

The Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John

By Bob Young

Introduction

In comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, the references to the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel are quite limited. The Holy Spirit is referred to or present (1) at the baptism of Jesus, (2) in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, (3) in the teachings of Jesus later in chapter 3 when he says that God gives the Holy Spirit without limit, (4) in the "living water" reference at the Feast of Tabernacles in chapter 7, (5) in the extended Upper Room Discourse in John 14-16; and (6) in the interaction of Jesus and his disciples in John 20 where he gives or anticipates the giving of the Holy Spirit. Each of these will be studied in more detail in this paper.

In two additional texts, one may question whether the reference is to the Holy Spirit or to the spiritual nature of human beings. These texts are (1) the John 4 reference to worship in spirit (or in the Spirit), and (2) the John 6 reference to life in the spirit (Spirit) vs. life in the flesh. Some would also put the Nicodemus discourse in this category, seeing the reference not to the Holy Spirit but to spiritual renewal.

In John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is also known as the Comforter. The Holy Spirit has not yet been given as Jesus speaks in John's gospel (John 7:37-40), but when he (the Holy Spirit) is given, or when he comes, he will be a witness of the truth about Jesus. In John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is not seen a miracle worker but has other roles and functions. In John's gospel, the Holy Spirit is little associated with miracles, but rather descends and remains on individuals, somehow participating in the new birth renewal available to all believers. Considering that sometimes one reads Bible for what it does not say, it is worthy of note that the list of witnesses in John 5 does not include the Holy Spirit.

Overview of the Biblical Texts

AT THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

John 1:32: Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.

John 1:33: And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

NICODEMUS

John 3:5: Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

John 3:6: Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

John 3:8: The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

WITHOUT LIMIT

John 3:34: For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

WORSHIP [HOLY SPIRIT?]

John 4:23: Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.

John 4:24: God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

LIFE [HOLY SPIRIT?]

John 6:63: The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.

LIVING WATER

John 7:39: By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

HOLY SPIRIT/COMFORTER

John 14:17: the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

John 14:26: But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

John 15:26: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

John 16:13: But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

John 16:15: All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 20:22: And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit within the believer

John’s Gospel several times reflects the fact that the Holy Spirit is given to the believer (see also Acts 5:32).

- In the Nicodemus passage, assuming the reference is to a new birth in the (Holy) Spirit, the Spirit is intended for all, as all are to be born of water and Spirit to experience the new birth Jesus makes possible.
- Later in chapter 3, Jesus says there is no partial giving of the spirit. (Without limit does not necessarily mean limitless power; it more likely refers to no limits on the reception, perhaps meaning it is not limited to the Jews but can go to all. Others see a reference only to the full reception of the Holy Spirit by Jesus.)
- John 7:37-40 speaks of the Holy Spirit using the metaphor of living water. This also appears to be for all believers. Again, some have questioned whether the reference is to the general believer or to Christ? The rest of the passage suggests a reference to the believer—especially see verse 39. The believers will receive the Spirit, the source of the streams of living water flowing forth.

What the Holy Spirit will do for the world

What does the Holy Spirit do for the world? In John 16:8-10, Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world of sin, of the identity of Jesus, and of the necessity of believing in Jesus. This reinforces the fact that the Holy Spirit points to Jesus.

Specifically, the work of the Holy Spirit will be to convict the world of righteousness and justice, that is, through Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to show his righteousness, the need for righteousness, and the inability to be righteous by one’s own power. Again, the Holy Spirit points to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit will also convict the world of judgment, because the prince of the world (Satan) is condemned in light of the Jesus' story. This conviction leads away from alignment with Satan as the Holy Spirit points the world to Jesus.

What the Holy Spirit will do for believers

What will the Holy Spirit do for the believers? Five things are outlined in the Upper Room Discourse.

- John 14:17-18; He is with them. Be with them forever, live in them, be in them, and represent God's presence. What does this mean?
 - Presence, ability to know him, understand him
 - Comfort
 - Affirms for the believer the fact of (spiritual) life
- John 14:26-27; He teaches them. Teach all things, remind of Jesus' teachings, guide into all truth (16:13). What does this mean?
 - 2 Tim. 3:16-17
 - Holy Spirit will say the same things Jesus said, Jesus is superior—not the Holy Spirit. Purpose of Holy Spirit is to point to Jesus, as he does for the world.
 - The word of God is truth (17:17), Jesus lived consistent with that truth and is thus that truth (14:6), so also the Holy Spirit will point to the same truth.
- John 15:26; this teaching validates, testifies about Jesus. Testify about Jesus, Jesus' identity.
 - Another way of saying what we have said: Holy Spirit points to Jesus, testifies about Jesus
 - Can do that after he comes, thus is not in list of John 5.
 - The time of the Holy Spirit had not come, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, but when he comes, he will testify about Jesus.
- John 15:27; empowers our own testimony. The Holy Spirit gives the people the power to testify about Jesus (although 15:27 may be primary reference to apostles, given the qualifications of Acts 1). Application is then by extension, secondary. Reminder of Jesus' promise: the words you need to speak will be given you.
 - Believers are empowered to testify about Jesus
 - This testimony keeps us faithful; the Holy Spirit has a part in our faith, so it will not fail.
- John 16:13-15; this teaching secures the promise of our future. The Holy Spirit will speak of future, things yet to come.
 - What the Holy Spirit says about the future will be the same as what Jesus said.
 - The Holy Spirit will bring glory to Jesus by continuing the task and purpose of Jesus, so do believers.
 - The Holy Spirit will bring glory by making Jesus known