

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?

This document aims to clarify what our theological understanding of the Holy Spirit is at Common Ground Rondebosch.

Summary: Our statement of faith.

We believe the Holy Spirit is the third person of the trinity and draws unbelievers to trust in Christ, indwells each believer upon salvation, and subsequently fills believers. The Spirit's presence, power and leadership empowers every believer for Christian life and witness. The Spirit reveals the Father and the Son to us, pouring out God's love into our hearts. He assures us of our salvation and our true identity as children of God, conforming our character to reflect Christ's. This transformational process requires our participation, as the Spirit guides, leads and calls us into who we are in Christ. All the gifts of the Spirit are available and desirable today for building the local church and extending the Kingdom of God. The Spirit illuminates the Bible and its truths, enables unity between believers and empowers gospel proclamation.

We are continuist in our position.

Cessationism and continuationism are two varying theological positions on the Holy Spirit around whether the spiritual gifts remain available to the church (continuist), or whether their operation ceased with the apostolic age of the church or soon thereafter (cessationist).

Nothing in the New Testament indicates that the spiritual gifts have stopped. Quite the opposite. We are called to eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1) and are instructed to not forbid speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:39). This is in keeping with the promise Jesus makes in John 14:8: *'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever'*

There is no biblical expectation that any of the gifts of the Spirit would cease prior to the second coming of Christ. Our historic position as Common Ground has been, and continues to be, to always embrace all the gifts of the Spirit.

(For further reading of this please see this article by Sam Storms:
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/continuationist/>)

We believe we are indwelt by the Spirit at conversion but also experience a subsequent infilling of the Spirit.

While some would hold that our full and only necessary experience of the Holy Spirit takes place at conversion, we wouldn't hold this view.

Whilst we believe that the Holy Spirit effects regeneration and indwells us at conversion, we believe that the New Testament indicates the importance of an ongoing, empowering work of the Spirit subsequent to conversion. Being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are theologically distinct experiences. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness and imparts his supernatural gifts for the edification of the body and for various works of ministry in the world.

Some call this post conversion experience of the Spirit 'baptism in the Spirit', while others see this term referring to our conversion experience and prefer the phrase 'to be filled with the Spirit'. We don't have a problem with either phrase but think it wise to use the phrase 'be filled with the Spirit' to help those who want to define 'baptism in the Spirit' in a narrow way.

(For further reading of this please see:

Appendix A: Biblical evidence for a post conversion experience of the Spirit by A. Warnock

Appendix B: Defining terms: 'Baptism in Spirit' v 'Being filled with the Spirit' by A. Warnock)

What we believe about experiencing the Spirit.

One of the passages that helps us understand what the subsequent filling of the Spirit looks like is Galatians 3:1-5:

¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ²Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith.

From this passage we believe that to be filled with the Spirit is:

A. Personal

Hearing someone else's experience of the Spirit can at times be unhelpful because the Holy Spirit is so good at meeting us in a personal way. This isn't a copy and paste situation and each person's experience will be unique and personal.

B. Memorable

In Galatians 3, Paul could reference back to an event that was personally significant enough to be memorable. The premise of Paul's argument in Galatians 3 is that the believers would remember that they received the promised Spirit by faith and not works of the law.

C. Meaningful

At the heart of this experience is an encounter with the love of God. A Romans 5:5 experience of God's love being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit ("*and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*"). What could be more meaningful than to encounter the love of God?

D. Empowering

To be filled by Spirit is a spiritually empowering event. It is like a sanctification booster. It isn't uncommon for people having had this experience to be freshly strengthened and empowered by God to live for Him.

Whilst not exhaustive some of the effects of the Holy Spirit's activity described in scripture include: inexpressible joy, love, hunger for the word, deeper levels of assurance, guidance, receiving of gifts (prophecy, tongues), commissioning, other forms of evidently manifesting which are not clarified, building shaking, tongues of fire, dreams, trances, visions, supernatural wind, healings, word of knowledge.

Our understanding of people's response to encountering God's power

A. It is an experience of God's love poured out.

We believe that the essence of being filled with the Spirit is to encounter the love of God. This belief is shaped by the experiential language Paul uses to describe our experience of adoption found in Romans 8:14-17:

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons^{of} of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.)

and Galatians 4:4-7:

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

In addition Paul's extended prayer for us to experience the love found in Ephesians 3:14-21:

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

and his description of the love of God being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit in Romans 5:5:

and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

(For further reading on this: See Appendix C by Tim Keller on the experiential nature of encountering the love of God.)

B. The manifestation of the Spirit is personal.

When the Spirit is manifest, people can respond in different ways. We don't see their response to the manifest presence of God as an act of God, but rather simply the way they happen to be responding to the manifest presence of God. This understanding helps remove attention off how the person happens to respond as it isn't an act of God, but simply a personal response. How we choose to manage their response is an administrative decision and not a moral one (is this God or not?).

In the great awakening in America in the 1700's, which had quite extreme manifestations, Jonathan Edwards never made the focus the manifestations but rather remained indifferent about the manifestations and rather looked to lasting fruit as a way of discerning the authenticity of the experience.

C. The evidence of the Spirit is in sanctification.

As we see in Romans and Galatians, the Spirit plays a critical role in empowering us to live the Christian life. Where the law can only point out what is wrong, the Spirit comes alongside us to empower us to do what is right.

The theological weight of this topic.

We think that it would be helpful for us as a church to define the level of weight we give to our understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as defined in this paper.

Four different approaches:

As we view the current church landscape, we can see four different ways churches have sought to apply their understanding of the work and activity of the Holy Spirit:

1. A defining value

Some churches have made the ministry of the Holy Spirit a defining value of their church. It is the primary way they define themselves and evaluate others. Embracing the work of the Spirit is their primary focus and key identity marker. Sunday meetings are set up for encountering and the pursuit of the supernatural/ paranormal is normative.

2. Foundational and important

These churches are seeking to understand the person and work of the Spirit but making it neither a defining value nor an optional extra.

They don't see it as a defining value because they rightly hold that the gospel needs to be the defining value of any healthy and mature church. A gospel-centred approach is what defines them. With that primary value settled, they don't feel it right to relegate the person and work of the Spirit to the fringes of church life and practice. Out of a careful reading of Scripture they see the work of Spirit as foundational and important.

They see a post conversion experience of the Spirit as legitimate and worth pursuing. Leadership and space are given to this experience. All spiritual gifts aren't simply believed but also appropriately practiced. Whilst rejecting the unbiblical excesses of some in the charismatic movement they nevertheless look to pursue authentic biblical expressions of the person and work of the Spirit.

3. An optional extra

Churches with this framework, whilst not seeing the work of the Spirit as illegitimate, neither do they see the Spirit as important. Teaching on a post-conversation experience of the Spirit is rarely if ever given. Prayer for fresh infilling of the Spirit

happens rarely and only on the fringes of church life. The more supernatural gifts, whilst believed, are rarely encouraged or practiced. People attending could fairly conclude that the church, although continuist in its theological position, is in fact cessationist in practice.

4. Illegitimate

Some churches hold a cessationist position that view a post-conservation experience of the Spirit and the supernatural gifts not simply as unimportant but illegitimate. These communities will speak out against communities seeking to be a continuist community.

Common Ground sees the work and activity of the Holy Spirit as foundational and important (option 2).

This means that we hold to our defining values of being “a Bible-loving, Spirit-dependent, gospel-shaped people” (as per our vision) and we see the role and work of the Spirit as foundational and important, we see the experience of the Spirit as being essential and worth pursuing, and we long for spiritual gifts to be appropriately practiced in and through as personally and corporately when we gather.

Appendices

1. APPENDIX A: BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR A POST CONVERSION EXPERIENCE OF THE SPIRIT BY A. WARNOCK

Receiving the Spirit

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

The book of Acts frequently refers to receiving the Spirit. Here Peter promised that anyone who repents and is baptized can receive the Spirit, implying that this is a distinct event from coming to faith. This promise is available to everyone who repents and believes in Jesus and is baptized. It would be circular logic to interpret Peter's words as meaning "repent and believe, be baptized, and you will receive a work of the Spirit automatically without you being aware of it, the main effect of which is to cause you to believe." There has to be some kind of distinct effects of the Spirit in us so we can conclude we have received him. We are told that we can seek for and consciously receive the Holy Spirit. Of course, this is not to deny the activity of the same Spirit in causing the believer to come to faith in Christ; it is simply to say that we can become more aware of his activity.

In Acts 8, the Samaritans believed in the gospel and were baptized, but it was only when the apostles came from Jerusalem and laid hands on them that they received the Holy Spirit. What is astonishing is that the magician, Simon, had observed miraculous healings performed by Stephen, but it was only when he witnessed the apostles imparting the Holy Spirit that he offered money to be able to do the same. This experience was obviously tangible and powerful, with dramatic life-changing effects on people.

In Acts 9, Paul repented and believed when he met the risen Jesus. Yet Ananias tells Paul, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17). This is another example where believing and receiving the Holy Spirit occur as separate events. Secondly, the specific instructions that are recorded as given to Ananias regarding Paul did not actually include praying for him to receive the Holy Spirit. This could suggest this was so commonly part of the normal practice when helping new believers that when Jesus sent him to Paul, Ananias concluded he had also sent him to impart the Spirit.

Acts 10, while Peter was proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles for the first time, the Spirit is described as "falling" and being "poured out." Peter then proclaimed they had received the Spirit as a stamp of God's approval of them as part of his saved people.

In Acts 19, Paul asked a group of people about their experience of the Holy Spirit. He assumed that it is possible for someone to believe without receiving the Spirit. The fact that these disciples may well not have believed or received the Spirit is immaterial to the argument. John Piper explains this:

Paul says, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" We scratch our heads and say, "I don't get it, Paul. If you assume we believed, why don't you assume we received the Holy

Spirit? We've been taught that all who believe receive the Holy Spirit. We've been taught to just believe that the Spirit is there whether there are any effects or not. But you talk as if there is a way to know we've received the Holy Spirit different from believing. You talk as if we could point to an experience of the Spirit apart from believing in order to answer your question." And that is in fact the way Paul talks. When he asks, "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed," he expects that a person who has "received the Holy Spirit" knows it, not just because it's an inference from his faith in Christ, but because it is an experience with effects that we can point to. That is what runs all the way through this book of Acts. All the explicit descriptions of receiving the Holy Spirit are experiential (not inferential).

In the book of Acts, receiving the Holy Spirit is not something that we can infer or assume has happened to us. Rather, it is a conscious, real experience that, at least in Acts, is usually accompanied by tongues and/or prophecy. At its core, however, it would seem from the rest of the New Testament that it is an experience of the love of God poured out into the believer's heart by the resurrected Jesus, giving tangible, visible effects.

If we were to ask Paul what the purpose of the gospel is for us in this present world, we might be surprised by his answer. In an often overlooked phrase he says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. ... so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14).

Here the Spirit is received by faith. Therefore Paul can't simply be referring to the Spirit's role in bringing us to faith. This extraordinary statement means the goal of the gospel is that we become aware of the Spirit's work in our lives. It only makes real sense when we remember what he is primarily meant to do for us. He is to restore something of the same relational intimacy with God that was enjoyed in the Garden of Eden and that we will share more perfectly in heaven. When we receive the Spirit, we are restored to a conscious fellowship with God, and with even this imperfect knowledge, our love and worship for him can only increase. The meaning of this astonishing emphasis on the pouring out of the Spirit is this: Jesus died in order that we might taste heaven even here on earth. That is the role of the Spirit when we are aware of him at work in our lives. He is a gift, or foretaste, given to believers until the day comes when we are finally reunited fully with Christ. Such knowledge of God brings great peace and settles in our hearts the question of whether or not we are children of God. We now know clearly. It is analogous to falling in love in that mere words become inadequate when attempting to describe the experience.

2. APPENDIX B: DEFINING TERMS: 'BAPTISM IN SPIRIT' V 'BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT' BY A. WARNOCK

There is much debate about the correct terminology that we should use to define this experience of God mediated through the Holy Spirit. Some would agree with the concept of pursuing God for a relationship felt experientially but would disagree that one should use the term baptism with the Spirit for that relationship. We probably should not get too preoccupied with terminology here, but in the next section we will consider the biblical terms used to describe the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. I hope we can all agree that whatever we choose to call his work, the Spirit is definitely involved in every believer's life but is also available to us in fuller measure and in ways that often represent sudden dramatic invasions of his activity into our lives.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit

For a phrase that has become so controversial in the church, there are remarkably few mentions of it in Scripture. It is mentioned once in each of the Gospels as a future act of Jesus (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). In Acts 1:5; 2:38; 11:16 it is revealed as the same phenomenon as Luke's preferred term "receiving the Spirit" (see Acts 10:47), and it is used just once by Paul:

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Much ink has been spilled on whether the verse is referring to the same thing as in Acts and the Gospels. It is debated whether every Christian or just the majority of Christians in the Corinthian church had been baptized in one Spirit. Many argue that the first half of the verse must refer to what happens at conversion, although, even if that is correct, we could conclude that this verse itself teaches a two-stage experience--baptism into Christ followed by a drinking of the Spirit.

John Piper appeals to us to lay aside our arguments about what the words baptism with the Holy Spirit signify by focusing on the concept of an ever greater need we have to be overwhelmed by the Spirit:

Jesus immerses people in the Spirit. That's what the word baptize means. There are pictures in the Bible of the Spirit being poured out. But when the idea of baptism (that is, dipping or immersion) is brought in, the point is that the Spirit is poured over us to such an extent that we are enveloped in him.

The point of this image is that the Spirit becomes profoundly and pervasively influential in our lives. When you are immersed in some-thing, it touches you everywhere. So when John says that Jesus is going to baptize with the Spirit, he means that the day is coming when the lives of God's people will be plunged into the life of the Spirit with profound and pervasive effects. As I have tried to let John define for us what he means by baptism with the Spirit, it seems to me that the term is a broad, overarching one that includes the whole great saving, sanctifying, and empowering work of the Spirit in this age. I don't think it is a technical term that refers to one part of the Christian life--say conversion, or speaking in tongues, or a bold act of witness. It is the continual, and sometimes extraordinary, outpouring of the Holy Spirit

on God's people. It immerses them not just in one or two, but in hundreds of his powerful influences.

In other words, if you are not born again, one way to describe your need is that you need to be baptized with the Spirit. That is, you need to be plunged into God's Spirit with the effect that you will be born again and come to faith in Christ. If you are born again, but you are languishing in a season of weakness and fear and defeat, one way to describe what you need is to be baptized in the Spirit. That is, you need a fresh outpouring of his Christ-revealing, heart-awakening, sin-defeating, boldness-producing power. Every spiritual need that we have before and after conversion is supplied by Christ immersing us in greater and lesser degrees in the Holy Spirit.

The key question is not so much what we should call the various actions of the Holy Spirit in us. What is more important is that we agree that the Spirit is at work in every believer, but that subsequent experiences of the Spirit, which can be sudden and dramatic, are available to believers today.

Becoming a Christian is actually a secret act of the Spirit in regenerating us and joining us to Christ and imparting faith to us. This is something of which we may not be aware, apart from its effects in us.

Many believers feel that the faith they have in Jesus is their own. They may not realize that it has been produced in them by the Spirit, that a rebirth has happened. Some argue that this acquisition of faith should be called "the baptism with the Spirit." However, whatever we call conversion, it would be wrong for us to insist that we have experienced the Spirit in all his fullness automatically. Both biblically and in the experiences of believers down through the centuries, there has been a conscious and tangible outpouring of the Spirit that is often distinct from conversion.

3. APPENDIX C BY TIM KELLER ON THE EXPERIENTIAL NATURE OF ENCOUNTERING THE LOVE OF GOD.)

Dr Timothy Keller writes:

During my first pastorate in Virginia, and then again in New York City, I had the experience of preaching through St. Paul's letter to the Romans. In the middle of chapter 8, Paul writes: "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (vv. 15-16) The Spirit of God assures us of God's love. First, the Spirit enables us to approach and cry to the great God as our loving father.

Then he comes alongside our spirit and adds a more direct testimony. I first came to grips with these verses by reading the sermons of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a British preacher and author of the mid-twentieth century. He made the case that Paul was writing about a profound experience of God's reality. Eventually I found that most modern biblical commentators generally agreed that these verses describe, as one New Testament scholar put it, "a religious experience that is ineffable" because the assurance of secure love in God is "mystical in the best sense of the word." Thomas Schreiner adds that we must not "underemphasize the emotional ground" of experience. "Some veer away from this idea because of its subjectivity, but the abuse of the subjective in some circles cannot exclude the 'mystical' and emotional dimensions of Christian experience."

Lloyd-Jones's exposition also pointed me back to writers I had read in seminary, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, the seventeenth-century British theologian John Owen, and the eighteenth-century American philosopher and theologian Jonathan Edwards. There I discovered no choice offered between truth or Spirit, between doctrine or experience. One of the most accomplished of the older theologians John Owen was especially helpful to me at this point. In a sermon on the gospel, Owen gave due diligence to laying the doctrinal foundation of Christian salvation. Then, however, he exhorted his hearers to "get an experience of the power of the gospel ... in and upon your own hearts, or all your profession is an expiring thing."

This heart experience of the gospel's power can happen only through prayer both publicly in the gathered Christian assembly and privately in meditation. In my pursuit of a deeper prayer life, I chose a counterintuitive course. I deliberately avoided reading any new books on prayer at all. Instead, I went back to the historical texts of Christian theology that had formed me and began asking questions about prayer and the experience of God - questions I had not had in my mind very clearly when I studied these texts in graduate school decades before. I discovered many things I had completely missed. I found guidance on the inward life of prayer and spiritual experience that took me beyond the dangerous currents and eddies of the contemporary spirituality debates and movements. One I consulted was the Scottish theologian John Murray, who provided one of the most helpful insights of all:

"It is necessary for us to recognize that there is an intelligent mysticism in the life of faith ... of living union and communion with the exalted and ever-present Redeemer. ... He communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love. ...

The life of true faith cannot be that of cold metallic assent. It must have the passion and warmth of love and communion because communion with God is the crown and apex of true religion."

Murray was not a writer given to lyrical passages. Yet when he speaks of "mysticism" and "communion" with the one who died and ever lives for us, he is assuming that Christians will have a palpable love relationship with him and do have a potential for a personal knowledge and experience of God that beggars the imagination. Which, of course, means prayer - but what prayer! In the midst of the paragraph, Murray quotes Peter's first epistle:

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." The older King James version calls it "joy unspeakable and full of glory." Some translate it "glorified joy beyond words."

As I pondered that verse, I had to marvel that Peter, in writing to the church, could address all his readers like this. He didn't say, "Well, some of you with an advanced spirituality have begun to get periods of high joy in prayer. Hope the rest of you catch up." No, he assumed that an experience of sometimes overwhelming joy in prayer was normal. I was convicted. One phrase of Murray's resonated particularly, that we were called to an intelligent mysticism. That means an encounter with God that involves not only the affections of the heart but also the convictions of the mind. We are not called to choose between a Christian life based on truth and doctrine or a life filled with spiritual power and experience. They go together. I was not being called to leave behind my theology and launch out to look for "something more," for experience. Rather, I was meant to ask the Holy Spirit to help me experience my theology.

John Flavel (English Puritan: 1630-1691), was one of the main influences in Charles Spurgeon's spiritual formation in the gospel. This quote will let you know why.

"Ecstasy and delight are essential to the believer's soul and they promote sanctification. We were not meant to live without spiritual exhilaration, and the Christian who goes for a long time without the experience of heart-warming will soon find himself tempted to have his emotions satisfied from earthly things and not, as he ought, from the Spirit of God. The soul is so constituted that it craves fulfillment from things outside itself and will embrace earthly joys for satisfaction when it cannot reach spiritual ones. The believer is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting the love of Christ and savoring the felt comforts of a Savior's presence. When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers. By the enjoyment of the love of Christ in the heart of a believer, we mean an experience of the "love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us" (Romans 5:5). Because the Lord has made himself accessible to us in the means of grace, it is our duty and privilege to seek this experience from Him in these means till we are made the joyful partakers of it."