

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Adult Education
The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is an eternal Person of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons. *Simple enough!* But what does this mean?

- How do we cultivate openness to the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives as individuals and as a faith community?
- How do we recognize the activity of the Holy Spirit, in order that we may listen and cooperate?

The Holy Spirit is too often treated as a sort of afterthought in discussions about God. For example:

1. We are invited by Jesus to address God as Father (Mtt. 6.9 ; Lk. 11.2).
2. We are instructed to ask in Jesus' Name (Jn. 14.13-14).
3. Jesus instructs that He will pray for us, and the Father will send us the Spirit (Jn. 14.15).
4. In the *Te Deum* the prayer uses 13 lines in addressing the Father, 13 lines in addressing or referring to the Son, and adds "... also the Holy Ghost the Comforter".

This "secondary reference" status makes it more likely that we will just think of the Spirit as a sort of active principle of God in action, which would be an incorrect view.

Our discussions in this class are intended to be practical—to be focused on recognizing and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is not a class on "pneumatology" (the theology of the Holy Spirit) but about practical theology, the believer's response.

As described in the Catechism (*An Outline of the Faith, BCP 845-862*):

- *We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation.*

Necessary corollary: If we are ever indifferent to Jesus, or do not confess Him as Lord, or are not in love and harmony as described, it is because we have not granted access in our lives to the Holy Spirit. We have built up a wall of sin around our hearts.

- *We recognize the truths to be taught by the Holy Spirit when they are in accord with the Scriptures.*

Necessary corollary: If we seek guidance and are led away from what is revealed in Scripture, we are being led astray. To discern what is revealed in Scripture requires ongoing focus. Let's look at examples:

God in action:

1. *At creation:* Genesis 1.1-3: In the beginning ... the earth was without form and void ...; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.
2. *A prophet is given to people in exile:* Ezekiel 3.14, 24: The Spirit lifted me up and took me away ... But the Spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet ...
3. *Jesus in baptized:* Matthew 3.16: ... and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove ...

4. *The Spirit is given to all believers:* Acts 2.2-4: And suddenly a sound came from heaven ... And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit ...
5. *The aged apostle is inspired to record his visions, while in exile:* Revelation 1.10: I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice ... saying ...

These illustrations are typical of many, many instances throughout Scripture in which are recorded examples of a divine personal force acting directly in God's creation. Note that we speak of a *personal* force, not just a force. The Holy Spirit is one and the same with God, with the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The actions described can be God active in nature—the ever-sustaining divine presence which creates, sustains, and vivifies. The actions can be God inspiring and guiding human beings, such as prophets. The actions can involve an identification of Jesus with the holy presence of God. The actions can involve the Church being taught and led by God. In all cases we speak of action/actions, of God in action, of God *doing things*.

God is one Being, and no single Person of the Holy Trinity works apart from the others, but there remain diversities of operations. Thus, we refer to the Father when we speak of God governing and directing His universe, and of the Spirit when we speak of God moving intimately in the lives of men and women to supply spiritual needs and to stimulate spiritual motives. The Church is the particular “territory” of the Holy Spirit, and the sacraments are the Spirit's particular means of operation.

This is not to say that the Spirit can be in any way confined within any limits of the natural and human world. The Holy Spirit is active in all places at all times, but in the Church the Spirit is focused. If we focus sunlight through a magnifying glass to set paper on fire this in no way diminishes the brightness of the sunlight which shines all around.

We speak of the Holy Spirit as “Comforter”. This comes from the King James (AV) translation, at a time when the word “comfort” related much more to strength and fortitude. In other words the Comforter who Jesus promises is not sent so much to sooth as to provide the strength and gifts necessary to accomplish God's will. When Jesus revealed to His apostles that He would send the Comforter¹ He revealed that God continues to direct and guide: “I have many things to say to you ... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ...” (Jn. 16.12-13).

The gifts of the Spirit: *This list is not exhaustive, and combines categories.* The gifts (to be distinguished from fruits²) were prophesied at Joel 2.28, promised by Jesus, and fulfilled at Pentecost.

1. *Wisdom:* to allow us to, and to help us in, our search for God.
2. *Understanding:* to lead us to the knowledge of the truth.
3. *Counsel:* to help us discern right from wrong.

¹ The original Greek word is *paraclete*. While this is sometimes translated as Counselor, it is closer to Advocate. But note, the Advocate does not advocate for us to the Father (Jesus is our mediator); the Spirit advocates (speaks to) *us* for God. Therefore, Counselor is a good equivalent in modern language.

² To compare lists of gifts *see* Romans 12.6-8; 1 Corinthians 12.8-10; 28; Ephesians 4.11; 1 Peter 4.11. For the fruits of the Spirit *see* Galatians 5.22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control.

4. *Spiritual strength*: to support us in doing right; in doing God's will.
5. *Knowledge*: to teach us the will of God.
6. *True godliness*: to help us to live righteously.
7. *Holy fear*: we are granted respect and reverence for God. We *care*, and are not indifferent.

We can only listen to the Holy Spirit when we recognize His voice: In order to recognize God's promptings in our lives, and to respond to them, we must know who it is who speaks to us and calls us. If a stranger calls to you and tells you to do something, you will likely dismiss what he/she says, even if it might otherwise make some sense. But if a loved one or trusted friend calls you and counsels action you are much more likely to: (a) pay attention and listen; and (b) consider what to do and how to respond. This means that in order to hear God's voice we need to focus on how He reveals Himself to us, and this revelation is made in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Focusing on Jesus to experience the Holy Spirit sounds counterintuitive. But consider how Jesus describes the equation:

1. At John 10.1-16 Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd. He states that His sheep will follow Him because they hear His voice as He calls to each of them by name.

God knows and calls each one of us, but we must recognize His voice, and we can only do this by walking with Him. To do this we must focus on Jesus, for He is the complete revelation of God: "He who has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father in me ..." (Jn. 14.9).

2. Jesus reveals the truth of His identity with the Father right before He promises that we will receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14.15-20), continuing this revelation by teaching, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (Jn. 14.21).

We need to pay attention to this sequence in revelation, for against it most of modern culture speaks, and much of the Church is silent in her testimony. It means that who we are and *what we do* matters. It is not enough to just be "spiritual" and to seek God; we must also walk in His way. We must strive for righteousness, to do His will, and the more we do this the more we will recognize His voice that we might respond to it. (Amos 3.3: "Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?"³) This means we cannot consider God to be "insurance," and we cannot just be "social Christians". It means we have to commit to obeying God; we need to know Jesus not just as our Savior and Redeemer, but obey Him as Lord and expect Him as Judge.

We do this by focusing on Jesus, seeking always to follow Him, honor Him, and to walk in His way. The closer we get to know God, the more we will recognize His voice.

This is where "religion" enters the picture. Religion is the practice of faith. The word comes from the Latin *re-ligio* (that which binds again). In other words, religion involves the disciplines of a life of faith, a life lived within the Church to which Jesus promises He will be present (Mtt. 18.20). All of this involves prayer, a commitment to listen to God. It involves:

1. *A commitment to listen*: A life of prayer.
2. *A Baptismal identity*: We have each received the Holy Spirit in our Baptism. We have each promised who we will be and what we will do in our baptismal vows (*BCP* 304-5).

³ King James (AV): "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

3. *Worship*: Gathering to offer praise, worship and thanksgiving. Gathering to partake of Our Lord's Body and Blood. Our life of faith must be a life of active and continual worship.
4. *Forgiveness*: As we are forgiven so must we be ready to forgive (as we pray in the Lord's Prayer!)
5. *Life in the Word*: We need to listen to God's voice by feeding on His holy Word. This involves the regular study of Scripture.
6. *Intention*: We must give our hearts to God and then always strive to be constant in this giving. Note that this is "giving," not "gift". To use an analogy, while I decided to marry my wife, I must decide each day to be married to her. This daily commitment is embodied in marriage vows, envisioning all kinds of conditions ("for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health"). It is the same with God (more so!) We must practice integrity of heart and resolve by an act of our own will to give ourselves to His will at all times.
7. *Abiding in God's presence*: We must trust that when God promises He will be with us, that He is! Are we looking for Him, listening for Him?
8. *Submitting to God's will*: God first; others second; ourselves last.

Prayer is involved in all of this, but so are all of the spiritual disciplines. A study of the disciplines involves a new topic, not now to be pursued, but to briefly list them:⁴

1. *The inward disciplines*:
 - a. Meditation
 - b. Prayer
 - c. Fasting
 - d. Study
2. *The outward disciplines*:
 - a. Simplicity
 - b. Solitude
 - c. Submission
 - d. Service
3. *The corporate disciplines*:
 - a. Confession [This is also an individual discipline in Anglicanism.]
 - b. Worship
 - c. Guidance
 - d. Celebration

And now you say: "*But I am already practicing the spiritual disciplines. My question is much more practical. Suppose, for example, I am sitting in my living room, and without prompting I think of a person (let's call him Tim) of whom I have not thought in years, and think that I need to call him. Is this of the Holy Spirit? When an idea just comes into my head, how do I know if the Spirit is talking to me?*"

To answer questions like these we will focus on two things: a) experience; and b) fruits. Let's discuss, first, our own experiences that are like "Call Tim." Did you reach him? How did

⁴ Various lists/inventories exist. The scheme set forth here is from Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (1978, 1998).

he respond? Did the conversation lead to a renewal in a relationship? Did Tim express how your call made a difference?

If Tim said something like, “I was very depressed, and to the point of thinking about just drowning my sorrows, And then you called ...,” and then you go on to have a long conversation, you have just learned that your response to the idea “Call Tim” has born spiritual fruit—hope.⁵

Which leads to your follow-up question: *“But how do I know in advance if I am hearing from the Holy Spirit? How do I know this before I pick up the phone and call Jim?”*

At Ephesians 5.9 the apostle teaches, “[W]alk as children of the light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true) ...” This tells us that when we are walking alongside God, and know His voice because we have a lively relationship with Him, we can trust. When we are truly practicing the spiritual disciplines and seeking righteousness, when we are practicing our faith, we can discern right from wrong, and so we can give the voice the “benefit of the doubt,” trusting that God does not test us beyond our strength. God is faithful (1 Cor. 10.13).

Faith has to be lived and practiced in an active manner. When we are diligent in “re-ligion,” we are equipped by God. He has given us His Holy Spirit in our baptism, and by this same Spirit we will be granted the gift of wisdom to discern guidance. We have to trust, and we can trust because in an active life of faith revelation and result are mutually reinforcing. The equation is iterative, and each time we pay attention and experience/witness the fruit we fine tune our hearing to God’s voice.

And you may still be wondering: *“I do not speak in tongues. I am not a prophet. I am not sure I have ever experienced or witnessed a miracle. Does this mean that I am lacking in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so I cannot listen to and respond to God?”*

In a word **No!** Go back and look up the gifts listed in the biblical passages cited in footnote 2, above. The first thing you will notice is that many apply to you even if you are in no way “special”. But even those that look extraordinary bear closer examination. For example, to be a prophet means no more (and no less) than to speak for God. Whenever you have a word of wisdom for another, this is from God. Whenever you show mercy, this is of God. Whenever you serve God’s people, this of God. We all live in the Spirit because we have all received the Spirit in our baptism. When we pay attention by practicing our faith, the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is all around us, and we can notice the miraculous, participate in healing, grow in our faith.

To come back to the two questions with which we opened this course (about cultivating our relationship with the Holy Spirit, and recognizing the activity of the Spirit), the answer to each question is found in the answer to the other—sort of like Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

⁵ Or, to use the language of Galatians, peace and self-control. *And see* John 15.5. When Jesus refers to “me” He speaks of God, *i.e.*, this includes the Holy Spirit. So when He says “He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” *The action is God’s.*