with us if your Presence does not go with us?" And God relents, and reveals himself to Moses in the awesome words of Exodus 34:6-7, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty."

Exodus then concludes with the construction of the Tabernacle, and the descent of God's glory—the evidence of his presence among them.

Later, in Solomon's Temple, God's glory comes down again (as it did in the Tabernacle in Exodus 40)—God is now present with Israel in the Temple on Mount Zion. But there is continual failure in Israel, so finally Jeremiah prophesies that God will one day make a new covenant with his people, with Torah written on their hearts, which Ezekiel then picks up in terms of the Spirit. "I will put my Spirit within them," says the Lord through Ezekiel. "I will make breath (my Spirit) come into you and you shall come to life," he says to the dry bones. [...] [The Spirit takes what is dead and brings new life.]

This, then, is what Paul understands by the gift of the eschatological Spirit. The Spirit of promise, he calls him, i.e., the promised Holy Spirit—the gift of God's own empowering presence. Thus, he pleads with the Corinthians, first corporately, then individually, "Do you not know that you, the church in Corinth, are God's temple in Corinth, and you are that because God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" "Do you not know," he pleads later in the context of their sexual sin, "that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within you?" And again, in 2 Corinthians, to some who are still flirting with idolatry, he urges, using all of this rich imagery: "What fellowship is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be my people ... I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'"

"Since we have these promises, dear friends," Paul concludes, "let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates flesh and Spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." We ourselves, both individually and corporately, are the location of God's presence—by his Spirit. God himself, in the person of the Spirit, indwells us for fellowship with him [...] and for life and service, as we are continually being transformed into God's own likeness by the indwelling Spirit.²

The Personhood of the Spirit

For Paul, the Spirit is not merely an impersonal force or influence or power. The Spirit is none other than the fulfillment of the promise that God himself would once again be present with his people. The implications of this are considerable, not only in terms of Paul's understanding of God and the Spirit [...], but in terms of what it means for us individually and corporately to be the people of God [...]. The Spirit is God's own personal presence in our lives and in our midst; he leads us into paths of righteousness for his name's sake, [...] he is grieved when his people do not reflect his character and thus reveal his glory, and he is present in our worship, as we sing "praise and honor and glory and power" to God and the Lamb.

² Gordon Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 29-31

It is for God's people of a later time like ours once more to grasp these realities by experiencing them, if we are truly to capture Paul's understanding. Perhaps a beginning point for us would be to downplay the impersonal images (wind, fire, etc.), as rich as they are in terms of aspects of the Spirit's ministry, and to retool our thinking in Paul's own terms, where we understand and experience the Spirit as the personal presence of the eternal God.³

Relevant Scriptures:

Exodus 33:14-16 The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will...
John 6:63 "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing...
Romans 8:16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are...
2 Corinthians 3:17-18 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is...

Questions for Discussion:

1. Where have you seen the Holy Spirit work in your life?
2. Describe your theological understanding of the Holy Spirit. What is the most difficult to grasp?
3. How could this article impact your view of the Christian life?
4. The article described God's desire to have His presence with us and within us through the Holy Spirit. How can you practice acknowledging and inviting God's presence in your life?

³ Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 22