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Introduction to the Biblical Teaching on the Holy Spirit

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I. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

A. Transcendence of God

A fundamental teaching of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is that God who created this material world is not Himself part of His own creation. He is presented as spirit, not matter, and as transcendent, or completely distinct from what is created. The creation, including humanity, owes its existence to God's deliberate choice, plan and action. The material existence of this world, including humanity, is not the result of an accident or a mistake, nor is it the consequence of a prank on the part of some lesser gods, as has been suggested by some belief systems. The fact that God is seen in Genesis as taking full responsibility for the creation of this world, and then initiating direct communication with it, leads to two conclusions. First, it makes it clear that it was viewed by God as a desirable fulfillment of His plan rather than the opposite. Second, it reveals the fact that communication between Creator and creature, between spiritual and material realms, was not only possible, but a part of the divine plan.

B. The Fall and the Resulting Communication Gap

The third chapter of Genesis narrates, and the remainder of Scripture confirms, the fall of part of creation into a state of rebellion. As a consequence, humanity was confronted by the widened gulf between God and His creation. The resulting communi-

His direct approach to those with futile thoughts and darkened minds was gentle and free of the pointing finger of blame.

cation breakdown became a major problem. Man's weakened will interfered with his desire to seek God, leaving him unable to initiate any effective plan to bridge the gulf. His futile efforts were frustrated and sabotaged by his own wayward will, leaving him caught in the ultimate dilemma of knowing there must be a God,

but failing in all attempts to find Him. The apostle Paul summed it up by writing, "For though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (Romans 1:21).

This statement should probably not be read with any undertone of blame, or scolding of humanity by Paul. Otherwise his gospel would have been one of "straighten yourself out and open yourself Godward by modifying your way of thinking." His direct approach to those with futile thoughts and darkened minds was gentle and free of the pointing finger of blame, as seen in his Areopagus sermon, based on the altar inscription, "To an Unknown God": "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

C. The Plan of Salvation: Bridging the Gap

Given the failure of all human efforts to bridge the gap between matter and spirit, creature and Creator, it remained for God to initiate the bridging process. The fact that He did

so, and the means He employed, constitute the central message of Scripture. Among the agents God employed in this activity, one, the Holy Spirit, will be the focus of this study.

II. THE SPIRIT OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. The Vocabulary

The choice of the word *spirit* was remarkably good. It provided Scripture authors of both Old and New Testaments with a relevant and effective word picture, immediately understandable by Hebrews and Greeks. The conventional definition of "spirit" in both Hebrew *ruach* and Greek *pneuma* was "air in motion," which could be the wind, as well as the breath of living creatures. Both are examples of air in motion, thus providing an apt metaphor for divine, spiritual involvement in the material, created sphere.

To ancient people in a prescientific world, air movements constitute a mystery, as reflected in the words of Jesus in John 3:8: "The *pneuma* blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." As Jesus and the Old Testament authors before Him knew, it was a simple step of logic to attribute the wind to God's direct involvement in this world, thus bridging the gap between Creator and fallen world by the use of *ruach* and *pneuma* as a metaphor of God's invisible, but real, all-pervasive and inescapable energy.

B. The Old Testament View of the Spirit

Of the 378 occurrences of Hebrew *ruach* in the Old Testament, about one-third of them refer to the wind and state or imply that God is its immediate cause. In approximately 100 passages (or 65, according to another authority) *ruach* refers explicitly or implicitly to the Spirit of God, or of the Lord, as in Isaiah 11:2: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord."

God's *ruach*, like the wind, was the power that brought life, motion or activity to whatever it encountered.

Initiative for sending His Spirit rests exclusively with God; humans have no more control over the event than they have over the elusive, powerful wind, which blows today from the sea, tomorrow from the desert. When this incalculable force descends upon a person and possesses him, it enables him to carry out God's will. This is illustrated through the Old Testament by verbs such as "come upon mightily" (Judges 14:6), "clothe" (Judges 6:34), "enter into" (Ezekiel 2:2), "impel" (Judges 14:25). God's *ruach* enabled the judges of Israel to deliver her from national calamities (Judges 3:10; 6:34), the craftsmen of Israel to

Initiative for sending His Spirit rests exclusively with God; humans have no more control over the event than they have over the elusive, powerful wind.

build the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 31:3), and Daniel to exercise unusual administrative skill (Daniel 6:3).

The ultimate manifestation of God's *ruach* in the Old Testament was through prophecy. The word "prophet" can be expressed by the phrase "man of *ruach*" (Hosea 9:7), acknowledging that God chose from time to time human agents to whom He granted in special measure His *ruach*. Through inspired utterance, vision, sermon, acted parable, written message, counsel and advice, these prophets gave sharper focus to God's life-changing currents of divine *ruach* and directed it toward those who needed it. The ministry of a prophet was sometimes, but not always, marked by supernatural spirit manifestations, as confirmation of his divine credentials. Because of the influence of prophecy it was counterfeited, leading to the setting up of tests of the true "man of *ruach*," for example, what a true prophet predicted, had to come to pass (Deuteronomy 18:22).

While some Old Testament prophecies focused on issues current at the prophet's time, others pointed to the future. There emerged two

prophetic aspects of God's plan for rescuing the creation from its fallen state and restoring humans to direct fellowship with God, which are relevant for this study. First, there was the promise of the Messiah, who would combine the qualities of an ideal national leader like David of old with the ordination by God's *ruach*, which would enable Him to exercise perfect judgment, establish a reign of righteousness, and inaugurate a process of salvation and restoration for God's people and creation. See Isaiah 11:1-8; 52:13-53:12; Micah 5:2; Zechariah 9:9-17.

The second aspect of God's plan is the outpouring of His *ruach* on His people, which like early and latter rain on the crops of Judah would lead to the growth of righteousness in the heart of each individual: "I will [pour out] my spirit within you . . ." (Ezekiel 36:27); "until a spirit from on high is poured out on us . . ." (Isaiah 32:15); "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh . . . even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28, 29). The verb "pour out" in each of these passages seems to promise God's people of the Old Testament that the time would come when restraints on the Spirit of God would be removed, with the result that categories of individuals previously excluded from the direct impact of the Spirit would find themselves the surprised recipients of God's stirrer and healer of hearts. The Joel prophecy clearly states, by the juxtaposing of flesh and Spirit, that these two antagonistic realms would be reunited in response to God's initiative in turning human hearts by His Spirit. The final verses of the final prophet of the Old Testament continues this theme. They first urge that God's people remember the covenant, including the laws, which Moses received at Horeb. Then the concluding prophetic saying is given: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." The final verse states the impact of the coming of the "man of the Spirit"—"He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents" (Malachi 4:5, 6).

Summary of Section II

The Old Testament employs the Hebrew word *ruach*, "wind,"

‘breath,’ as an apt metaphor for God’s activity of bridging the gulf between Creator and fallen creatures. On His own initiative God by His Spirit is at work moving and changing the hearts of men and women to achieve reunion and fellowship. Prophets and prophecy, the chief evidence of the work of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament, foretold two of the elements of the plan of restoration. First, a Spirit-filled Messiah, and second, spirit-filled people, drawn from all categories of humanity.

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. Background to the New Testament Age

As soon as the echo of God’s promise through the prophet Malachi died away, and the era of the Old Testament drew to an end, God’s people entered what is known as “the time between the Testaments”—a period covering several hundred years that witnessed the development of attitudes and beliefs that are important to know in order to understand the reactions of people to the ministry and teachings of Jesus and of the apostles.

Regarding the Spirit of God, the Jewish documents of this time reveal that a range of beliefs were held. First, the titles “The Holy Spirit” and “Spirit of Prophecy,” hardly to be found in the Old Testament, make their appearance. The Holy Spirit continued to be understood as God’s Spirit, which comes to humanity due to God’s initiative to accomplish specific purposes such as granting wisdom, power and holiness.

The most significant beliefs about the Holy Spirit during this period centred around the gift of prophecy. The Jewish people heard the echoes of the Old Testament prophets, and they looked for the imminent fulfilment of the prophecies about the Spirit-filled Messiah and a Spirit-filled humanity. To them the sign of the messianic age would be the return of the Spirit and power of Elijah. In the meantime, however, among many Jews a conviction grew that the age of prophetic inspiration had closed with the work of the final Hebrew prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Many were convinced that God no longer spoke directly to His people, but only

through an echo of His voice of old. This divine silence carried ominous undertones of judgment and rejection.

There is evidence from the documents that many people longed for the return of the Spirit, when “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28), and they longed for the Messiah on whom “the spirit of the Lord shall rest . . .” (Isaiah 11:2). It was against the background of this mood of anxious expectancy that John the Baptist inaugurated his ministry with the electrifying words: He who will come after me “will baptise you with the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matthew 3:11).

B. The Vocabulary of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament

The word *pneuma* occurs 379 times in the New Testament with the dual meaning of “wind” and “breath,” which, as in the case of Hebrew *ruach*, easily provided a metaphor to express God’s power at work in the human realm. Over 250 of these occurrences refer unambiguously to the Holy Spirit. In contrast to the Old Testament, where “Spirit of God” and “Spirit of the Lord” predominate, while “The Holy Spirit” occurs only in Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 58:10f and Daniel 4:5; 5:12; 6:3, the New Testament writers prefer “The Holy Spirit” (approximately 90 times) or simply “(The) Spirit” (used nearly 80 times by Paul and John alone).

This shift may reflect a twofold development of thought, first bringing

The ultimate manifestation of God’s ruach in the Old Testament was through prophecy.

the Spirit inside a person where He does His work. The Old Testament, it is suggested, saw the Spirit working on a person more from without. Secondly, it granted more independent existence to the Spirit, thus laying the foundation for the development of the view of the Holy Spirit as the third member of the Godhead. The Old Testament saw the Spirit primarily as an extension of God, and

hardly raised the possibility of His independent existence and personality.

C. The Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus

The announcement by John the Baptist that he was preparing the way for One who would baptise with the Holy Spirit fell like a spark onto the dry brush of popular hopes for the promised final age. The territory had been partly burned over by messianic claimants and claims of spirit manifestations. The evidence assembled by the four evangelists had to be comprehensive enough to confront the scepticism of those already burned by these revivals.

The life of Jesus was marked repeatedly by evidence of the promised last-day return of the Spirit: from His conception (Matthew 2:20; Luke 1:35) through His anointing by the Holy Spirit at His baptism (Matthew 3:16); the testing in the wilderness, which was Spirit-driven (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12); His ministry, including striking evidence of the working of God’s Spirit in the exorcisms (Mark 1:32), healings, and especially in restoring to life the dead. The chief lesson to be drawn by a Spirit-hungry people from these aspects of His ministry He summed up when responding to the Pharisees’ challenge that He exorcised demons by the prince of demons. “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20).

Another line of evidence centred on the unanimous verdict of Jesus’ contemporaries that He was a prophet through whom God’s Spirit was ushering in the final age. The people saw him as a prophet (Mark 6:15; 8:28; Matthew 21:11, 46; Luke 7:16; John 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:17). According to Luke 24:19, Jesus’ disciples saw Him as a prophet, and even some of the Pharisees with some reluctance (Luke 7:39; Mark 8:11) acknowledged Him as a prophet.

Further evidence comes from Jesus’ own claims to possess the Spirit: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me . . .” (Luke 4:18). When Jesus quoted these words of the prophet Isaiah (61:1) and applied them to Himself in the synagogue in Nazareth, His audi-

ence understood clearly His claim, which was so explicit that it demanded immediate acceptance or rejection. His ministry made available to His followers not only the benefits of the Spirit—healing and exorcism—it made available to them the Spirit Himself. This is seen in His advice to His followers about their future witness. When called upon to give a

One who believes, or one who comes to Christ, does so because he has the Spirit.

defence for their beliefs, His followers are assured, “Do not worry beforehand about what you are to say . . . for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11).

The evidence of the life and ministry of Jesus in the power of the Spirit allowed only one conclusion—that “the time of barrenness and judgment is coming to an end. The quenched Spirit is returning after a long absence. God is breaking his silence and is speaking again as he once did in the days of the prophets” (Jeremias, page 82). Jesus fulfilled John the Baptist’s prophecy of the One who would baptise in the Holy Spirit, the cleansing agent for entry into God’s final age.

The evangelists present Jesus as God’s Spirit-anointed Messiah, the ultimate man of the Spirit, who achieves in His unique divine-human nature the first and crucial aim of God’s plan of salvation—direct communion across the gap between Creator and creature, Spirit and flesh, Infinite and finite. At the moments of His death and His resurrection, God achieved the fusion between Himself and humanity, which His Spirit had been preparing for since the Fall. Thus the stage was set for bringing the benefits of that fusion to all people. Paul stated it succinctly when he wrote to the Romans, “for if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).

D. The Holy Spirit in the Mission of the Church

The new spiritual reality that

opened up to humanity as a result of the cross could not be contained by the community of Palestinian Jews who first experienced it. As the Spirit had expressed through Joel, “all flesh,” or in Peter’s words on the day of Pentecost, “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away . . .” (Acts 2:39) who would experience the saving benefits of the last days. The remainder of the New Testament can be viewed as the record of the Spirit’s progress, aided by the creative translations of the basic message into new languages and cultures by leading evangelists.

E. The Acts of the Apostles

The second volume of Luke’s account has been designated “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” who is mentioned by name 70 times—more than in any other New Testament document. The Holy Spirit’s influence, according to Luke, can be summarised under three headings:

1. The transforming power in the work of conversion. Peter’s Pentecost sermon links together repentance, forgiveness, and receiving the Holy Spirit, in 2:38.

2. The power enabling effective witness. The gift of tongues (2:17f) and ability to testify effectively are singled out for mention (5:32; 6:10).

3. The direction at crucial stages of the mission of the church. “The Spirit said to Philip” (8:29), “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:28), “The Spirit told me to go with them” (11:12), “The Holy Spirit did not let them preach” (16:6). The Spirit assumed leadership after Christ’s ascension, employing men and women to bring others into the new relationship to God made possible in Christ.

F. The Gospel of John

In his Gospel, John highlights aspects of the Spirit not prominent in the first three Gospels. His overall message is that the Spirit that gives life through the new birth (3:5) reaches the believer as part of a personal relationship with the risen Lord (20:22).

1. The Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26) guides to a new and meaningful understanding of reality, which affects, for example, worship. “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the

Father in spirit and truth . . .” (4:23). In the messianic age, worship ceases to be restricted to one place. The representation of God’s presence on earth ceases to be the ark of the covenant in the most holy place of the Jerusalem temple; it is replaced by the indwelling Spirit whenever He encounters a man or a woman and transforms them into a child of God.

2. John also makes it clear that the Spirit continues, on earth, the work left behind by Christ at His ascension (16:7-11), including convicting of sin, providing a true picture of righteousness, and announcing God’s many-faceted work of judgment.

G. The Pauline Letters

Paul, known as the theologian of the Spirit, provides the most comprehensive exposition on the subject, mostly in form of “applied theology” tailored to a great variety of life-situations in his churches. For Paul, as for John, the Spirit is God’s agent of saving activity in the world, which achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus the restoration of union between God and humans. He continues, in this final age, extending the invitation to “all flesh” to join that union, and for those who respond he

Whenever children of God feel, and respond to, the urge to live sanctified lives, they have evidence that they have received the Spirit.

confirms their status as children of God by entering their lives and effecting transformations of will and character.

1. The Spirit takes possession of the life when the individual comes to faith. “Did you receive the Spirit by . . . believing what you heard?” (Galatians 3:2); “You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:9); “We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God . . .” (1 Corinthians 2:12). “To believe,” “to come to Christ” and “to have the Spirit” for Paul are synonymous. One who believes, or one who comes to Christ,

does so because he has the Spirit.

2. The reception of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of Christian life. "All of us . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18); "God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit . . ." (2 Thessalonians 2:13). So whenever children of God feel, and respond to, the urge to live sanctified lives, they have evidence that they have received the Spirit.

3. Life in the Spirit in the present is subject to an ongoing tension between Spirit and flesh, which parallels the present tension between the new age and the old. "If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Romans 8:10). See also Romans 7:14-25. "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16); "Walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4).

4. Life in the Spirit finally leads to the completion of God's redemptive activity. Out of our present sin-weakened condition God will fully recreate us. "He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. . . . If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:11-13). When will this take place? Paul's answer seems to be, very near to, or at the time of the resurrection: "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). See also 2 Corinthians 5:4: "While we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

5. Gifts of the Spirit, for Paul, are essential for building up the church, especially those that led to Spirit-inspired speech. He warns Christians against restricting their range of expression, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). This stress on testing Spirit utterances is found also in Romans 12:3; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14; 12:3; 2

Thessalonians 2:2. The mistake of exalting one spiritual gift far above others, leading to distorted over-emphasis and a devaluation of other gifts, is gently rebuked by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:27: "If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn. . . ."

6. The Spirit, for Paul as for John, is the Spirit of the ascended Christ, doing His work and extending His

The ultimate test of any claim that the Spirit controls a person's life is whether that person's character is being transformed into the character of Christ.

reign in this last age (2 Corinthians 3:18). Believers experience Christ only in and through the Spirit, for "anyone united with the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:17). Therefore the ultimate test of any claim that the Spirit controls a person's life is whether that person's character is being transformed into the character of Christ: "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). Only that which makes the individual or the congregation more Christlike can rightfully claim to be the expression of the Spirit. Truly, while the gifts of the Spirit can be counterfeited, it is not so easy to counterfeit the fruit of the Spirit. The gifts, unlike the Spirit that brings them, are not permanent: "As for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end" (1 Corinthians 13:8). The final test, therefore, of the presence of the Spirit in the life, and the church, is love, "the greatest of these," the first item on the list of the Spirit's fruit. Compare 1 John 4:12: "If we love one another, God lives in us." So Paul, like John, spells out the ultimate test of the Spirit's presence—it is love.

Summary of Section III

The writers of the New Testament not discussed above do not contribute

in a significant way to the picture of the Spirit built up by the four evangelists, Acts, and Paul's letters. Therefore, according to the New Testament, God's Spirit comes in fulness upon Jesus, as prophesied in the Old Testament, thus ending the age of prophetic silence and inaugurating the promised last days, or final age. In Christ, God through the Spirit achieved reunion with humanity and now invites all people everywhere to share in it. The Spirit continues His work of moving and stirring hearts, drawing them to unite with Christ and experience the process of transformation. At various times and places, different spiritual gifts are distributed to assist the work of salvation, but these are not to be identified as the Spirit, who is much greater than His gifts. Although the final age has dawned, its fullness awaits the second coming of Christ. At that time, and at every moment until that time, the Spirit will continue His activity of leading men and women to God and fitting them for the fellowship for which they were created. □

Most scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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