

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Power, Performance, Purity and Presentation

Part 2 of 2

The Holy Spirit's main task is to mediate the presence of Jesus to believers. This is what the Father and Son sent the Spirit to do, primarily—to bring an awareness of Christ presence today to every believer.

In this study we will look closer at Bible passages that teach about the work of the Spirit. We will focus on four areas of the work of the Spirit: Power, Performance, Purity and Presentation. With each of these four areas, we will do three things:

- 1) Study what the Bible says about this aspect of the Spirit's work,
- 2) Consider the limits of this aspect if given undue emphasis and
- 3) Discuss the what this means for us today.

→ *As a group, pray and ask God to help you to understand the meaning of the Bible passages you are about to study.*

Power

Believers are given *power* to live now, from Christ through the Holy Spirit. This supernatural power gives strength to people to do things they would not by themselves be able to do. God, in Christ, through the Spirit, empowers people to say no to cravings, to be patient, control bad tempers, to stand boldly for Christ and to trust God in the midst of suffering and trouble.¹ This is seen especially in the life of the earliest Christians.

→ *Read the Bible passages below and discuss the following questions.*

Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples and having promised to send them the Spirit, he does so with a particular mention of power. Luke records Jesus' words in his Gospel and in Acts.

¹ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 22.

And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

1) According to these two verses, what does Jesus' instructions and promise to his disciples regarding the Holy Spirit teach us today?

Three things can be concluded:

Power is given

Power is "clothed" and "from on high," and it is something that we "receive." Without a doubt, power from God is something given, by grace. As a result, we should never expect power from God as a right, but to humbly receive it as a one of the "glories of the gospel."²

Power comes by the Holy Spirit

In the Acts verse, it specifically states that power is received "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." Hence, the Holy Spirit must be in a person's life before any power can be experienced. We need the Holy Spirit, then, to forsake every competing idol and to live life in Christ to the full.

Power to be Christ's witnesses

At least one purpose—a vital one—of this power from the Spirit is to "be witnesses" for Jesus in every place. This has immense implications for our understanding of the mission of the Church, and for evangelism to our friends. One implication? To minimize self-reliance, and to increase trust in God's provision of power to be faithful witnesses.

Romans 15:18-19

The apostle Paul also attributes his ability to preach the Gospel to the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice that this is Paul's "reason to be proud" of his work for God (Romans 15:17).

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God... (Romans 15:18-19)

2) For Paul, his success in bringing Gentiles to "obedience" is attributed to "what Christ has accomplished through" him. How does Christ "accomplish" this through Paul? And what does this teach us today?

Paul is able to bring Gentiles to obedience because of what Christ has "accomplished" in Paul through 1. word and deed, 2. the power of signs and wonders and 3. the power of the Spirit of

² Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 22.

God. Hence, for Paul, his ability to minister is grounded not in himself, but in Christ through the Spirit. See also 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.

One implication from this is that the power we receive from the Spirit, is power from Christ, to accomplish the work Christ has for us. In other words, this power is not for us to use as we please, but for the greater purpose of making the Gospel clear, and spreading it wide.

Limitations of Power

New Testament teaching on power from Christ through the Spirit is important for Christians today to learn and live by. However, when we think of power as the central work of the Spirit, then limitations and problems arise.

3) What might be some limitations of viewing power as the main work of the Spirit?

Here are three examples given by J.I. Packer:

Man-centredness

Focus turns inward when we see power as the only work of the Spirit, and not, properly, that his work is to mediate the presence of Christ. We, and our pleasure, become most important when we view power from God as something that is primarily for us to "use." Packer writes,

Pietistic concentration of interest on the felt ups and downs of the soul as it seeks power over this and that tends to produce an egoistic, introverted cast of mind that becomes indifferent to community concerns and social needs.³

Inner passivity needed to receive power

That is, "waiting for God's power to carry us along, [as] a required state of heart."⁴ Waiting on God, to be sure, is a biblical attitude. For example, see Psalm 27:14 where it says, "*Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*" The difference is that this waiting, reflected here in Psalm 27, is an *active* type of waiting. When there is over-emphasis on power from the Spirit of God, there could be a tendency to *passively* wait for power from on high. This passive waiting is exemplified in the saying, "let go and let God."⁵

God's power will immediately cancel out defects of character and make our lives whole

Attention focused on power from the Spirit, especially while evangelizing and inviting others to believe in Jesus, can also over-promise the benefits of this power. The critique is squarely on the strategy to paint a smooth sailing picture of "life with God and his power," that people would be so allured to the quick benefits of this power that they might believe. But this approach is flawed and unbiblical. Rather, every Christian's life, Packer says,

...is a constant fight against the pressures and pulls of the world, the flesh, and the devil; and his battle for Christlikeness (that is, habits of wisdom, devotion, love, and righteousness) is as grueling as it is unending.⁶

³ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 26.

⁴ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 26.

⁵ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 26.

⁶ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 27.

And so the corrective, is to always view power from the Spirit in light of his primary work of *mediating the presence of Christ*. When we do so, the focus is taken off of ourselves, and rightly moved to Jesus.

Performance

Christians are *empowered* with gifts of the Spirit to build up the church. A *spiritual gift*, according to Wayne Grudem, is "any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church."⁷ There are many different gifts mentioned in the New Testament, and there are wide-ranging views on the place of these *gifts* in the life of the Christian and the church. Nevertheless, in this study we will look at Bible passages that simply teach us two things about spiritual gifts: their purpose and the variety of gifts.

→ *Read the Bible passages below and discuss the following questions.*

Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 14:12, 26 and Ephesians 4:11-12

In the 1 Corinthian passages, Paul is addressing the conduct of the Corinthian Christians when they gather for worship. Division in the church had been created over spiritual gifts, where it seemed one gift was elevated above others (likely speaking in tongues). So Paul addresses the issue here, and in so doing clarifies what spiritual gifts are, and what they are for.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:11)

4) Paul makes clear that there are "varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit," and that all gifts are "empowered by one and the same Spirit." What might this mean for a church with many members and many different gifts?

Even in variety, there is unity

Along the lines of the issue that Paul was addressing in the Corinthian church, there must never be division in the church *based on spiritual gifts*. In other words, certain gifts should not create classes of Christians, as if some gifts were less, or more, important than others. As Paul makes clear in the passage, all gifts are given and empowered by "one and the same Spirit." As such, the body of Christ, rather than being divided, is united in the variety of gifts given by the Spirit.

Diversity should be embraced

For the church, then, this also means embracing the diversity of gifts of the Spirit. Prayerful awareness of the Spirit in the life of the church and in individuals is important. Recognition, discernment, nurture and continual "building up" of people is necessary.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, "Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine," *Zondervan*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, p. 1016.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ... (Ephesians 4:11-12)

5) According to Paul, in the above passages, what is the purpose of spiritual gifts?

For building up the church
 When Christ ascended to heaven he gave gifts (Ephesians 4:8) to his people for the work of ministry, for the "building up" of the body of Christ. This is the purpose of spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts also give a foretaste of the age to come
 In 1 Corinthians 1:5,7 Paul gives thanks that God has "enriched" the Corinthians in "all speech and all knowledge...so that [they] are not lacking in any gift, as [they] wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ." This empowering of "all speech and all knowledge" is certainly not perfect now, but only a foretaste of heavenly perfection.⁸ Grudem puts it this way:

Just as the Holy Spirit himself is in this age a "down payment" of the fuller work of the Holy Spirit within us in the age to come, so the gifts of the Holy Spirit gives us are partial foretastes of the fuller working of the Holy Spirit that will be ours in the age to come.⁹

All Kinds of Gifts

1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and other texts

In the New Testament, there are six lists of spiritual gifts, all written by the apostle Paul.

6) Look through these lists of spiritual gifts below, compare them, and mark down any observations.¹⁰

1 Corinthians 12:28	Ephesians 4:11	1 Peter 4:11
Apostle Prophet Teacher Miracles Kinds of healings Helps Administration Tongues	Apostle Prophet Evangelist Pastor-teacher	Whoever speaks (covering several gifts) Whoever renders service (covering several gifts)
	Romans 12:6-8	
1 Corinthians 12:8-10	Prophecy Serving Teaching Encouraging Contributing Leadership Mercy	
Word of wisdom Word of knowledge Faith Gifts of healing		

⁸ Grudem, p. 1019.

⁹ Grudem, p. 1019.

¹⁰ Table taken from Grudem, p. 1020.

Miracles	1 Corinthians 7:7
Prophecy	
Distinguishing between spirits	
Tongues	
Interpretation of tongues	

On top of the fact that each list differs from the others, there are five further observations that Wayne Grudem makes:

1. No one list has all the gifts.
2. Only prophecy is mentioned in all the lists (except 1 Corinthians 7:7).
3. Paul was likely not trying to provide "exhaustive lists" of all the gifts of the Spirit.
4. Although there seems to be some order in the lists (e.g. Apostle, Prophet, Teacher...), it is likely that Paul, in general, was randomly listing a series of gifts as they came to mind.
5. There is some overlap of gifts among the lists. (e.g. Administration in 1 Cor. 12:28 is similar to Leadership in Romans 12:8)

Though worthwhile to spend a good amount of time studying each gift, here, for now, are some **basic definitions** of many of the spiritual gifts above, particularly from 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 28.¹¹

<i>Prophecy</i>	Telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.
<i>Teaching</i>	The ability to explain Scripture and apply it to people's lives.
<i>Miracles</i>	Any kind of activity where God's mighty power is evident.
<i>Healing</i>	Brings a restoration of health as a foretaste of the complete freedom from physical weakness and infirmity that Christ purchased for us by his death and resurrection.
<i>Tongues & Interpretation</i>	Speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker.
<i>Word of Wisdom</i>	The ability to speak a wise word in various situations.
<i>Word of Knowledge</i>	The ability to speak with knowledge about a situation.
<i>Distinguishing Between Spirits</i>	The special ability to recognize the influence of the Holy Spirit or of demonic spirits in a person

7) Of the spiritual gifts listed above, which ones are you most familiar with, and which ones are you not familiar with? Do you see any of these gifts your church? Why or why not?

¹¹ Grudem, p. 1050 - 1083.

Limitations of Performance

Indeed, being empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts to serve God and to build up the church is something we should pray for, seek and encourage. A good result of this is certainly that every member of a congregation may *perform*, according to the gift given him or her, such that God is honoured and others edified.

But there are drawbacks too, when the focus of the work of the Spirit is centred on spiritual gifts. Here are two examples, as explained by J.I. Packer¹²:

1) *Undervaluing and even discounting the special responsibilities of clergy.*

Although "every member ministry" is a good result of encouraging the use of spiritual gifts, a potential drawback is for members to devalue the leadership role of clergy.

2) *Authoritarian forms of pastoral oversight.*

As a means to balance the freedom of "personal Christian performance," leadership of some congregations have gone to the extreme in imposing control.

A clear example of Christians overvaluing spiritual gifts is the case of the Corinthian church, to which Paul addresses with sharp words. The Corinthians had a high view of themselves, since they possessed certain gifts others did not. They were proud of the knowledge they possessed (1 Corinthians 8:1-2) and they looked down on other worshipers who were less gifted than them. Paul rebukes this immature outlook, and sharply questions their resulting behaviour (1 Corinthians 3:1-4; 5:1-13; 6:1-8; 11:17-22). Their problem? "They were valuing gifts and freedom above righteousness, love, and service."¹³ In other words, because their focus was on spiritual gifts, they used these gifts as markers for superiority, and a passport to bad behaviour. Paul, though, turns their attention to a "still more excellent way," the way of love (1 Corinthians 12:31). His point: gifts—no matter how great they are—are dead without love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Thus, this way of love—or better put, this Christlikeness—is what matters.

This Corinthian attitude is still possible today. If, ironically, Christian duty and activity make you too busy to know and attend to Christ's presence, something is amiss. If you devote time, energy and resources to your church (in other words, you exercise your spiritual gifts), but at home or elsewhere you are easily angered, bitter, or harsh to those around you, something is wrong. What is needed is a replacing of this Corinthian attitude with a commitment to growing in Christlikeness. And this is helped when spiritual gifts are no longer elevated as the most important, but seen within the proper framework of the Spirit's true, central work: *mediating the presence of Christ*.

One final word of caution here: *There can be gifts **without** graces.*¹⁴ What this means is that someone can perform and use their gift to the spiritual benefit of others "and still be a stranger oneself to the Spirit-wrought inner transformation that true knowledge of God brings."¹⁵ In other words, you can have good, edifying gifts, and still not exhibit Christ-like character like the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). This is important to be aware of. And because the reality of this is personal and between believer and God, careful and honest personal reflection is necessary.

¹² Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 30.

¹³ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 31.

¹⁴ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 31. Here Packer refers to the Puritan pastor John Owen. See the extended quote of Owen on p. 32.

¹⁵ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 31.

→ As a group, read the following personal questions aloud, then give time for one another to quietly reflect before returning together to share and discuss.

Note to Leaders: A quiet time of approximately 5-10 minutes is recommended. For the time of sharing, consider beginning this time with your own response and reflection. Encourage openness, but don't force people to share. Again, lead with your own reflection opening the way for others to share also.

8) Which of the spiritual gifts listed above do you believe you have been given to serve the church?

9) Have you, in your own thinking, equated your spiritual gifts with spiritual maturity?

10) Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians was to seek and desire "the way of love." Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and highlight some characteristics of "the way of love," you would like to grow in. Pray for the Spirit to help you in this way.

Purity

The Holy Spirit also works to purify the Christian's life. That is, to cleanse us from sin and to "sanctify us" or make us more holy in the way we live.¹⁶ God hates all sin, and since we are all stained and under the power of sin (Romans 3:9, 23) we need not only for our guilt to be forgiven, but for the filth in our lives to be cleansed.¹⁷ The Spirit does this in our lives: he purifies our life from sin, and produces in us growth in holiness.

The Spirit Purifies Us—Mortifying Sin **Romans 8:13-14**

One prominent image in the Bible of how the Spirit purges sin out of our lives is *mortifying sin*.

→ Read the Bible passage below and work through the following questions.

These verses sit in a section of Paul's letter that focuses on life in the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17). Christ has set free people from the law of sin and death (8:2), now allowing those justified to turn from living by the flesh, toward living "in the Spirit." In these two verses, Romans 8:13-14, Paul makes clear the life and death consequences of either living by the flesh or the Spirit.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Romans 8:13-14)

¹⁶ Grudem, p. 640.

¹⁷ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 34.

11) What does living “according to the flesh” look like? And why does this lead to death?

Hostile to God

Living according to the flesh means to “set their minds on things of the flesh,” (Romans 8:5) which leads to death (8:6), and minds set on the flesh are “hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed it cannot” (8:7). Living “to the flesh,” then, means giving in to the sin that still dwells in us (as in Romans 7:14-18); it is still a part of our nature, even though we have the ability to live by the Spirit, it is a struggle still between flesh and Spirit (see also Galatians 5:16-18).

Since living according to the flesh is not what God had designed for his creatures, when humans live like this, they are “hostile” to God and thus deserving death. Believers can rejoice, however, since “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Accepting and believing this good news motivates us to live by the Spirit.

12) In contrast to living according to the flesh, Paul makes clear that for Christians to live they must “put to death the deeds of the body.” What does this mean? And how is it done?

Put to death the deeds of the body = Mortifying sin

To mortify sin simply means to give sin its death sentence in our lives. It is a powerful, biblical image that evokes in us a call to battle against sin, or flesh, that still rages within us. Temptations continue to tempt and our ability to withstand the pull to do evil is sometimes still too strong (See Romans 7:14-25 and Galatians 5:16-18). What is needed is this instruction to “put to death the deeds of the body.” John Owen, has written a whole book on this subject of mortifying sin. He says,

*The choicest believers, who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin, ought yet to make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.*¹⁸

What is mortification?

According to Owen, mortification is¹⁹:

1. a habitual weakening of sin (see 2 Corinthians 4:16)
2. a constant fighting and contending against sin (see Colossians 3:5)
3. a series of frequent success

As a result, believers must be active in battling old sinful habits, no matter how difficult is the internal struggle. It will be, as Packer says for the Christian seeking purity of life, a “conscious tension and struggle and incomplete achievement all along the line.”²⁰ But, we are not left entirely to our own in this.

How to mortify sin?

First, the Christian’s ability to mortify sin is dependent wholly on the work of the Spirit. Look at Romans 8:13 again, and notice that Paul says “but if *by the Spirit* you put to death...” Furthermore, John Owen says,

¹⁸ John Owen, edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor, “Overcoming Sin and Temptation,” *Crossway Books*, Wheaton, Illinois, 2006, p. 47.

¹⁹ Owen, *Overcoming Sin*, p. 73-77.

²⁰ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 35.

He [the Spirit] only is sufficient for this work; all ways and means without him are as a thing of naught; and he is the great efficient [cause] of it—he works in us as he pleases.²¹

And how does the Holy Spirit do this work of mortifying sin in us? Owen presents three ways²²:

1. *By causing our hearts to abound in grace and the fruits that are contrary to the flesh.*
2. *By a real physical efficiency [a consuming] on the root and habit of sin, for the weakening, destroying, and taking it away.*
This is why the Spirit is called a “spirit of judgment and...burning” (Isaiah 4:4). “He is the fire which burns up the very root of lust.”
3. *He brings the cross of Christ into the heart of a sinner by faith, and gives us communion with Christ in his death and fellowship in his sufferings.*

13) Reflect on this purifying work of the Spirit. Have you tried to deal with sin by yourself and in your own strength? In dealing with a recurring sinful habit, have you asked for the Spirit to “burn” the root of your lust?

14) Knowing the Spirit’s integral role in rooting out sin in your life, mark down some real steps you can take to depend on the Spirit in this way.

The Spirit Purifies Us—Growing in Holiness **Galatians 5:22-25**

The Spirit not only purifies us by purging sin from our lives, he also helps us to grow in holiness, to be more like Christ. As Paul says, “And we all,...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. *For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit*” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

➔ *Read the Bible passage below and work through the following questions.*

These verses, known as the Fruit of the Spirit, are within a larger section in which Paul is both warning the Galatian Christians of the desires of the flesh, and encouraging them to live and walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-18). Paul lists the “works of the flesh,” including sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, etc...(5:19-21), saying that anyone who does these things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In sharp contrast to this list of vices, he presents the fruit of the Spirit.

²¹ Owen, *Overcoming Sin*, p. 57. Owen points to Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26 and Isaiah 57:17-18, to show that mortifying sin is the work of the Spirit.

²² Owen, *Overcoming Sin*, p. 61. See also p. 138-139 for a fuller treatment by Owen.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.
(Galatians 5:22-25)

15) All these qualities of character, that reflect God's holy character, is *fruit* of the Spirit. It is not therefore, fruit borne from any merit or action on our part. Do you notice any of these fruit within your church? In yourself?

16) Since sin still indwells us, even with the Spirit in us also, will not sin continue to grow as the Spirit produces fruit in us?

No. Look at what Paul says in verse 24, "And those who belong to Christ *Jesus have crucified the flesh* with its passions and desires." So, even though the struggle and battle will continue, we can rest our hope in the victory that Christ has already won for us.

17) What is our role in this? If the Spirit produces fruit in us, what are we to do?

Our role is never passive! In obedience, we must as Paul says, "live by the Spirit" and also to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Packer says, we,

...can and must mortify sin through the Spirit (Romans 8:13); [we] can and must walk in the Spirit, in a steady course of godliness and good works (Romans 8:4: Galatians 5:16, 25). This means that [we] will stop doing certain things that we did before...and [we] will start doing other things instead. The desires of the Spirit, felt in the believer's own spirit (that is, his consciousness) are to be followed, but the desires of the flesh are not to be indulged.²³

Limitations of Purity

Again, there are drawbacks when the purifying work of the Spirit is seen as central. Packer explains what happens when this "moral-struggle" doctrine is made front and centre when thinking of the Spirit: a spiraling tendency to become...²⁴

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|-------------------|---|
| <i>Legalistic</i> | making tight rules for themselves and others about abstaining from things indifferent, imposing rigid and restrictive behaviour patterns. |
| <i>Pharisaic</i> | more concerned to avoid what defiles and adhere to principle without compromise than to practice the love of Christ. |
| <i>Scrupulous</i> | unreasonably fearful of pollution where none threatens and obstinately unwilling to be reassured. |
| <i>Joyless</i> | being so preoccupied with thoughts of how grim and unrelenting the battle is [joy leaves their life] |

²³ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 36-37.

²⁴ Packer, *Keep in Step*, p. 38.

Morbid always introspective and dwelling on the rottenness of their hearts in a way that breeds only gloom and apathy.

Pessimistic moral progress is unlikely both for themselves and for others; settle for low expectations of deliverance from sin, as if the best they can hope for is to be kept from getting worse.

These are all possible drawbacks *when purity* is seen as the only most important work of the Spirit. The Spirit, of course, is at work first and foremost to mediate the presence of Christ. When union with Christ is focused, we can and must pray for and depend on the Spirit to cleanse us from sin, and to grow us in holiness.

Presentation

The Holy Spirit also works in leading God's people. He reveals God's will to Christians by his active presence, giving directions, affirming our inclusion to God's family (Romans 8:16) and that he is at work *within* us (1 John 3:24; 4:13). One aspect of the Spirit's work at presenting is guidance.

The Spirit Guides Us Acts 15:28 and 16:6-7

The Bible is filled with passages showing the Spirit actively guiding his people, including Jesus (Matthew 4:1). In this study, we will look at three short passages in the book of Acts, highlighting examples of the Spirit at work in guiding.

➔ *Read the Bible passage below and work through the following questions.*

The following verse is part of letter sent by the council on their decision to send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. The decision was not made on their own, as you'll see.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements... (Acts 15:28).

18) How was the council guided by the Spirit?

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit.

For the council to include further requirements (see Acts 15:29), they thought it appropriate and "good to the Holy Spirit." This implies, logically, these leaders together have a sense of the Spirit's affirmation regarding this decision.

It is worth noting that the main, larger decision to send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch also "seemed good" to the council (see Acts 15:22). Now, does this mean the Spirit didn't affirm that, since there was no mention of the Spirit? No. What is clear is that the decision was the result of a process of many Christian leaders who depended on the guidance of the Spirit. And Acts 15:28 supports this.

Wisdom and reasoning

It should be said that though the Spirit does lead and guide decisions in immediate and dramatic ways (see Acts 8:29), the Spirit also leads decisions through instructions and examples from Scripture, and through the wisdom of others. This approach seems similar to the one taken on by the council.

In the next passage in Acts 16, Paul sees a vision at Troas calling him to go to Macedonia. Paul concludes this to be from God, and so based on this vision he sets off for Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). All this was preceded, though, by a kind of intervention of the Spirit.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. (Acts 16:6-7)

19) God desires for all people to hear his word, so why did the Spirit prevent Paul to speak in Asia and go to Bithynia? How did the Spirit speak to Paul?

There is no reason, at least from the Bible, that would have forbidden Paul from preaching the gospel at these places. Perhaps there is a larger reason only God knows. But, in regards to the Spirit's guidance here, Grudem notes: "The Holy Spirit must rather have communicated his direct guidance to them in some specific way, whether through words heard audibly or in the mind, or through strong subjective impressions of a lack of the Holy Spirit's presence and blessing as they attempted to travel to these different areas."²⁵

20) What are some "indicators" or changes that happen to a person when he or she lives a Spirit-led life?

Four New Changes

According to J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, there are four *new* changes to a person when he or she is Spirit-led.²⁶

1. New Birth

The Spirit gives a new heart to the believer, expressing itself in faith, hope and love. The Spirit indwells us (1 Corinthians 6:19) as a seal of God's ownership (Ephesians 1:13-

²⁵ Grudem, p. 643.

²⁶ J.I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, "Guard Us, Guide Us: Divine Leading in Life's Decisions," *Baker Books*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008, p. 225-228. Packer and Nystrom makes the point that in the two times that Paul speaks of being "led" by the Holy Spirit, he is not talking about "being drawn to a specific decision or policy," but rather that in both times Paul's theme is "overall life-quality, as a sign that one has passed from spiritual death into spiritual life." The two places are Galatians 5:18 and Romans 8:14. Therefore, for Packer and Nystrom, the phrase "led by the Spirit" points to "living in the Spirit as a personal fact, rather than to particular experiences of guidance, in whatever form." They do not discount that the Spirit may "nudge" believers in their decisions, as will be seen, but for them, being Spirit-led is encompasses the whole of life. The following Four New Changes, stated above, are aspects of this Spirit-led life.

14; 4:30), producing in us the fruit of Christ-like character (Galatians 5:22-23). We are now new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

2. *New Life*

The Spirit also gives us new desires, "the desires of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:17). These are, essentially, the same desires of Jesus: the complex desire to love and serve and please and honor and exalt and glorify his Father, who loves and magnifies his Son. In this new life, the Spirit also places within us the instinct to commune with the Father and the son in prayer; he prays for us, within us, even when we cannot pray ourselves (Romans 8:15-16, 26; Galatians 4:4-6).

3. *New Conflict*

The Spirit also leads us into conflict in two specific and important ways. First, the outward battle against evil permeating the world, infecting the church, and insinuating spiritual decay into our own lives. This "spiritual warfare" is one in which we are fitted in the strength of the Lord's might, including the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). Second, the Spirit helps us in the constant, inward battle against sin, essentially what is already discussed in the "Purity" section about mortifying sin.

4. *New Tasks*

The Spirit also gives gifts to all Christians so that each may play a full role in the body's life (1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and 1 Peter 4:10-11). Loving service marks the Spirit-led life at every point. This aspect of the Spirit's work is already discussed in the "Performance" section of this study.

21) How are we to understand the Spirit's "nudging" of us to one decision over another? Is following the Spirit's lead in this way wise?

Packer & Nystrom, have five good things to say in response to these questions:

First, God may make his will known in whatever way he chooses. And he may very well do so, as he did in Bible times, via visions, dreams, voices, or inner promptings.

Second, following the Spirit's direct promptings is most likely to be authentic and healthy when it comes at a time when one is not looking for it but is seeking to discern God's will by being guided by [his Word, by wisdom, and help from others.]

Third, if we are looking for a kind of spiritual experience that God himself has not told us to look for, Satan, who is very good at imitating genuine spiritual experience, may fool us again and again by giving us his version of what we are looking for and will thereby lead us astray.

Fourth, while it is always important to check our conclusions as to what God wants us to do by consulting wise folk in the church, it is supremely important to do this when we believe we have received guidance by unusual means (i.e. nudges from the Spirit).

Fifth, direct guidance will never breach biblical boundaries or cut across biblical directives.²⁷

²⁷ Packer and Nystrom, *Guard Us, Guide Us*, p. 229.

Limitations of Presentation

As mentioned, one of the limits of seeking direct guidance from the Spirit is that our own fallen nature may cloud our hearing and judgment. As fallen humans, Packer & Nystrom say, we...

...excel at self-deception when it comes to decision making. We shut our eyes to inconvenient facts, we naively rely on our own imperfectly trained consciences, we make exceptions to rules to favor ourselves, we listen only to people who say what we want to hear, we decide on policies and courses of actions in unawareness of our own deep-down motives, ambitions, and rivalries.²⁸

What is needed, they contend is the gift of wisdom, which includes honesty, humility and prudence.

On this note, another limitation of emphasizing the seeking of direct guidance from the Spirit is that one might mistakenly minimize or discount the way of wisdom. When one is convinced only to seek God's guidance in the form of some overt spiritual experience (visions, dreams, voices or inner promptings), then wisdom—which is also God-given—may be overlooked. Packer and Nystrom cautions us:

Many Christians are still haunted by the fancy that real guidance from God for the making of each day's decisions is a direct ministry of the Holy Spirit in one's heart that entirely transcends the mental disciplines of analyzing alternatives, applying principles, calculating consequences, weighing priorities, balancing pros and cons, taking and weighing advice, estimating your own capacities and limitations, and engaging in whatever other forms of brainwork prudence in self-commitment is held to require. We emphatically agree that leading us to the best decision is a ministry of the Holy Spirit, first to last, but with equal emphasis we deny that under ordinary circumstances his ministry short-circuits or circumvents any of these sometimes laborious intellectual procedures. On the contrary, they are precisely the means by which the Holy Spirit of God leads us into seeing clearly what it is right and good to decide and do in each situation.²⁹

It is important to understand the Spirit's work in *presentation*, that is in guiding and leading us in our day to day lives. He is active and he is here.

It is also just as, if not more important, to understand that the Spirit's work in this way, is ultimately to help mediate Christ's presence to us. The Spirit helps us in our decisions not to "give us the best" for our sake, but to lead us to the best, for the sake of God's purpose in the world: to magnify and glorify Christ to the world, in his people, through of the work of the Holy Spirit.

²⁸ Packer and Nystrom, *Guard Us, Guide Us*, p. 137.

²⁹ Packer and Nystrom, *Guard Us, Guide Us*, p. 136-137.

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