

Questions
of Life

The Holy Spirit

NICKY GUMBEL

8

Alpha



The Holy Spirit

Booklets taken from Questions of Life:

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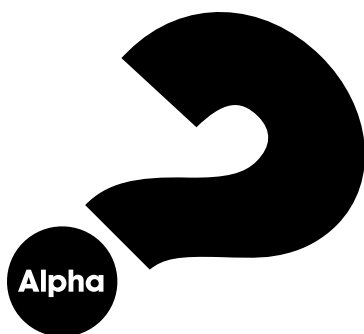
Does God Heal Today?

What About the Church?

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?

The Holy Spirit

NICKY GUMBEL



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Contents

01 Who Is the Holy Spirit?	7
02 What Does the Holy Spirit Do?	23
03 How Can I Be Filled with the Spirit?	45
Endnotes	64

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

I had a group of friends at university, five of whom were called Nicky! We used to meet for lunch most days. In February 1974, most of us came to faith in Jesus Christ. We immediately became very enthusiastic about our new-found faith. One of the Nickys, however, was slow to get going. He didn't seem excited about his relationship with God, reading the Bible, or praying.

One day, someone prayed for him to be filled with the Spirit and it transformed his life. A great big smile came across his face. He became well-known for his radiance – he still is, years later. From then on, if there was a Bible study, a prayer meeting, or a church in reach, Nicky was there. He loved to be with other Christians. He became the most magnetic personality. People were drawn to him and he helped many others to believe and to be filled with the Spirit in the way that he had been.

What was it that made such a difference to Nicky? I think that he would answer that it was his experience

of the Holy Spirit. Many people know a certain amount about God the Father and Jesus the Son. But there is a great deal of ignorance about the Holy Spirit. Hence, the three chapters of this booklet are devoted to the third person of the Trinity.

Some old translations speak of the 'Holy Ghost' and this can make him seem a little frightening.¹ As an old limerick puts it:

There was a young man who said, 'Run!
The end of the world has begun!
It's that old Holy Ghost
I'm frightened of most
I can manage the Father and Son!'

The Holy Spirit is not a ghost, but a person. He has all the characteristics of personhood. He thinks (Acts 15:28), speaks (Acts 1:16), leads (Romans 8:14) and can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30). He is sometimes described as the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) or the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7). He is the way in which Jesus is present with his people.

What is he like? He is sometimes described in the original Greek as the *parakletos* (John 14:16). This is a difficult word to translate. It means 'one called alongside' – a counsellor, a comforter and an encourager. Jesus said the Father will give you 'another' counsellor. The word for 'another' here implies

‘another of the same kind’. In other words, the Holy Spirit is just like Jesus.

In this chapter, I want to look at the person of the Holy Spirit: who he is and what we can learn about him as we trace his activity through the Bible from Genesis 1 right through to the day of Pentecost. Because the Pentecostal movement began about a hundred years ago, it might be tempting to think that the Holy Spirit is a relatively new phenomenon. This is, of course, far from the truth.

He was involved in creation

We see evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the opening verses of the Bible: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters’ (Genesis 1:1-2). Like a bird hovering over her nest, waiting, the Holy Spirit was about to bring something new into being. The whole Trinity was involved in creation (John 1:3).

We see in the account of the creation how the Spirit of God caused new things to come into being and brought order out of chaos. He is the same Spirit today. He often brings new things into people’s lives and into churches. He brings order and peace into chaotic lives,

freeing people from addictions and from the confusion and mess of broken relationships.

When God created human beings, he ‘formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being’ (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word implied for breath here is *ruach*, which is also the word for ‘Spirit’. The *ruach* of God brings physical life to humanity formed from dust. Likewise, he brings spiritual life to people and churches, both of which can be as dry as dust.

Some years ago I was speaking to a clergyman who was telling me that his life and his church had been like that – a bit dusty. One day, however, he and his wife were filled with the Spirit of God. They found a new enthusiasm for the Bible, and their lives were transformed. His church became a centre of life. The youth group, started by his son who had also been filled with the Spirit, experienced explosive growth and became one of the largest in the area.

Many are hungry for life and are attracted to people and churches where they see the life of the Spirit of God.

He came upon particular people at particular times for particular tasks

When the Spirit of God comes upon people something

happens. He does not just evoke a feeling of inner peace. He comes for a purpose, and we see clear examples of this in the Old Testament.

He filled people for artistic work. The Spirit of God filled Bezalel 'with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship' (Exodus 31:3-5).

It is possible to be a talented musician, writer or artist without being filled with the Spirit. But when the Spirit of God fills people for these tasks their work often takes on a new dimension. It has a different effect on others. It has a far greater spiritual impact. This can be true even where the natural ability of the musician or artist is not particularly outstanding. Hearts can be touched and lives changed. No doubt something like this happened through Bezalel.

He also filled individuals for the task of leadership. During the time of the Judges, the people of Israel were often overrun by various foreign nations. At one time it was the Midianites. God called Gideon to lead Israel. Gideon was very conscious of his own weakness and asked, 'How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family' (Judges 6:15). Yet when the Spirit of God came upon Gideon (v.34), he became one of the remarkable leaders of the Old Testament.

In leadership, God often uses those who feel weak, inadequate and ill-equipped. When they are filled with the Spirit, they become outstanding leaders in the church.

In January 1955, Dr Martin Luther King was arrested for the first time. He was charged with driving 30 mph in a 25 mph zone in his hometown of Montgomery, Alabama. This petty arrest was the climax of a season of sustained harassment by a racist police force. Authorities in Montgomery wanted to do everything possible to quench the fire lit by the Montgomery bus boycott, the first event of the civil rights movement. The boycott, aimed at ending segregation on the city's buses, had been organised by the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), of which King (a prominent clergyman in Montgomery) was president. After his arrest, King was released the same night. He returned home exhausted, but the phone rang immediately. It was yet another death threat: 'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you: before next week, you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.'

Unable to sleep, King made some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. 'I was ready to give up,' he said. He was on the verge of quitting his presidency of the MIA, recalling later, 'I felt myself growing in fear.' But as he sat there, his face buried in his hands, he felt compelled to pray. 'Something said to me, "You've got to call on that something your daddy used to tell

you about, that power that can make a way out of no way.” King prayed, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. But I must confess that I’m weak now, I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage.’ At that moment King heard God’s voice urging him to fight on. ‘He promised never to leave me.’ King was already a clergyman and preacher and doctoral student in theology. But it was only there in that kitchen in 1955 that ‘[he] experienced the presence of the Divine as [he] had never experienced Him before.’ From then on King said, ‘My uncertainty disappeared’, and, ‘I was ready to face anything.’

It was the Holy Spirit whom King experienced that night in the kitchen: ‘the power that can make a way out of no way.’²

Elsewhere, we see the Holy Spirit filling people with strength and power. The story of Samson is well known. On one occasion, the Philistines tied him up by binding him with ropes. Then, ‘The Holy Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands’ (Judges 15:14).

What is true in the Old Testament physically is often true in the New Testament, and in our lives today, spiritually. It is not that we are physically bound by ropes, but that we are tied down by fears, habits or addictions which take a grip on our lives. We are controlled by bad tempers or by patterns of thought

such as envy, jealousy or lust. We know that we are bound when we cannot stop something, even when we want to. When the Spirit of God came upon Samson, the ropes became like charred flax and he was free. The Spirit of God is able to set people free today from anything that binds them.

We experience the Holy Spirit not just so that we have a warm feeling in our hearts, but so that we go out and make a difference to our world. Later on we see how the Spirit of God came upon the prophet Isaiah to enable him 'to preach good news to the poor... to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners' and 'to comfort all who mourn' (Isaiah 61:1-3).

We sometimes feel a sense of helplessness when confronted with the problems of the world. I often felt this before I was a Christian. I knew I had little or nothing to offer those whose lives were in a mess. I still feel like that sometimes. But I know that with the help of the Spirit of God, we do indeed have something to give. The Spirit of God enables us to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to bind up those with broken hearts; to proclaim freedom to those who are in captivity to things in their lives which deep down they hate; to release those who are imprisoned by their own wrongdoing; and to bring the comfort of the Holy Spirit (who is, after all, the Comforter) to those who are sad, grieving or mourning. If we are going to help

people in a way which lasts eternally, we cannot do so without the Spirit of God.

Promised by the Father

We have seen examples of the work of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. But his activity was limited to particular people, at particular times, for particular tasks. As we go through the Old Testament we find that God promises he is going to do something new. The New Testament calls this 'the promise of the Father'. There is an increasing sense of anticipation. *What was going to happen?*

In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with his people. He said that he would be their God and that they would be his people. He required that they should keep his laws. They realised that they were good laws. Sadly, the people found that they were unable to keep his commands. The old covenant was consistently broken.

God promised that one day he would make a new covenant with his people. This covenant would be different from the first covenant: 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts' (Jeremiah 31:33). In other words, under the New Covenant the law would be internal rather than external. If you go on a long hike, you start off by carrying your provisions on your back. They weigh you down and slow you up.

But when you have eaten them, not only has the weight gone but you also have a new energy coming from inside. What God promised through Jeremiah was a time when the law would no longer be a weight on the outside but would become a source of energy from inside. *But how was all this going to happen?*

Ezekiel gives us the answer. He was a prophet, and God spoke through him, elaborating on the earlier promise: 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you,' he said. 'I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws' (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God was saying that this is what will happen when he puts his Spirit within us. This is how he will change our hearts and make them soft ('hearts of flesh') rather than hard ('hearts of stone'). The Spirit of God will move us to follow his decrees and keep his laws.

Jackie Pullinger has spent over thirty years working in what was the lawless walled city of Kowloon, Hong Kong. She has given her life to working with prostitutes, heroin addicts and gang members. She began a memorable talk by saying, 'God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The trouble with many of us is that we have hard hearts and soft feet.' Christians should have hard feet in that we should be tough rather than morally weak or 'wet'. Jackie is a glowing example

of this in her willingness to go without sleep, food and comfort in order to serve others. Yet she also has a soft heart: a heart filled with compassion. The toughness is in her feet, not her heart.

We have seen what ‘the promise of the Father’ involves and how it is going to happen. Next, Joel tells us *to whom it is going to happen*. Through Joel, God says:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your old men will dream dreams,
 your young men will see visions.
 Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
 Joel 2:28–29

Joel is foretelling that the promise will no longer be reserved for particular people, at particular times, for particular tasks, but it will be for all. God will pour out his Spirit regardless of sex (‘sons and daughters... men and women’); regardless of age (‘old men... young men’); regardless of background, race, colour or rank (‘even on my servants’). There will be a new ability to hear God (‘prophesy... dream... see visions’). Joel prophesied that the Spirit would be poured out with great generosity on all God’s people.

Yet all these promises remained unfulfilled for at least 300 years. The people waited and waited for the

‘promise of the Father’ to be fulfilled until at the coming of Jesus there was a burst of activity of the Spirit of God.

With the birth of Jesus, the trumpet sounds. Almost everyone connected with the birth of Jesus was filled with the Spirit of God. John the Baptist, who was to prepare the way, was filled with the Spirit even before his birth (Luke 1:15). Mary, Jesus’ mother, was promised: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’ (Luke 1:35). When Elizabeth, her cousin, came into the presence of Jesus, who was still in his mother’s womb, she too was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (v.41) and even John the Baptist’s father Zechariah was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (v.67). In almost every case there is an outburst of praise or prophecy.

John the Baptist links him with Jesus

When John was asked whether he was the Christ he replied: ‘I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Luke 3:16). Baptism with water is very important, but it is not enough. Jesus is the Spirit baptiser. The Greek word means ‘to overwhelm’, ‘to immerse’, or ‘to plunge’. It was the word used to describe a sinking ship when it had finally submerged. This is what should happen when we are filled with

the Spirit. We should be completely overwhelmed by, immersed in, and plunged into the Spirit of God.

Sometimes this experience is like a hard, dry sponge being dropped into water. There can be a hardness in our lives which stops us absorbing the Spirit of God. It may take a little time for the initial hardness to wear off and for the sponge to be filled. So it is one thing for the sponge to be in the water ('baptised'), but it is another for the water to be in the sponge ('filled'). When the sponge is filled with water, the water literally pours out of it.

Jesus was a man completely filled with the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God descended on him in bodily form at his baptism (Luke 3:22). He returned to the Jordan 'full of the Holy Spirit' and was 'led by the Spirit in the desert' (Luke 4:1). He returned to Galilee 'in the power of the Spirit' (v.14). In a synagogue in Nazareth he read the lesson from Isaiah 61:1, 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me...' and said, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (v.21).

Jesus predicted his presence

On one occasion Jesus went to a Jewish festival called the Feast of Tabernacles. Thousands of Jews would go to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast, looking back to the time when Moses brought water from a rock. They thanked God for providing water in the past year and

prayed that he would do the same in the coming year. They looked forward to a time when water would pour out of the temple (as prophesied by Ezekiel), becoming deeper and deeper, and bringing life, fruitfulness and healing wherever it went (Ezekiel 47).

This passage was read at the Feast of Tabernacles and enacted visually. The High Priest would go down to the pool of Siloam and fill a golden pitcher with water. He would then lead the people to the temple where he would pour water through a funnel in the west side of the altar, and into the ground, in anticipation of the great river that would flow from the temple. According to rabbinic tradition, Jerusalem was the navel of the earth and the temple of Mount Zion was the centre of the navel (its 'belly' or 'innermost being').

On the last day of the feast Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, "Out of his heart [the original word means 'belly' or 'innermost being'] shall flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:38, RSV). He was saying that the promises of Ezekiel and others would not be fulfilled in a place, but in a person. It is out of the innermost being of Jesus that the river of life will flow. So too, in a derivative sense, the streams of living water will flow from every Christian ('Whoever believes in me', v.38). From us, Jesus says, this river will flow, bringing life, fruitfulness and healing to others promised by God through Ezekiel.

John went on to explain that Jesus was speaking about the Holy Spirit 'whom those who believed in him were later to receive' (v.39). He added that 'up to that time the Spirit had not been given' (v.39). The promise of the Father had still not been fulfilled. Even after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Spirit was not poured out. Later, Jesus told his disciples, 'I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49).

Just before he ascended to heaven Jesus again promised, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you' (Acts 1:8). But still they had to wait and pray for another ten days. Then at last, on the day of Pentecost: 'Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them' (Acts 2:2-4).

It had happened. The promise of the Father had been fulfilled. The crowd was amazed and mystified.

Peter stood up and explained what had occurred. He looked back to the promises of God in the Old Testament and explained how all their hopes and aspirations were now being fulfilled before their eyes. He explained that Jesus had 'received from the Father

the promised Holy Spirit' and had 'poured out what you now see and hear' (Acts 2:33).

When the crowd asked what they needed to do, Peter told them to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus so that they could receive forgiveness. Then he promised that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For, he said: 'The promise is for you and your children and for *all* who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call' (v.39, italics mine).

We now live after Pentecost – the Spirit has been poured out. The promise of the Father has been fulfilled. Every single Christian receives the promise of the Father. It is no longer just for particular people, at particular times for particular tasks. It is for *all* Christians, including you and me.

What Does the Holy Spirit Do?

Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." 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.'

John 3:5-8

A few years ago I was in a church in Brighton. One of the Sunday school teachers was telling us about her Sunday school class the previous week. She had been telling the children about Jesus' teaching on being born again in John 3:5-8. She was trying to explain to the children about the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth. In trying to draw them out on the

subject she asked, 'Are you born a Christian?' One little boy replied, 'No, Miss. You are born normal!'

The expression 'born again' has become something of a cliché. It was popularised in America and has even been used to advertise cars. Actually, Jesus was the first person to use the expression of people who were 'born of the Spirit' (John 3:8).

A new baby is born as a result of a man and a woman joining together in sexual intercourse. In the spiritual realm, when the Spirit of God and the spirit of a man or woman come together, a new spiritual being is created. There is a new birth, spiritually. This is what Jesus is speaking about when he says, 'You must be born again.'

Jesus was saying that physical birth is not enough. We need to be born again by the Spirit. This is what happens when we become Christians. Every single Christian is born again. We may not be able to put our finger on the exact moment it occurred, but just as we know whether or not we are alive physically, so we should know that we are alive spiritually.

When we are born physically, we are born into a family. When we are born again spiritually, we are born into a Christian family. Much of the work of the Spirit can be seen in terms of a family. He assures us of our relationship with our Father and helps us to develop that relationship. He produces in us a family likeness. He unites us with our brothers and sisters, giving each

member of the family different gifts and abilities. And he enables the family to grow in size.

In this chapter we will look at each of these aspects of his work in us as Christians. Until we become Christians the Spirit's work is primarily to convict us of our sin and our need for Jesus Christ, to convince us of the truth and to enable us to put our faith in him (John 16:7-15). But we have a different type of relationship with the Holy Spirit when he comes to live within us. When I first became a Christian, I thought 'This is it! I've arrived!' I had been struggling with various issues, and then I made a decision to follow Christ. A friend had to explain to me that this was only the beginning.

Sons and daughters of God

The moment we come to Christ we receive complete forgiveness. The barrier between us and God has been removed. Paul says, 'There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). Jesus took all our sins – past, present and future. God takes all our sins and buries them in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19), and as the Dutch author Corrie Ten Boom used to say, 'He puts up a sign saying "No fishing."'¹

Not only does he wipe the slate clean, but he also brings us into a relationship with God as sons and daughters. Not all men and women are children of God in this sense, although all of us were created by God. It

is only to those who receive Jesus, to those who believe in his name, that he gives the 'right to become children of God' (John 1:12). Sonship in the New Testament (which is used in the generic sense to include sons and daughters) is not a natural status, but a spiritual one. We become sons and daughters of God not by being born, but by being born again by the Spirit.

"I am perfect Gerald"



The book of Romans has been described as the Himalayas of the New Testament. If this is the case, then Chapter 8 is Mount Everest, and verses 14–17 could well be described as its peak:

Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive

a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Romans 8:14–17

First of all, there is no higher privilege than to be a child of God. Under Roman law – which is probably what is in Paul's mind here – you could have no higher status than being adopted into a Roman family. If an adult wanted an heir he could either choose one of his own sons, or he could adopt a son. God has only one son – Jesus Christ – but he has many adopted children. There is a fairy story in which a reigning monarch adopts waifs and strays and makes them princes. In Christ, myth has become fact. We have been adopted into God's family. There could be no higher honour.

Billy Bray was a miner from Cornwall, born in 1794. He was an alcoholic and was always getting involved in fights and arguments at home. At the age of twenty-nine he became a Christian. He went home and told his wife, 'You will never see me drunk again, by the help of the Lord.' She never did. His words, his tone of voice, and his looks all had magnetic power. He was charged

with divine electricity. Crowds of miners would come and hear him preach. Many were converted and there were some remarkable healings. He was always praising God and saying that he had abundant reason to rejoice. He described himself as 'a young prince'. He was the adopted son of God, the King of Kings and therefore he was a prince, already possessing royal rights and privileges. His favourite expression was, 'I am the son of a King.'²

I met a Hungarian woman called Ildiko Papp. Eighteen months previously she had been a homeless alcoholic, living on the streets in a town near Budapest, when somebody invited her on Alpha. On Alpha she gave her life to Christ, experienced the love of Jesus, and was set free from alcoholism. When I asked her what difference Jesus had made to her life, she answered, 'He's changed me from being a beggar to a princess'.

Once we fully understand our status as adopted sons and daughters of God, we realise that there is no status in the world that even compares with the privilege of being a child of the Creator of the universe.

Second, as children we have the closest possible intimacy with God. Paul says that by the Spirit we cry, 'Abba, Father!' This Aramaic word, *Abba* (that we looked at in the chapter 'Why and How Do I Pray?'), is not found in the Old Testament. The use of this word in addressing God was distinctive of Jesus. It is impossible to translate it, but the nearest equivalent translation is

probably 'dear Father' or 'Dad'. The word speaks of the authority of the Father, as well as his accessibility. Jesus allows us to share in that intimate relationship with God when we receive his Spirit. 'For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption' (v.15). As Pope John Paul II said in an address to more than half a million young people in Poland just after the fall of Communism: 'How can we fail to be amazed at the heights to which we are called? The human being, a created and limited being – even a sinner, is destined to be a child of God!'³

Prince Charles has many titles. He is the Heir Apparent to the Crown, His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, Knight of the Garter, Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Regiment of Wales, Duke of Rothesay, Knight of the Thistle, Rear Admiral, Great Master of the Order of Bath, Earl of Chester, Earl of Carrick, Baron of Renfrew, Lord of the Isles and Prince and Great Steward of Scotland. We would address him as 'Your Royal Highness', but I suspect to William and Harry he is simply 'Dad'. When we become children of God we have an intimacy with our heavenly King. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said about his conversion, 'I exchanged the faith of a servant for the faith of a son.'

Third, the Spirit gives us the deepest possible experience of God. 'The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children' (v.16). He wants

us to know, deep within, that we are children of God. In the same way that I want my children to know and experience my love for them and my relationship with them, so God wants his children to be assured of that love and of that relationship.

One man who only experienced this quite late in his life was the South African bishop Bill Burnett, who was at one time Archbishop of Cape Town. I heard him say, 'When I became a bishop I believed in theology [the truth about God], but not in God. I was a practical atheist. I sought righteousness by doing good.' One day, after he had been a bishop for fifteen years, he went to speak at a confirmation service on the text in Romans, 'God has poured out his love [ie, his love for us] into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us' (Romans 5:5). After he had preached, he came home, poured himself a strong drink and was reading the paper when he felt the Lord saying, 'Go and pray.' He went into his chapel, knelt down in silence and sensed the Lord saying to him, 'I want your body.' He could not quite understand why (he was tall and thin and said, 'I'm not exactly Mr Universe'). However, he gave every part of himself to the Lord. 'Then,' he said, 'what I preached about happened. I experienced electric shocks of love.' He found himself flat on the floor and heard the Lord saying, 'You are my son.' When he got up, he knew indeed that something had happened. It proved a turning point in his life and ministry.

Since then, through his ministry, many others have come to experience sonship through the witness of the Spirit.

Fourth, Paul tells us that to be a son or daughter of God is the greatest security. For if we are children of God we are also 'heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ' (Romans 8:17). Under Roman law an adopted son would take his father's name and inherit his estate. As children of God we are heirs. The only difference is that we receive our final inheritance not on the death of our father, but on our own death. This is why Billy Bray was thrilled to think that 'his heavenly Father had reserved everlasting glory and blessedness' for him. We will enjoy an eternity of love with Jesus.

Paul adds, 'If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory' (v.17). This is not a condition but an observation. Christians identify with Jesus Christ. This may mean some rejection and opposition here and now, but that is nothing compared to our inheritance as children of God.

Developing the relationship

Birth is not just the climax of a period of gestation; it is the beginning of a new life and new relationships. Our relationship with our parents grows and deepens over a long period. This happens as we spend time with them; it does not happen overnight.

Our relationship with God, as we have seen in the early chapters, grows and deepens as we spend time with him. The Spirit of God helps us to develop our relationship with God. He brings us into the presence of the Father. 'For through him [Jesus] we both [Jews and Gentiles alike] have access to the Father by one Spirit' (Ephesians 2:18). This is what it means for a Christian to experience God as Trinity. Through Jesus, by the Spirit, we have access to the presence of God. Jesus, through his death on the cross, removed the barrier between us and God. That is why we are able to come into God's presence. Often we don't appreciate that when we are praying. We might feel there is a barrier but in fact there is none at all.

When I was at university I had a room above Barclays Bank in the high street. We often used to have friends over for lunch in this room, and one day we were discussing whether or not the noise we made could be heard in the bank below. In order to find out, we decided to conduct an experiment. A girl called Kay went down into the bank. As it was lunchtime, it was packed with customers. The arrangement was that we would gradually build up the noise. First, one person would jump on the floor, then two, three, four and eventually five. Next we would jump off chairs and then off the table. We wanted to see at which point we could be heard downstairs in the bank.

It turned out that the ceiling was rather thinner than we had thought. The first jump could definitely be heard. The second made a loud noise. After about the fifth, which sounded like a thunderstorm, there was total silence in the bank. Everyone had stopped cashing cheques and was looking at the ceiling, wondering what was going on. Kay was right in the middle of the bank and thought, 'What do I do? If I go out it's going to look very odd, but if I stay it is going to get worse!' She stayed. The noise built up and up. Eventually bits of polystyrene started to fall from the ceiling. At that moment, fearing the ceiling would cave in, she rushed up to tell us that we could indeed be heard in the bank!

Imagine my surprise when I received a letter many years later from a man who had heard me tell this story on video. He said that he was interested in my reference to S1 and S2 Hewell's Court because he was the College Clerk of Works at the time, 'The problem of sound penetration between S1 and S2 and Barclays Bank was reported to me, but until now I did not know who it was who had caused it. It was not polystyrene tiles that fell from the bank, but part of the suspended ceiling. Have no fear – there will not be any recrimination.'

The barrier was much smaller than we thought! Since, through Jesus, the barrier has been removed, God hears us when we pray. We have immediate access to his presence, by the Spirit. We don't need to jump up and down to get his attention.

Not only does the Spirit bring us into the presence of God, he also helps us to pray. St Paul writes, 'the Spirit helps us in our weakness'. (Romans 8:26). Sometimes we just don't know how to pray. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us. What matters is not the place in which we pray, the position in which we pray or whether or not we use set forms of prayer; what matters is whether or not we are praying in the Spirit. All prayer should be led by the Spirit. Without his help prayer can easily become lifeless and dull.

Another aspect of developing our relationship with God is understanding what he's saying to us. Again, the Spirit of God enables us to do this. Paul says, 'I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...' (Ephesians 1:17-18). The Spirit of God is a Spirit of wisdom and revelation. He opens our eyes so that, for example, we can understand what God is saying through the Bible.

Before I became a Christian I read and heard the Bible endlessly, in school services, at weddings and at funerals, but I did not understand it. It meant nothing to me. The reason it did not make sense to me was that I did not have the Spirit of God to interpret it. The Spirit of God is the best interpreter of what God has said.

Ultimately we will never understand Christianity without the Holy Spirit enlightening our eyes. We can see enough to make a step of faith, which is not a blind leap of faith; but real understanding often only follows faith. Anselm of Canterbury said, 'I believe in order that I might understand.'⁴ Only when we believe and receive the Holy Spirit can we really understand God's revelation.

The Spirit of God helps us to develop our relationship with God and he enables us to sustain that relationship. People are often worried that they will not be able to keep going in the Christian life. God never intended for us to keep going by ourselves. By his Spirit, God keeps us going. It is the Spirit who brings us into a relationship with God and it is the Spirit who maintains that relationship. We are utterly dependent on him.

The family likeness

I always find it fascinating to observe how children can look like both parents at the same time when the parents themselves may look so different. Even husbands and wives sometimes grow to look like each other as they spend time together over the years!

As we spend time in the presence of God, the Spirit of God transforms us. As Paul writes, 'And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being

transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18). We are transformed into the moral likeness of Jesus Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is developed in our lives. Paul tells us that 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22). These are the characteristics that the Spirit of God develops in our lives. It is not that we become perfect immediately, but over a period of time there should be a change.

The first and most important fruit of the Spirit is love. Love lies at the heart of the Christian faith. The Bible is the story of God's love for us. His desire is that we should respond by loving him and loving our neighbour. The evidence of the work of the Spirit in our lives will be an increasing love for God and an increasing love for others. Without this love everything else counts for nothing.

Second in Paul's list is joy. The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge wrote: 'The most characteristic and uplifting of the manifestations of conversion is rapture – an inexpressible joy which suffuses our whole being, making our fears dissolve into nothing, and our expectations all move heavenwards.'⁵ This joy is not always mirrored by our outward circumstances. It comes from the Spirit within. Richard Wurmbrand, who was imprisoned for many

years and frequently tortured on account of his faith, wrote of this joy: 'Alone in my cell, cold, hungry and in rags, I danced for joy every night... sometimes I was so filled with joy that I felt I would burst if I did not give it expression.'⁶

The third fruit listed is peace. Detached from Christ, inner peace is a kind of spiritual marshmallow full of softness and sweetness but without much actual substance. The Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word used here is *shalom*, which means 'wholeness', 'soundness', 'well-being', 'rootedness in community' and 'relatedness to God'. There is a longing within every human heart for peace like that. Epictetus, the first-century pagan thinker, said, 'While the Emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than ever for outward peace...'.⁷

It is wonderful to see those whose characters have been transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ as these and the other fruits of the Spirit – patience, kindness, goodness, and so on – have grown in their lives. A woman in her eighties in our congregation said of a former vicar, 'He gets more and more like our Lord.' I cannot think of a higher compliment than that. It is the work of the Spirit of God to make us more and more like Jesus so that we carry the knowledge of him wherever we go (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Unity in the family

When we come to Christ and become sons and daughters of God we become part of a huge family. God's desire, like that of every normal parent, is that there should be unity in his family. Jesus prayed for unity among his followers (John 17). Paul pleaded with the Ephesian Christians to 'make every effort to keep *the unity of the Spirit* through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3, italics mine). The Spirit wants us to be united and helps us to grow in unity. We are meant to be an example in a troubled and divided world.

The same Holy Spirit lives in every Christian wherever they are and whatever their denomination, background, colour or race. The same Spirit is in every child of God and his desire is that we should be united. Indeed, that is what makes the divisions in the church such a tragedy, because there is '*one* body and *one* Spirit... *one* hope... *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism; *one* God and Father of *all*, who is over *all* and through *all* and in *all*' (Ephesians 4:4–6, italics mine).

The same Spirit indwells Christians in Russia, China, Africa, America, the UK or wherever. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Anglican, or new church. In one sense, important as it may be to us, what matters more than our denomination is whether or not we have the Spirit of God. The same Spirit indwells Christians in every denomination. If people have the Spirit of God living

within them, they are Christians, and our brothers and sisters. As Father Raniero Cantalamessa has said, 'What unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us.' It is a tremendous privilege to be part of this huge family; one of the great joys of coming to Christ is to experience this unity. There is a closeness and depth of relationship in the Christian church which I have never found outside of it. We must make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit at every level: in our small groups, congregations, local churches and the worldwide church.

Gifts for all the children

Although there is often a family likeness and, hopefully, unity in the family, there is also great diversity. No two children are identical – not even 'identical' twins are exactly alike. So it is in the body of Christ. Every Christian is different; each has a different contribution to make, each has a different gift. In the New Testament there are lists of some of the gifts of the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians Paul lists nine gifts:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by

the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

1 Corinthians 12:7–11

Elsewhere he mentions other gifts: those given to apostles, teachers, helpers, administrators (1 Corinthians 12:28–30), evangelists and pastors (Ephesians 4), gifts of serving, encouraging, giving, leadership, showing mercy (Romans 12:7), hospitality and speaking (1 Peter 4). No doubt these lists were not intended to be exhaustive.

All good gifts are from God, even if some, such as miracles, more obviously demonstrate the unusual acts of God in his world. Spiritual gifts include natural talents which have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. As the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann points out, 'In principle every human potentiality and capacity can become charismatic [ie, a gift of the Spirit] through a person's call, if only they are used in Christ.'⁸

These gifts are given to all Christians. The expression 'to each one' runs like a thread through 1 Corinthians

12. Every Christian is part of the body of Christ. There are many different parts, but one body (v.12). We are baptised by (or in) one Spirit (v. 13). We are all given the one Spirit to drink (v. 13). There are no first- and second-class Christians. All Christians receive the Spirit. All Christians have spiritual gifts.

There is an urgent need for the gifts to be exercised. One of the major problems in the church at large is that so few are using their gifts. As a result, a few people are left doing everything and are totally exhausted, while the rest are under-utilised. The church has been likened to a football match, in which thousands of people desperately in need of exercise watch twenty-two people desperately in need of a rest!

The church will only operate with maximum effectiveness when every person is using his or her gifts. The Spirit of God gives each of us gifts. God does not require us to have many gifts, but he does require us to use what we have and to desire more (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1).

The growing family

It is natural for families to grow. God said to Adam and Eve, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' It should be natural for the family of God to grow. Again, this is the work of the Spirit. Jesus said, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on 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).

The Spirit of God gives us both a desire and the ability to tell others. The playwright Murray Watts tells the story of a young man who was convinced of the truth of Christianity, but was paralysed with fear at the very thought of having to admit to being 'a Christian'. The idea of telling anyone about his new-found faith, with all the dangers of being dubbed a religious nutcase, appalled him.

For many weeks he tried to banish the thought of religion from his mind, but it was no use. It was as if he heard a whisper in his conscience, repeating over and over again, 'Follow me.' At last he could stand it no longer and he went to a very old man, who had been a Christian for the best part of a century. He told him of his nightmare, this terrible burden of 'witnessing to the light', and how it stopped him from becoming a Christian. The man sighed and shook his head. 'This is a matter between you and Christ,' he said. 'Why bring all these other people into it?' The young man nodded slowly.

'Go home,' said the old man. 'Go into your bedroom alone. Forget the world. Forget your family, and make it a secret between you and God.'

The young man felt a weight fall from him as the old man spoke. 'You mean, I don't have to tell anyone?'

'No,' said the old man.

‘No one at all?’

‘Not if you don’t want to.’

‘Are you *sure*?’ asked the young man, beginning to tremble with anticipation. ‘Can this be right?’

‘It is right for you,’ said the old man.

So the young man went home, knelt down in prayer and was converted to Christ. Immediately, he ran down the stairs and into the kitchen, where his wife, father and three friends were sitting. ‘Do you realise,’ he said, breathless with excitement, ‘that it’s possible to be a Christian without telling anyone?’⁹

When we experience the Spirit of God we want to tell others. As we do, the family grows. The Christian family should never be static. It should be continually growing and drawing in new people, who themselves receive the power of the Holy Spirit and go out and tell others about Jesus.

I have stressed throughout this chapter that the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian. Paul says, ‘And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, that person does not belong to Christ’ (Romans 8:9). Yet not every Christian is filled with the Spirit. Paul writes to the Christians at Ephesus and says, ‘Be filled with the Spirit’ (Ephesians 5:18). In the next chapter we will look at how we can be filled with the Spirit.

We started the previous chapter with Genesis 1:1-2 (the first verses in the Bible) and I want to end this chapter by looking at Revelation 22:17 (one of the

last verses in the Bible). The Spirit of God is active throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let those who hear say, “Come!” Let those who are thirsty come; and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life’ (Revelation 22:17).

God wants to fill every one of us with his Spirit. Some people are longing for this. Some are not so sure that they want it – in which case they do not really have a thirst. If you do not have a thirst for more of the Spirit’s fullness, why not pray for such a thirst? God takes us as we are. When we thirst and ask, God will give us ‘the free gift of the water of life’.

How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?

The evangelist J. John once addressed a conference on the subject of preaching. One of the points he made was that preachers often exhort their hearers to do something, but they never tell them *how* to do it. They say, 'Read your Bible.' He wants to ask, 'Yes, but how?' They say, 'Pray more.' He asks, 'Yes, but how?' They say, 'Tell people about Jesus.' He asks, 'Yes, but how?' In this chapter I want to look at the question of *how* we can be filled with the Spirit.¹

We have an old gas boiler in our house. The pilot light is on all the time, but the boiler is not always giving out heat and power. Some people have only got the pilot light of the Holy Spirit in their lives, whereas when people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to fire on all cylinders. When you look at them you can almost see and feel the difference.

The book of Acts has been described as Volume I of the history of the church. In it, we see several examples of people experiencing the Holy Spirit. In an ideal

world every Christian would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of conversion. Sometimes it happens like that (both in the New Testament and now), but not always – even in the New Testament. We have already looked at the first occasion of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. As we go on through the book of Acts we will see other examples.

When Peter and John prayed for the Samaritan believers and the Holy Spirit came upon them, Simon the Magician was so impressed that he offered money in order to be able to do the same thing (Acts 8:14–18). Peter warned him that it was a terrible thing to try to buy God's gift with money. But the account shows that something very wonderful must have happened.

In the next chapter (Acts 9) we see one of the most remarkable conversions of all times. When Stephen the first Christian martyr was stoned, Saul approved his death (Acts 8:1) and afterwards began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged men and women off to prison (v.3). At the beginning of chapter 9 we find him still 'breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples'.

Within the space of a few days, Saul was preaching in synagogues that 'Jesus is the Son of God' (v.20). He caused total astonishment, with people asking, 'Isn't he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name [of Jesus]?'

What had happened in those few days to change him so completely? First, he had encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Second, he had been filled with the Spirit (v.17). That moment, 'something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again' (v.18). It sometimes happens that people who were not Christians, or who were even strongly anti-Christian, have a complete turnaround in their lives when they come to Christ and are filled with the Spirit. They can become powerful advocates of the Christian faith.

At Ephesus, Paul came across a group who 'believed', but who had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. He placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:1-7). There are people today who are in a similar position. They may have 'believed' for some time or even all their lives. They may have been baptised, confirmed and gone to church from time to time or even regularly. Yet they may know little or nothing about the Holy Spirit.

Another incident occurs early in the book of Acts and I want to look at it in a little more detail. It is the first occasion when Gentiles were filled with the Spirit. God did something extraordinary which started with a vision given to a man called Cornelius. God also spoke to Peter through a vision and told him he wanted him to go and speak to the Gentiles at the house of this man. Halfway through Peter's talk, something remarkable happened: 'The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the

message. The circumcised believers [ie, the Jews] who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God' (Acts 10:44–46). In the rest of the chapter I want to examine three aspects of what happened.

They experienced the power of the Holy Spirit

Peter had to stop his talk because it was obvious that something was happening. The filling of the Spirit rarely happens imperceptibly, although the experience is different for everyone.

In the description of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Luke uses the language of a heavy tropical rainstorm. It is a picture of the power of the Spirit flooding their beings. There were physical manifestations. They heard a gale (v.2) which was not a real gale, but it resembled one. It was the mighty invisible power of the *ruach* of God; the same word as we have seen for wind, breath and spirit in the Old Testament. Sometimes, when people are filled, they shake like a leaf in the wind. Others find themselves breathing deeply, almost as if they were physically breathing in the Spirit.

They also saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them (v.3); in the Bible, fire signifies something powerful that

purifies. Of course, it also sets things alight. Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit and people experience it in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of 'glowing all over'. Another said she experienced 'liquid heat'. Still another described 'burning in my arms when I was not hot'. Fire perhaps symbolises the power, passion and purity that the Spirit of God brings to our lives.

For many, the experience of the Spirit may be an overwhelming experience of the love of God. Paul prays for the Christians at Ephesus that they might have 'power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ' (Ephesians 3:18). The love of Christ is wide enough to reach every person in the world. It reaches across every continent to people of every race, colour, tribe and background. It is long enough to last throughout a lifetime and into eternity. It is deep enough to reach us however far we have fallen. It is high enough to lift us into the heavenly places. We see this love supremely in the cross of Christ. We know Christ's love for us because he was willing to die for us. Paul prayed that we would 'grasp' the extent of this love.

Yet he does not stop there. He goes on to pray that we would '*know* this love that *surpasses knowledge*' – that you would 'be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:19, italics mine). It is not enough

to understand his love; we need to experience his love that 'surpasses knowledge'. It is often as people are filled with the Spirit – 'filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' (v.19) that they experience in their heart this transforming love of Christ.

Thomas Goodwin, one of the Puritans of 300 years ago, illustrated this experience. He pictured a man walking along a road hand in hand with his son. The little boy knows that this man is his father, and that his father loves him. But suddenly the father stops, picks up the boy, lifts him into his arms, embraces him, kisses him and hugs him. Then he puts him down again, and they continue walking. It is a wonderful thing to be walking along holding your father's hand; but it is an incomparably greater thing to have his arms enfolded around you.

'He has embraced us,' says Spurgeon and he pours his love upon us and he 'hugs' us. Martyn Lloyd-Jones quotes these examples among many others in his book on Romans, and comments on the experience of the Spirit:

Let us realize then the profound character of the experience. This is not light and superficial and ordinary; it is not something of which you can say, 'Don't worry about your feelings.' Worry about your feelings? You will have such a depth of feeling that for a moment you may

well imagine that you have never 'felt' anything in your life before. It is the profoundest experience that a man can ever know.²

They were released in praise

When these Gentiles were filled with the Spirit they started 'praising God'. Spontaneous praise is the language of people who are excited about their experience of God.

I am asked, 'Is it right to express emotions in church? Isn't there a danger of emotionalism?' The danger for most of us in our relationship with God is not that there is too much emotion, but too little. Our relationship with God can be rather cold. Every relationship of love involves our emotions. Of course, there must be more than emotions. There must be friendship, communication, understanding and service. But if I never showed any emotion towards my wife, there would be something lacking in my love for her. If we do not experience any emotion in our relationship with God, then our whole personality is not involved.

St Augustine said this about God: 'The thought of you stirs a person so deeply that they cannot be content unless they praise you, because you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'³ Worship is the purpose for which we were made.

As the Westminster Catechism puts it, 'A man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.' It should involve our whole personality, including our emotions. We are called to love, praise and worship God with *all of* our beings.



It could be argued that emotions are all right in private, but what about the public demonstration of emotion? After a conference attended by George Carey when he was Archbishop of Canterbury there was a correspondence in *The Times* about the place of emotions in church. One man wrote:

Why is it that if a cinema comedy produces laughter, the film is regarded as successful; if a theatre tragedy brings tears to the audience

the production is regarded as touching; if a football match thrills the spectators, the game is reviewed as exciting; but if the congregation are moved by the glory of God in worship, the audience are accused of emotionalism?

Of course, there is such a thing as emotionalism, where emotions take precedence over the solid foundation of teaching from the Bible. But as the former Bishop of Coventry, Cuthbert Bardsley once said, 'The chief danger of the Anglican church is not delirious emotionalism.' Our worship is the expression of our love for God and it should involve our whole beings: our mind, heart, will and emotions.

They received a new language

As on the day of Pentecost and with the Christians in Ephesus (Acts 19), when the Gentiles were filled with the Spirit they received the gift of tongues. The word for 'tongues' is the same word as that for 'languages' and it means the ability to speak in a language you have never learned. It may be an angelic language (1 Corinthians 13:1), which presumably is not recognisable, or it may be a recognisable human language (as at Pentecost). A young woman in our congregation called Penny, was praying with another girl. She ran out of words in English and started praying in tongues. The girl smiled

and then opened her eyes and started laughing. She said, 'You have just spoken to me in Russian.' The girl, although English, spoke fluent Russian and had a great love for the language. Penny asked, 'What have I been saying?' The girl told her that she had been saying, 'My dear child,' over and over again. Penny does not speak a single word of Russian. For that young woman, those three words were of great significance. She was assured that she was important to God.

The gift of tongues has brought great blessing to many people. It is, as we have seen, one of the gifts of the Spirit. It is not the only gift or even the most important gift. Not all Christians speak in tongues, nor is it a necessary sign of being filled with the Spirit. It is possible to be filled with the Spirit and not speak in tongues. Nevertheless, for many, both in the New Testament and in the Christian life more generally, it accompanies an experience of the Holy Spirit and may be the first experience of the more obviously supernatural activity of the Spirit. Many today are puzzled by the gift. This is why I have devoted quite a lot of space in this chapter to the subject. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul deals with a number of questions that are often raised.

What exactly is speaking in tongues?

It is a form of prayer (one of the many different forms of prayer found in the New Testament), according to Paul,

'for those who speak in a tongue do not speak to people but *to God*' (1 Corinthians 14:2, italics mine). It is a form of prayer that builds up the individual Christian (v.4). Obviously, the gifts which directly edify the church are even more important, but this does not make tongues unimportant. The benefit of tongues is that it is a form of prayer which transcends the limitation of human language. This seems to be what Paul means when he says, 'For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful' (1 Corinthians 14:14).

Everybody, to a greater or lesser extent, is limited by language. I'm told that the average native English speaker has a vocabulary of between 10,000 and 20,000 words. Winston Churchill, however, had a vocabulary of around 50,000 words. But even he was limited to that extent. Often people experience frustration that they cannot express what they really feel, even in a human relationship. They feel things in their spirits, but they do not know how to put them into words. This is often true also in our relationship with God.

This is where the gift of tongues can be a great help. It enables us to express to God what we really feel in our spirits without going through the process of translating it into English. (Hence Paul says, 'My mind is unfruitful'.) It is not mindless; the speaker is in full control, and can start and stop where they want. However it is 'unfruitful', because it is not going through the process of translation into an intelligible language.

In what areas does it help?

There are three areas in which many people have found this gift especially helpful. First, in the area of *praise and worship*. We are particularly limited in our language. When children (or even adults) write thank-you letters, it is not long before they run out of language, and we find that words such as 'lovely', 'wonderful' or 'brilliant' are repeated over and over again. In our praise and worship of God we can often find language limiting.

We long to express our love, worship and praise of God, particularly when we are filled with the Spirit. The gift of tongues enables us to do this without the limitation of human language.

Second, it can be a great help when *praying under pressure*. There are times in our lives when it is hard to know exactly how to pray. It can be because we are burdened by pressure, anxiety or grief. I prayed for a 26-year-old widower whose wife had died of cancer a year into their marriage. He asked for, and instantly received, the gift of tongues while we were praying. All the grief, sadness and emotion that he had pushed down in his life seemed to pour out as he prayed. He told me afterwards what a relief it had been to be able to unburden all those things.

I too have found this in my own experience. In 1987, during a staff meeting at our church, I received a message to say that my mother had had a heart attack

and was in hospital. As I dashed up to the main road and caught a taxi to the hospital, I have never been more grateful for the gift of tongues. I desperately wanted to pray, but felt too shocked to form any sentences in English. The gift of tongues enabled me to pray all the way to the hospital and to bring the situation to God in a time of crisis.

Third, many people have found the gift a help in *praying for other people*. It is hard to pray for others – especially if you have not seen them or heard from them for some time. After a while, ‘Lord, bless them’ might be our most elaborate prayer. It can be a real help to start praying in tongues for them. Often, as we do that, God gives us the words to pray in English.

It is not selfish to want to pray in tongues. Although ‘those who speak in a tongue edify themselves’ (1 Corinthians 14:4), the indirect effects of this can be very great. Jackie Pullinger describes the transformation in her ministry when she began to use the gift:

By the clock I prayed 15 minutes a day in the language of the Spirit and still felt nothing as I asked the Spirit to help me intercede for those he wanted to reach. After about six weeks of this I began to lead people to Jesus without trying. Gangsters fell to their knees

sobbing in the streets, women were healed, heroin addicts were miraculously set free. And I knew it all had nothing to do with me.

It was also the gateway for her to receive other gifts of the Spirit:

With my friends I began to learn about the other gifts of the Spirit and we experienced a remarkable few years of ministry. Scores of gangsters and well-to-do people, students and churchmen, were converted and all received a new language to pray in private and other gifts to use when meeting together. We opened several homes to house heroin addicts and all were delivered from drugs painlessly because of the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Does Paul approve of speaking in tongues?

The context of 1 Corinthians 14 is excessive public use in church of the gift of tongues. Paul says, '*In the church* I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue' (v.19, italics mine). There would be little point in Paul arriving at Corinth and giving his sermon in tongues. They would not be able to understand unless there was someone to interpret. So he lays down guidelines for the public use of tongues (v.27).

Nevertheless, Paul makes it clear that speaking in tongues should not be forbidden (v.39). With regard to the private use of this gift (on our own with God), he strongly encourages it. He says, 'I would like every one of you to speak in tongues' (v.5) and, 'I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you' (v.18). This does not mean that every Christian has to speak in tongues or that we are second-class Christians if we do not speak in tongues. There is no such thing as first- or second-class Christians. Nor does it mean that God loves us any less if we don't yet speak in tongues. Nevertheless, the gift of tongues is a blessing from God.

How do we receive the gift of tongues?

Some say, 'I don't want the gift of tongues.' God will never force you to receive a gift. Tongues is just one of the wonderful gifts of the Spirit, and not the only one by any means, as we saw in the last chapter. Like every gift, it has to be received by faith.

Not every Christian speaks in tongues, but there is no reason why anyone who wants this gift should not receive it. Paul is not saying that speaking in tongues is the be-all and end-all of the Christian life; he is saying that it is a very helpful gift. If you would like to receive it, there is no reason why you should not.

Like all the gifts of God, we have to cooperate with his Spirit. God does not force his gifts on us. When I

first prayed for the gift, I kept my mouth firmly shut! Then someone explained to me that if I wanted to receive the gift of tongues, I had to cooperate with the Spirit of God, open my mouth and start to speak to God in a language other than English or any another known to me. As I did, the words began to come and I received the gift of tongues also.

What are the common hindrances to being filled with the Spirit?

On one occasion Jesus was speaking to his disciples on the subject of prayer and the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:9-13). In that passage he deals with some of the principal difficulties we may have in receiving from God.

Doubt

There are many doubts people have in this whole area, the principal one being, 'If I ask will I receive?' Jesus says simply: 'I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you' (Luke 11). Jesus must have seen that they were a little sceptical because he repeats it in a different way: 'Seek and you will find.'

And again he says a third time: 'Knock and the door will be opened to you.'

He knows human nature so he goes on a fourth time: 'For everyone who asks receives.'

They are not convinced so he says it a fifth time:

‘He who seeks finds.’

Again a sixth time: ‘To him who knocks, the door will be opened.’

Why does he say it six times? Because he knows what we are like. We find it very difficult to believe that God would give us anything – let alone something as unusual and wonderful as his Holy Spirit and the gifts that come with the Spirit.

Fear

Even if we have cleared the first hurdle of doubt, some of us trip up on the next hurdle of fear. The fear is about what we will receive. Will it be something good?

Jesus uses the analogy of a human father. If a child asks for a fish, no father would give him a snake. If a child asks for an egg, no father would give him a scorpion (Luke 11:11–12). It is unthinkable that we would treat our children like that. Jesus goes on to say that in comparison with God we are evil! If we would not treat our children like that, it is inconceivable that God would treat us like that. He is not going to let us down. If we ask for the Holy Spirit and all the wonderful gifts he brings, that is exactly what we will receive (Luke 11:13).

Inadequacy

Of course it is important that there is no unforgiveness or other sin in our lives, and that we have turned our back on all that we know is wrong. However, even

after we have done that, we often have a vague feeling of unworthiness and inadequacy. We cannot believe that God would give us anything. We can believe that he would give gifts to very 'advanced' Christians, but not to us. But Jesus does not say, 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to all very 'advanced' Christians.' He says, 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to *those who ask him*' (Luke 11:13, italics mine).

If you would like to be filled with the Spirit you might like to find someone who would pray for you. If you don't have anyone who would be able to pray for you, there is nothing to stop you from praying on your own. Some are filled with the Spirit without receiving the gift of tongues. The two do not necessarily go together. Yet in the New Testament and in experience they often do go together. There is no reason why we should not pray for both.

If you are praying on your own:

1. Ask God to forgive you for anything that could be a barrier to receiving.
2. Turn from any area of your life that you know is wrong.
3. Ask God to fill you with his Spirit. Go on seeking him until you find. Go on knocking until the door opens. Seek God with all your heart.

4. If you would like to receive the gift of tongues, ask. Then open your mouth and start to praise God in any language but English or any other language known to you.
5. Believe that what you receive is from God. Don't let anyone tell you that you made it up. (It is most unlikely that you have.)
6. Persevere. Languages take time to develop. Most of us start with a very limited vocabulary. Gradually it develops. Tongues is like that. It takes time to develop the gift. But don't give up.
7. If you have prayed for any other gift, seek opportunities to use it. Remember that all gifts have to be developed by use.

Being filled with the Spirit is not a one-off experience. Peter was filled with the Spirit three times in the space of chapters 2–4 in the book of Acts (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31). When Paul says, 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18), he uses the present continuous tense, urging them and us to go on and on being filled with the Spirit.

Endnotes

Chapter 1

1. The slightly old-fashioned sense of the word 'ghost' in this context shares a root with the German word 'geist', which means 'spirit' (as in 'zeitgeist').
2. This is my adaptation of the account as narrated by Charles Marsh in *The Beloved Community: How Faith shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

Chapter 2

1. Corrie ten Boom and Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord* (CLC, 1974), p.55.
2. F. W. Bourne, *Billy Bray: The King's Son* (Epworth Press, 1937).
3. Pope John Paul II, *You Have Received a Spirit of Sonship* (Vatican City, 1993).
4. J. Hopkins and H. Richardson (eds), *Anselm of Canterbury, Proslogion Vol I* (SCM Press, 1974).
5. Malcom Muggeridge, *Conversion* (Collins, 1988).
6. Richard Wurmbrand, *In God's Underground* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1977).
7. *Discourses* III.13
8. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Fortress Press, 1993), p.297.
9. Murray Watts, *Rolling in the Aisles* (Monarch Publications, 1987).

Chapter 3

1. There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about whether this experience of the Holy Spirit should be described as 'baptism', 'filling', 'releasing', 'empowering' or some other term. What is clear is that we need the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I myself think that the filling of the Holy Spirit is the most faithful to the New Testament and I have used that expression in this chapter.

2. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, Vol. VIII (Banner of Truth, 1974).

3. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Classics, 1961), p.21.

4. John Wimber and Kevin Springer (eds), *Riding the Third Wave* (Marshall Pickering, 1987).

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*All titles are by Nicky Gumbel,
who is vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton*

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Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha. He read law at Cambridge and theology at Oxford, practised as a barrister and is now vicar of HTB in London. He is the author of many bestselling books about the Christian faith, including *Questions of Life*, *The Jesus Lifestyle*, *Why Jesus?*, *A Life Worth Living*, *Searching Issues* and *30 Days*.

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