

# Gift & Giver

The Holy Spirit for Today

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Craig S. Keener

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WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

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# Introduction

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## Perspectives and Labels

Christians agree on much of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit, such as the fruit of the Spirit and the Spirit's work in salvation. Most of us also agree that the Spirit empowers us for evangelism, and we also agree on at least some spiritual gifts and some ways of hearing God's voice. But Christians often differ on details such as the importance of particular gifts (especially tongues) and whether a person is baptized in the Spirit at conversion, after conversion, or (in some sense) at both times.

My goal in writing this book is to help Christians better understand how the Spirit empowers us to live. Most of the book, therefore, addresses practical areas in which the Spirit helps us live the Christian life. That being said, however, I also seek to help Christians with some of the controversial questions concerning the Holy Spirit, because answers to these questions also affect the church's life and ministry. In those sections of the book, I attempt to present various sides fairly, though in the end I make a case for what I believe are biblical positions. Only if Christians listen to one another's reasons for holding different views will we be able to work for consensus, or at least for unity in God's work despite our differences.

## Defining Terms: *Charismatic* and *Evangelical*

In an earlier book, I freely described myself as "charismatic." In much of North America, this term commonly means Christians who affirm and prac-

tice spiritual gifts but are not members of a Pentecostal church. Sometimes it also refers somewhat more specifically to those who pray in tongues; naturally this group also affirms and practices spiritual gifts. I have tried to allow for both of these traditional definitions, encompassing anyone who feels comfortable describing themselves in this way. For the sake of one overarching, convenient designation, I also include in this designation Third Wave and other groups that might not use the label “charismatic”; the contours of today’s church differ from when charismatic essentially meant noncessationist, but so far no one term has come along to replace it.

Since I wrote *3 Crucial Questions about the Holy Spirit*, however, I have learned that people apply the term in different ways in different circles. Some Nigerian friends from the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) and an evangelical friend from Mexico warned me that in their circles charismatic means advocates of health and wealth teachings, people who “claim” material blessings for themselves. I would rather abandon the title than risk anyone thinking that I advocate such teachings! (In fact, I am coauthoring a book for Nigeria with a Nigerian professor and pastor, challenging those very beliefs and practices.) In his book, *I Was Wrong*, former health and wealth teacher Jim Bakker confesses his discovery that for years he taught exactly the opposite of Jesus’ teachings. Studying the Bible in context changed his thinking and led him to renounce his former beliefs on this matter. Millions of Bible-reading Christians who today call themselves charismatics do not believe in health and wealth teachings.

I do not wish to risk confusion by using a label that means different things to different readers. Although I have used the term *charismatic* less frequently in this book, however, I have had to retain the term a number of times, for the simple reason that no other term available in English encompasses all who affirm and practice spiritual gifts. *Pentecostal* usually applies specifically to those who belong to Pentecostal denominations, and as much as I like Pentecostal denominations (and personally share the “Pentecostal experience”), most people would not use that title to describe me: I was ordained in a Baptist church, not a Pentecostal one. I should also emphasize that not all charismatics and Pentecostals agree with everything that has been practiced in the name of “charismatic.” People have wrongly justified all sorts of things in the name of the Spirit (just as they have wrongly justified all sorts of things in the name of the Bible, or in the name of Christ).

Not everyone uses the term *evangelical* in the same way either. I use the term to describe those who embrace and seek to obey the Bible as God’s Word and are committed to evangelizing the world because they recognize

Christ as the only way of salvation. It has been applied more narrowly in a denominational or subcultural sense, but I mean it in the broader historic sense. The circles in which I move and the largest part of this book's audience have determined to some extent the issues I address and in how much detail. (For example, I do not deal at length with sacramental views of the Spirit at confirmation, though many committed Christians in many parts of the world do hold these. This is not to devalue the importance of such a discussion, but many parts of that debate hinge on the needs of the early church after the completion of the New Testament; my own area of expertise and study is the New Testament itself.) I trust that the book will nevertheless contain enough useful information that all readers will profit from it, whether they are Pentecostal, Baptist, Anglican, or from other circles.

I have done my best to write a book that is fair to various views, but I have especially tried to be faithful to what I believe I find in the Bible. Nevertheless, because one's background and spiritual experiences (or lack of particular experiences) often help shape a Christian's approach to the subject of the Holy Spirit, it is only fair to my readers that I recount briefly my own background.

## My Background on the Subject

I have been miraculously healed, experienced supernatural gifts such as prophecy, followed the Spirit's leading in witnessing, and had deep experiences in the Spirit during prayer (including, regularly, prayer in tongues). I consider such experiences (and others mentioned later in the book) an advantage in writing a book on the Holy Spirit that includes controversial questions.

Some may object that such experiences bias my treatment of whether or not such experiences can happen today. From their standpoint, this is a legitimate objection (although many Pentecostals would respond that *non*-experience can also produce a sort of bias in the other direction). I could not deny that such works happen today any more than I could deny the existence of someone I know personally, because I have witnessed their reality firsthand. I do not, however, expect others to embrace the reality of these experiences on the basis of my testimony if they do not believe that such experiences are biblical. I can merely invite them to listen to my biblical arguments, and, if they wish, to a few of the stories I tell.

But I am an evangelical New Testament scholar who has published commentaries on various New Testament books. God called me to understand and teach the Bible, and if I had found my experiences to be unbiblical, I would have needed to find some other explanation for what they really were. It would not be the first time the Bible made me change my mind on something!

I am also part of the larger evangelical movement that is committed to evangelizing the world across denominational lines. Fundamental Baptists led me to Christ, I was ordained in a black Baptist church, and I teach in an interracial, evangelical Baptist seminary that serves evangelical students from a broad range of denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Mennonite, Assemblies of God, and others). My Methodist cousins prayed me into the kingdom, and I taught for four years in an AME Zion seminary. (I therefore sometimes jest that I am a Methodobapticostal.) When I teach in Africa, I teach workers from a much wider range of denominational circles: Anglican, Church of Christ in Northern Nigeria (COCIN), ECWA, Salvation Army, Deeper Life, and so on. I therefore move in a variety of circles. Many (perhaps most) of my closest friends have not experienced the same spiritual gifts I have experienced, and I have good friends who teach at seminaries such as Dallas and Westminster, which hold that some spiritual gifts have ceased.

My own church background has varied. Early in my education I studied especially under Pentecostals; later I studied under Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and other professors (and was discipled by an even wider range of writings). I pastored a charismatic congregation. During seminary, I belonged to a nondenominational, noncharismatic congregation. When I relocated to begin my Ph.D., I joined a Pentecostal church for two years until going on staff with a Baptist church. When I relocated again to teach, I went on staff with a campus AME Zion church and later a Baptist church. At present, I belong to and minister in a black Baptist church and sometimes attend a charismatic Messianic Jewish congregation and travel to speak in a variety of circles. My background probably suggests to readers that I am eclectic—or hopelessly confused! But the biblical body of Christ is not circumscribed by denominational boundaries; our circles of fellowship should be as wide as Christ's body.

I thus write this book with the larger body of Christ in mind, from Pentecostals to moderates to cessationists (those who believe supernatural gifts have ceased)—though my cessationist friends may wish to skip a few of the later chapters! Most of the church probably falls in the range between Pen-

tecostal and cessationist; most Christians today seem to accept that experiences described in the Bible are valid today, even though not every Christian will have all of them. But this book will address enough practical issues that even cessationists will profit from at least some of it.

Many other charismatic or Pentecostal scholars also write for wide Christian audiences, scholars such as Michael Brown, Peter Davids, Gordon Fee, Michael Green, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Wayne Grudem, Richard Hays, Michael Holmes, and Ben Witherington, as well, I am told, as some widely read writers such as Martin Lloyd-Jones.

## A Different Book

Although it was an honor to have a book in the *3 Crucial Questions* series alongside authors such as Grant Osborne, Clint Arnold, and Tremper Longman, I am grateful to Baker for the opportunity to revisit the subject in a fresh way. While this book is based on the same material I used for *3 Crucial Questions about the Holy Spirit*, it represents a significant reorganization of that material. I have written five other books between that work's release and the present time, so hopefully I have more experience in knowing how to write a readable book. I have tried to package the material in more interesting ways. I have also had time to grow in my own relationship with the Lord and my relationships with brothers and sisters who hold a wide range of views on matters of spiritual gifts. In terms of its direct value for the church, this book may be the most important book I have written, with the possible exception of *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*.

I have included a few more personal stories to spice up the book; indeed, a couple stories I originally told in the third person to avoid talking about myself too much I am now retelling in the first person. The stories are to illustrate, not to argue a case; the case (when I am making one) depends on biblical arguments. I include the stories, however, for several reasons.

First, I want to underline the importance of applying biblical principles to daily life, and concrete examples are a good way to invite application. My ministry students and colleagues desire practical examples of how the principles we learn about in the Bible should influence our lives. I have found that my students respond to my personal illustrations because they demonstrate that I grapple with the task of applying the text to my own life; I don't just teach theory.

Further, when the stories are my own, verification becomes simpler. I am an eyewitness to the events and experiences I describe. If I am credible, my stories should be credible as well. Finally, by observing Jesus' teaching techniques and by noticing what contemporary books hold readers' attention, I have learned the value of stories for communicating points I endeavor to convey. Stories capture the attention of people in most cultures in a way that a more traditional textbook format does not.

## The Need

Christians differ on their views about some aspects of the Holy Spirit's work, but we can all agree on most of the central questions. The early Christians were dependent on God's Spirit from start to finish, and we must be too.

Each revival in history has been the result of a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit, usually accompanied by experiences or commitments that threatened the comfortable status quo of religious institutions of the day. Yet the strength of the flesh, or proud human intellect that seeks to control God's power by reducing it to terms we can explain, can pretend to be sufficient for God's work only when the kingdom of Satan appears to be dormant. Now is not such a time.

Those of us involved in various forms of frontline evangelism recognize that our world has little time to spare; we stand in desperate need of revival. Will we dare to submit our lives to the giver of the Spirit, regardless of what price the Spirit may call us to pay to reach our contemporaries for Christ? On the answer to that question hangs the fate of our generation.

# 1

## Recognizing the Spirit’s Voice

Recently converted in high school, I began sharing Christ with other students on the way home from school. Sometimes I was afraid to witness, but I would feel the Spirit prompting me to talk with the person behind me, or to walk to the next block and find someone there to share Christ with, or to follow up with someone I had led to Christ the preceding week. Often the leading came from the Holy Spirit, but sometimes my feelings were simply the product of indigestion, and I was not very skilled at discerning the difference.

I wanted to know God’s leading better, but to know God’s leading better I had to know something more important than his specific leading: I had to know his heart, what God was like. Too often we hold misconceptions about God’s character. We have our own mental idols and we conceive of God in an image that does not correspond with the true God of the Bible. Paul says that we know in part and prophesy in part (1 Cor. 13:9). We may not always hear God perfectly, either in prayer or in our study of Scripture, but if we know what he is like enough to love him the way he is, he has ways to work out our imperfections in hearing him. When we perceive and reflect his heart, especially the love that nailed Jesus to the cross, we can best say we “know God” (1 John 4:7–12).

This chapter lays the groundwork for knowing and recognizing the Spirit; the next chapter provides further comments on learning to hear the voice of the Spirit. Often we experience God's leading in evangelism (chapter 3). Chapter 4 also remains central to this issue: The fruit of the Spirit tells us about the Spirit's character, hence, enabling us to recognize him when he speaks to us.

## Why Hear God's Voice?

In Western Christianity today, people are often far more eager to attend to controversial issues such as Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts than discussions about the Spirit's character. By these priorities, however, we may miss the most important matter we could learn about the Spirit—learning God's heart. (Someday, when we know God fully, the gifts will not even be necessary, useful as they may be now [1 Cor. 13:8–12].)

Several years ago, when the pressures of trying to find time for teaching, writing, and speaking were overwhelming me, I walked into a worship service and suddenly felt God's Spirit prompt me to consider something in my heart. "My son," I felt him say, "you will not always have this ministry or that ministry. These gifts will pass away when you stand before me. But you will *always* be my son." I wept as I felt his comfort (and perhaps a tinge of gentle reproof). I had gotten so wrapped up in all the work I was doing for God—like Martha—that I had forgotten what mattered most: sitting at Jesus' feet like Mary. God graciously uses us to serve others, but first he graciously saves us from sin, from our selfish rebellion against him and his ways. Anything we do for God is simply the fruit of his new life within us. I felt that God was pleased with my work, but even more than my work he desired my fellowship with him, my continual acknowledgment of him in all my ways. I won't always be a teacher or a writer, but I will always be his child, and that means more to me than anything else.

The Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is not just a doctrine, an idea, or an experience to be tagged on to the other doctrines and experiences of our Christian life. He is the God who has invaded our lives with his transforming presence.

Many of us need guidance to recognize more accurately when and how the Spirit speaks. Some circles in the church tend to exclude the Spirit's work almost altogether, content to depend on human programs and abilities. As one preacher remarked, "Were the Spirit to be withdrawn suddenly

from the earth today, most of the church's work would continue unabated." In other circles, nearly everything that happens is attributed to the Holy Spirit, though much of what happens there has nothing to do with him.

In this chapter, therefore, we begin with one of the less controversial but, nevertheless, crucially practical questions: How can we recognize the Spirit? The answer to this question must affect our discussion of the gifts of the Spirit later in the book, our discussion of the Spirit's leading in evangelism, and why discussions about the meaning of baptism in the Holy Spirit even matter. After briefly commenting on the Spirit and his character as God, we will consider some ways to improve our sensitivity to the Spirit's voice.

## Some Introductory Principles

If we desire to hear God, the best place to start is by asking him to open our ears. God often grants such gifts (compare 1 Cor. 14:13) and encourages us to seek them (1 Cor. 12:31). His voice may come through such means as gentle nudges, calm assurances, specifically Spirit-guided dreams, a powerful urge, clear wisdom, or an unyielding sense of calling or direction.

If we ask to hear, however, we must also be willing to obey what we hear. James invites us to ask for wisdom (James 1:5) but insists that we ask in faith (1:6)—a faith that elsewhere in his letter must be confirmed as genuine by obedience (2:14–26). The more we obey the Spirit's leading, the more adept we become at hearing it. We must take it seriously and pay attention; God will not continue to give us leadings if we use them merely to gauge our spirituality or keep ourselves emotionally excited (compare John 14:23).<sup>1</sup>

Yet this raises the question, How do we discern what is God's leading, apart from trial and error? In situations in which it would do no harm to step out in faith, trial and error may work. In more critical matters, we may need to ask for God's confirmation or assurance (for example, Judg. 6:36–40; 1 Sam. 14:9–10). But knowing God's character in Scripture is the most important way to begin recognizing God's voice. Although our voices change over time, the character of God's voice has not changed in the past two thousand years.

## Who Is the Spirit?

Christians today agree on many details about the Spirit. We recognize that the Spirit is God, just as the Father and the Son are God. Although

the Father, Son, and Spirit each focus on some different aspects of our salvation, we can learn about the Spirit's ways by looking at Jesus the Son, because the Bible reveals God's character most clearly in Jesus.

Perhaps because their Jewish contemporaries were less inclined to debate the personhood of the Spirit than, say, Christ's deity, the New Testament writers usually assume, rather than defend, the distinct personhood of the Spirit. Nevertheless, they do teach that the Spirit is personal and divine (Matt. 28:19; John 14:16–17; 16:13–15; Acts 5:3–5; Rom. 8:26–27; 2 Cor. 13:14). But while Jewish people before Jesus did not think of the Spirit as a distinct person, as Jesus' followers did, they all took for granted that the Spirit was divine, belonging to God's being (see, for example, Isa. 40:13; 48:16; 63:10–11). That the Spirit was divine was never in question.

I should pause momentarily to explain why I call the Spirit "he" rather than "it." As early church fathers also recognized, the word for "spirit" is feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek, and masculine in Latin. Because the New Testament is written in Greek, it is therefore not surprising that pronouns for the Spirit are normally neuter in the Greek New Testament. (The exceptions are passages in John that refer to the Spirit as the Paraclete, or counselor, a masculine term in Greek.) Because God is Spirit, Christians do not believe that God has biological gender, but neither would we describe him as neuter. I thus use Christian tradition's masculine pronoun for the Spirit here to remind readers that he is a divine person, an individual, not an impersonal force.

## Knowing the Spirit Personally

Greek philosophy might seek to define what God is; the Bible, by contrast, shows God to us in how he related to people throughout history. The Old Testament does not clearly provide the arithmetical components for the Trinity (although it allows for it); God is "one," but so is a married couple (Gen. 2:24). The Old Testament does, however, reveal God's character, the same character we meet in the flesh in Jesus in the Gospels. This is also the same divine character we experience in our interactions with God through the Holy Spirit.

Some people suppose that learning theology means learning about God only in an abstract, rational sense, and feel this has little influence on their personal relationship with him. But when the Bible talks about knowing God, it speaks of a relationship characterized by intimacy and obedience,

not by merely intellectual knowledge. Knowledge about God is clearly essential for knowing him, because a relationship with someone demands that we get to know about that person and the people and things important to that person. But knowledge about God is inadequate unless we apply it in practical ways to our relationship with him. In fact, merely knowing about him without applying that knowledge leads to more severe judgment than if we did not know about him (Luke 12:47–48; Rom. 2:12–16; James 3:1).

One of the first steps we should take in knowing God's voice is knowing God's heart. If we know the God of the Bible—the God of the cross—we will recognize the true Spirit of God when he speaks to us. Of course, God sometimes reveals himself to us by his Spirit within us first before we understand Scripture fully. But the heart of God we come to know through prayer is the same heart of God we find in Scripture when we search it with hearts humbled before him.

Knowing someone's background and significant relationships and what matters to that person are important if we want to really know and care for someone. Each day as we study the Bible and watch God in his relationships with others throughout history—confronting the arrogant, comforting the broken, calling and using the humble—we should hear God speaking to us. We learn God's character and get to know him in Scripture and must recognize the same God in our experience. As Dallas Willard points out, we need to see the people in the Bible as being just as human as we are. We can *believe* the Bible and enter into its experience only if we study it “on the assumption that the experiences recorded there were basically of the same type as ours would be if we were there.”<sup>2</sup>

## Knowing God through the Spirit

Although we will look at many passages in the Bible, we will return often to the Gospel of John in this chapter and the next. John especially emphasizes the theme of knowing God personally through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit undoubtedly led John to emphasize this theme because it was so important to his readers, mainly Jewish Christians, in their difficult situation. Leaders of some synagogues had expelled them from the synagogues and in some cases may have handed them over to hostile Roman authorities because of their faith in Christ. These local Jewish leaders appealed to their superior knowledge of religious traditions to justify their actions, but John encouraged the Christians to appeal to a more essential kind of knowl-

edge: We know God himself, because the Spirit of his Son lives in us (compare 1 John 4:13).

As I will mention several times in this book, many Jewish people felt that the Spirit of prophecy had departed from Israel. From the time of Malachi on, prophecies were rare, and most people believed that Israel lacked prophets in the authoritative, Old Testament sense. But Jewish people recognized that someday God would pour out his Spirit on his people in a fuller way, as the biblical prophets had promised (Joel 2:28–29). By appealing to their continual experience with the Spirit, the Christians not only appealed to a supernatural empowerment their opponents did not even claim. They also declared that the time of promise had arrived in Jesus of Nazareth! The presence and manifestation of the Spirit constituted the clearest proof that Jesus was the promised deliverer.

John encourages his readers by telling them that their experience marks them as God's true servants, but he also calls them to a deeper relationship with God by presenting the ideal meaning of that relationship. By listening to John's words of encouragement to his first readers, we can deepen our own sensitivity to the Spirit.

## Jesus' Sheep Know His Voice

How do we recognize the Spirit when he speaks to us? Paul tells us plainly that we do not yet know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12); yet if we are to grow in our relationship with God, we need to begin somewhere. John's Gospel teaches that all who are born again have a relationship with Jesus. We have already begun to know God; we simply need to develop the relationship that God has already established with us.

The Bible describes many people who were intimate with God, while at the same time imperfect just as we are. God became so intimate with his friend Abraham that he asked, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (Gen. 18:17 niv), and Elisha seemed disturbed to discover that God had not revealed something to him (2 Kings 4:27). Yet this same Abraham acted in unbelief in having relations with Hagar (Gen. 16:1–3, reported immediately after God's confirmations of Genesis 15). Noah and Enoch walked with God (Gen. 5:22, 24; 6:9), but this same Noah got drunk (9:21). Likewise, Jesus came in the flesh to imperfect disciples (who could sleep through a prayer meeting or even deny

him) and made them examples of the transformation he can bring about in us through intimacy with him.

The Bible says that Jesus' sheep know him and know his voice (John 10:4–5, 14). They recognize him when he speaks because they are already acquainted with his character. The Gospel of John, which includes this saying of Jesus, illustrates this point with various examples. Nathanael, undoubtedly a student of Scripture (1:45–46), recognized the Lord he already served when the Lord confronted him (1:49). Similarly, Mary did not recognize the risen Jesus by his physical appearance (20:14–15), but when he called her by name—as the Good Shepherd promised to do with his sheep (10:3)—she immediately knew who he was (20:16). In the context of Jesus' promise that his sheep would know his voice, a broken man whose need Jesus touched embraced him readily, whereas the arrogant who rejected Jesus showed that they were not his sheep (9:35–10:10).

## God's Nature

Because the Father, Son, and Spirit are one in nature (though distinct in person and role), what we learn about the character of one member of the Trinity applies to all three. Just as we cannot have a relationship with the Father except through the Son (1 John 2:23), we cannot have a relationship with the Son except through the Spirit (John 16:14; Rom. 8:9), or vice versa (John 14:17). Thus, whatever we learn about our relationship with the Father or the Son also applies to our relationship with the Spirit, through whom we experience the presence of the Son and the Father.

How, then, can we learn about God's character so that we can recognize his voice? Countless Bible passages teach us about him—about a God so merciful and patient that human analogies portray him as almost foolishly indulgent (Matt. 18:24–27; Mark 12:6; Luke 15:12). At the same time, Scripture reveals that God's patience does have its limits with those who continue to take his mercy for granted (Exod. 4:24–26; 32:35; Ps. 78:17–31; Hosea 2:8–10; 11:1–7; Rom. 2:4–5; 9:22).

God disciplined his people for their continual disobedience to him, but when they repented, Judges tells us that God “could endure their pain no longer” (Judg. 10:16), so he raised up a deliverer for them. In Jeremiah he weeps that his people have forsaken him, the true source of water, in

exchange for broken containers (Jer. 2:13); in Hosea he laments that they oppose him, their help (Hosea 13:9).

God often chose to illustrate his character by comparing his relationship with his people to human relationships. Thus, through Hosea we learn of God's wounded heart, broken by the betrayal of his unfaithful people. Just as we are ready to condemn Hosea's unfaithful wife, Gomer, Hosea reminds us that Gomer did nothing to him that all of us have not done to the God who loves us (Hosea 1:2–2:23). Hosea speaks further of how God redeemed Israel from slavery, then adopted the people as his own children. God says he taught Israel how to walk, carried them in his arms, bent down and fed them like a loving father (Hosea 11:1–4). But they rejected his message, so he warned in grieving anger that he would send them back to captivity (11:5–7)!

In the midst of pronouncing judgment in this passage, however, God's voice breaks. "How can I punish you like this, my people?" he cries out. "How can I treat you like Admah and Zeboiim?" (11:8), referring to two cities God overturned and burned when he overthrew Sodom (Deut. 29:23). Rather, he says, "My own heart is overturned within me, and all my compassion burns" (Hosea 11:8). God is saying, "My people, if I could bear the judgment in your place, I would." And then he forgave his people (11:9–11). This is the God of the cross.

## God's Supreme Revelation of Himself

Some issues are more central in the Bible than others (e.g., Matt. 23:23–24, where the Pharisees neglected the "weightier matters" of Scripture). The same principle is true in how God reveals his character; all of his revelation is important, but some of his revelation is clearer to us than other parts.

John teaches us about God's character in a special way: He tells us to look at Jesus. When one of Jesus' disciples fails to recognize that Jesus perfectly reveals the Father's character, Jesus responds, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 NIV). Indeed, even John's prologue introduces this point: Jesus is God's "Word" made flesh.

All that God revealed of himself in the written Word, God revealed even more fully in his Word made flesh. Jewish people recognized that God had revealed himself in the Scriptures, and the synagogue leaders who had expelled John's readers from their assemblies apparently believed they knew

the Scriptures better than the Christians did (compare John 5:39; 9:28–29). But John claims that the same Word of God we confront in the Scriptures has stepped into human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John thus counters the claims of the Christians' enemies, who emphasized their own zeal for God's law: Those who claim to know God's law but reject Jesus reject the true message of the Word itself (5:45–47).

By alluding to the Old Testament story of Moses on Mount Sinai, John shows how Jesus revealed God's character. As the Word, Jesus had always existed alongside the Father (1:1–13), until finally God spoke his Word as flesh (1:14). Then Jesus became one of us, embracing our humanity and our mortality. In so doing, Jesus revealed the Father's glory, "full of grace and truth" (1:14), a fullness of grace and truth that we all receive when we receive Christ (1:16; compare 1:12–13).

### ***God Showed His Heart to Moses***

By telling us that Jesus' glory was "full of grace and truth," John tells us about God's heart. He alludes to Moses' climbing up Mount Sinai the second time to receive God's law. God told Moses that he was angry with his people and did not wish to dwell among them any longer, but he also said that Moses was his friend (Exod. 33:3, 17). "If I am your friend, then I ask only this," Moses requested. "Show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). God then explained that his full glory would be too much for Moses—no one can see God and live—but that he would reveal part of his glory to Moses (Exod. 33:19–23). The Lord then passed before Moses, showing him part of his glory (Exod. 34:5–7). Yet what God showed his servant was not just some cosmic spectacle of fireworks (although there were enough "fireworks" to make Moses' face glow); God revealed his character, his heart, to Moses. He made his "goodness" pass before him (Exod. 33:19).

As the Lord passed before Moses, he declared, "The LORD, the LORD, abounding in covenantal love and covenantal faithfulness. His anger against sin is so great that he punishes it for three or four generations—but his love is so great that it stretches to the thousandth generation—so much greater is his mercy than his wrath" (Exod. 34:6–7; see also Exod. 20:5–6; Deut. 7:9–10). In other words, God's glory was summarized as "full of covenant love and covenant faithfulness," which could be translated from Hebrew to Greek and Greek to English as, "full of grace and truth." "Grace" means God accepts us because that's the way he is, not because of how we are. The Hebrew word for "truth" in this context means God's integrity, his unfail-

ing faithfulness to his character and to the promises he made in his covenant. When God finished his revelation, Moses acted on his deeper understanding of God's character, pleading again for God to forgive Israel and dwell among them (Exod. 34:8–9). And God, being gracious and merciful, agreed (Exod. 34:10).

### ***God Showed Us His Heart in Jesus' Sufferings***

Some thirteen centuries later, God revealed his Word again, “full of grace and truth.” But this time, more than part of God’s glory was revealed. This time the Word became flesh, and the grace and truth revealed in him was complete, unlike the partial revelation in the law of Moses (John 1:17). Although no one had seen God at any time, the only begotten God, who is in the most intimate relationship with the Father, expounded his character and nature for all the world to see (1:18). What Moses saw in part, the eyewitnesses of Jesus, who could say “we beheld his glory” (1:14), saw in full. The same principle applies not only to those who walked with Jesus on earth but also to those who have subsequently come to know his glory, understanding his character in the gospel (2 Cor. 3:2–18).

But though we may expect some fireworks when Jesus comes back, there were no fireworks at his first coming. God’s Word came in a hidden way, recognized only by those who had developed some acquaintance with God’s character beforehand (for example, John 1:47–51). Jesus revealed his glory through various signs, often to only a handful of people (2:11). But the supreme revelation of his gracious and truth-filled glory was the ultimate expression of his full identification with our humanity: his death! God “glorified” Jesus when his enemies “lifted him up” on the cross (12:23–24, 32–33). We crowned our Lord Jesus with thorns and enthroned him “King of the Jews” on a cross, but in Jesus’ sacrifice, God accounted him Lord of creation and reserved for him the seat at God’s own right hand. In the ultimate act of our rebellion, when we shook our fist in God’s face and declared our hatred of our Creator, when we pounded the nails into his wrists, God’s emissary offered the ultimate demonstration of God’s love for us. “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his uniquely special Son, so whoever depends on him will not perish, but share in the life of the world to come” (John 3:16).

God revealed his glory throughout history, but the ultimate expression of his glory—the supreme revelation of his grace and truth—occurred on the cross. Do we want to know God’s heart? John declares that we must

look at the cross to find it. Paul informs us of this same reality: While we were yet sinners, enemies of God, he proved his love for us by sending Jesus to die for us (Rom. 5:6–8). Now “God has poured out his love toward us by the Spirit he has freely given us” (Rom. 5:5; see also Eph. 3:16–19)—an experience that in this context means the Spirit has come into our hearts and now points to the cross, assuring us over and over again, “See! I love you! I love you! I love you!”

To the abused child, to the abandoned spouse, to the unappreciated, workaholic pastor, to all the other broken people of our world, Jesus declares the heart of God. When we hear the voice of the one who sent his Son not to condemn the world but rather to save the world from its sin, we truly hear the voice of God’s Spirit. Sometimes we can get so caught up in doing God’s work that we forget to pause to listen to God’s reassurance of love for us, his Spirit reminding us that we are truly his children (Rom. 8:16; 1 John 3:24; 4:13; 5:6–8). But once we have experienced the soothing touch of God’s love in prayer, we are content only when walking in loving intimacy with him.

To recognize God’s voice, we should begin by knowing, as best as possible, God’s character as he has revealed it already. That is, before we listen for what God might say, we should heed what he has already said. Listening to the Spirit means listening to the God of the Bible, the God of the cross.

## The Spirit and Jesus’ Presence

An important step in getting to know God is to realize how available he is to us. In learning to hear God, it helps us to take on faith the fact that we are already in his presence. If we must make ourselves worthy of his presence first, we will never get there. As a young Christian, I felt I had to “pray through” for an hour before I could earn my way into God’s presence. Having grown more conscious of the need to use my time responsibly, I realize I wasted many hours that could have been spent instead in intimate communion with the God I was growing to love.

If we must “feel” God’s presence before we believe he is with us, we again reduce God to our ability to grasp him, making him an idol instead of acknowledging him as God. I find that I often do feel an overwhelming sense of God’s majesty and love and character now, but usually (in my better moments) I neither seek it nor use it to gauge my relationship with him.

Back when I waited for a feeling before believing God was present, I often felt merely frustrated. Feelings should follow faith; God himself, rather than feelings, should be the object of our seeking.

### ***Approaching God's Throne***

The writer of Hebrews summons us to approach God's throne of grace confidently (Heb. 4:16), and Paul reminds us that Christ has provided us perfect access to God, which we could not have achieved on our own (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18). The Gospel of John again provides a helpful approach to this step in learning to hear God's voice.

John informs us that we can approach God intimately at any time because we are already in his presence (John 14:16–23; 15:1–11). Our relationship with God comes by grace (Phil. 3:9–10), so we act on it by faith. It is true that disobedience can obstruct our relationship with God (John 14:23–24); certainly God does not waste his words on those living lives of deliberate disobedience. But Jesus' triumph on the cross freed us from both the consequences and the power of sin. We overcome temptation by appropriating God's gracious power, not by waiting until our lives are holy enough to earn his power (Ezek. 36:27). We learn to appreciate God's abiding presence with us in the same way.

### ***Many Dwellings***

Jesus promises his disciples his continuing presence after his departure. After Jesus uses his coming death for us as the new standard of love that believers should follow (John 13:31–38), he addresses the next inevitable issue: He must go away. But he assures his anxious disciples that though he is going away to the Father, he will return to them again (14:3, 18, 23).

We often read the first few lines of John 14 as a promise of Jesus' second coming, but although Jesus promises the second coming in other passages in John, that is probably not what the promise of John 14:2–3 means. In this passage, Jesus assures his disciples that he is going to the Father's house to prepare a place for them among the many dwellings there (14:2; kJV's "mansions" mistranslates, based on the Latin Vulgate). He promises that he will return to them and that they will be with him forever in his Father's house. It is not surprising if we are unsure what Jesus was talking about, for even Jesus' original disciples were confused (14:5)! The context, however, goes on to clarify Jesus' point.

First, Jesus explains what he means by his coming again. In this context, he means he will come to his disciples after the resurrection (14:16–20; 16:16, 20–22). At that time he will give them his Spirit, through whom they will experience his presence and resurrection life (14:16–17, 19; 20:22). Second, Jesus explains what he means by the “dwellings” in the Father’s house: our current dwelling in God’s presence. The noun I translate here as “dwellings” appears only one other time in the entire New Testament—later in this passage, where Jesus expands on the information he has already given his disciples about dwellings. Through the Spirit, Jesus and the Father will come and make their dwelling within each disciple (14:23), thus making them temples of the Lord (the Father’s house). The term *dwell*, or *abide*, which is the verb form of *dwelling*, appears several times in John 15, where Jesus talks about dwelling with us and we with him (15:4–7, 9–10).

Further, Jesus’ disciples did not understand what he said, so his explanation to them instructs us as well. When Jesus noted that they already knew where he was going and how he would get there, one confused disciple protested, “Lord, we do not even know *where* you are going; how can we know the way to get there?” Jesus replied that he was going where the Father was, and Jesus was the way the disciples would get there (14:6; see also 16:28). But *when* do the disciples get to the Father through Jesus?

John 14:6 is talking about salvation; we come to the Father through Jesus when we become believers in Jesus. This being the case, Jesus’ earlier words in 14:2–3 must also speak of a relationship beginning at conversion. When we come to the Father through Jesus, we become his dwelling by the Spirit he has given us. If John 14:6 refers to salvation (and it does), then the question it answers (how do we get where you are going?) cannot merely refer to the second coming of Jesus that we look for in the future.

### **God Lives in Us**

But even if one rejects my argument concerning John 14:2–3, the rest of the context (14:16–17, 23, 26) makes the point that God comes to live inside us. The same Jesus who washed his disciples’ feet, who died on the cross for our sins, is the same Jesus who is with you now as you read this book. You are in his presence at all times, and he is pleased when you trust his presence.

God’s continuous presence and life-giving empowerment is important in the New Testament, but it would have shocked some people in John’s day. Jewish people during this period spoke of God purifying his people

through his Spirit or empowering some to speak for him through his Spirit. But the first Christians who experienced the Spirit recognized that the Spirit living inside them meant something more; it meant that God himself lived inside them, that they were God's holy temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:22; 1 Peter 2:5; compare the "Father's house" in John 14:2 with John 2:16). Although not to the same degree, this experience already had biblical precedent before Jesus came (Gen. 41:38; Num. 27:18; 1 Peter 1:11; compare Dan. 4:8–9, 18; 5:11, 14; 1 Peter 4:14).

God not only wanted to save us from hell, he wanted to cleanse us from sin. And God not only wanted to deliver us from sin, but once he has purified our house, he wants to live in it with us. Although some Jewish people, such as the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, already saw their community as a new temple for God, early Christians went beyond this. Viewing not only the church but each individual believer as a temple (1 Cor. 6:19), they recognized that the Spirit dwelt continually in each believer's heart and provided each believer with continual, intimate communion with God (Eph. 3:17–19). It was expedient for us that Jesus go away so that he could return to be present with each of us in a deeper and more intimate way than before (John 16:7, 12–15). How marvelous is God's great love for us!

Once the Spirit has made us God's temple, the Spirit equips us for worship. More than any other activity, with the possible exception of evangelism, worship helps us focus on God's glory. By doing so, worship invites us to pay attention to the very one whose heart we wish to know. It allows us to translate what we know *about* God into a dynamic conversation *with* God.

## Spirit-Empowered Worship

I had been hearing wonderful news about worship services at a particular church. I knew, of course, that God's presence there would not differ from the presence of God I already knew; there is only one true God. Still, I also recognized that sometimes people in different places have a better picture of some aspect of God's infinite character, and sometimes their intensity or the intensity of God's gracious response to their worship can affect others who come (compare 1 Sam. 19:20–24 for a dramatic example). God is consistent with his nature and declared purposes in Scripture, but he is not limited to our finite understanding of him or the ways we think he should work.

When I was visiting that city, I worshiped in that particular church, but

during the first hour or so of worship, I experienced nothing out of the ordinary. A couple thousand young people enthusiastically danced and shouted praises to Jesus, but because of where I was seated, I could not hear the words, and hence, could not sing with them. I had come to worship, not to watch others worship, and was beginning to think sadly that, in my thirties, I was already becoming old and out of touch with youthful exuberance. I spent much of that time searching my heart before the Lord. I seemed to worship so differently from everyone else. Was there something wrong with me? But then as a moment of silence swept over the international congregation, in the midst of the silence I felt God's deep compassion and love. I began quietly singing in tongues, as did a few other people. Soon most of the worshipers were singing in tongues or spontaneously in their own languages.

It was then that I felt God's Spirit speak to my heart. He said that he had created each of us unique and different. Of course, I already knew that; our DNA signatures are far more diverse than snowflakes! But knowing something in the back of one's mind and applying it to one's circumstances are two different things. I felt God say that because he had created each of us unique, the worship of each of us was special to him. Even if ten thousand people were present, my own worship mattered to God. Only Craig Keener could offer God the worship that God had created Craig Keener to offer him. I might see myself as a stodgy scholar, but God saw me as his child who would worship him through all eternity! I fell to my knees weeping, completely overwhelmed by God's grace and mercy.

The Book of Acts reveals the character of Spirit-empowered *evangelism*. Paul's letters often focus on the importance of Spirit-empowered *behavior*. But the Bible also teaches us about Spirit-empowered *worship*. God wants us to bring our needs to him, to express our dependence on him. But it is in an even more intimate form of worship that we pause before God to focus not on what we need from him but on God's glory. Without worship we may remember what God is like on paper, but we will not experience it as fully as we can in relationship with him. God yearns for our worship both because we reveal our love for him in this way and because he knows we need to worship him. It is most fully in worship that our hearts can embrace who God is, adoring him and finding the ways of his heart.

### ***Biblical Examples of Worship***

How involved is the Spirit in worship? The Spirit inspired the Old Testament psalms so God's people could praise him fully. In fact, the Bible

often records an interplay between worship and prophetic inspiration (for example, Exod. 15:20–21; 1 Sam. 10:5; 2 Kings 3:15; Hab. 3:19). David himself appointed orderly but prophetically inspired worship leaders in the tabernacle (1 Chron. 25:1–7). Many of the psalms originated in this Spirit-inspired worship (2 Chron. 29:30) and were perpetuated there (Neh. 12:45–46). Worshipful celebration of God’s goodness was essential for all his people in the Old Testament (see 1 Chron. 6:31–32; 15:16, 28–29; 16:4–6; 23:27, 30; 2 Chron. 31:2; Neh. 12:24, 27, 36, 43), and the major revivals in Israel’s history included revivals of worship (2 Chron. 8:14; 20:20–22; 29:25; Ezra 3:10–11).

If God’s Spirit empowered his people in worship in the Old Testament, he certainly deserves worship today that is no less Spirit-led. Scripture, in fact, marks the believer as one who will worship God not merely in traditional temples (such as those in Samaria or Jerusalem) or with traditional ritual (such as circumcision) but “in the Spirit” (John 4:24; Phil. 3:3 in context).

Much of the worship in the Bible involves singing, and singing involves emotions (and our body) as well as intellect. We should know and celebrate God with our whole person. While too many Christians neglect to serve God with the mind, others cultivate only their minds and neglect the emotional aspects of worship. To know the Holy Spirit involves more than knowing facts about him. One need only to survey the psalms to realize that God touches the affective (emotional) dimension of our personality as well as the intellectual. The psalms emphasize joy (over one hundred times), shouting (over twenty times), and even dancing.<sup>3</sup> Of course, different cultures and personalities lead us to express emotion in different ways, and different kinds of circumstances may invite different kinds of responses from our hearts (James 5:13). But knowing the Holy Spirit means pursuing a personal and intimate relationship with him, and relationships involve intellect, emotions, and commitment.

### ***The Biblical Meaning of Worship***

Worship does not involve merely enjoying the rhythm of a song, experiencing an emotional feeling, or comprehending a liturgy, helpful as any of these may sometimes be for inviting our attention to God. Nor does it involve repeating glib phrases without recognizing the one who deserves the phrase. When the psalmist declares, “Hallelujah!” (in English, “Praise the Lord!”) this is a strong Hebrew imperative—that is, it is an urgent, strong command uttered by the worship leaders in the temple to the people

who had come to worship. It is not so much worship itself as a call to worship! But even in summoning ourselves or others to worship, we may begin to turn our hearts toward God.

Worship involves giving the appropriate honor to God; it is an ultimate act of faith, in which we acknowledge God's greatness directly to him. God often responded to such genuine worship and faith by acting on behalf of his people (for example, 2 Chron. 20:20–24). We need to glorify God and allow him to express his power among us today as well. As a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6), we must offer a more meaningful sacrifice than that of bulls and goats, offering both our lips and our hearts in magnifying God.

Our mission in this world involves bringing people from all cultures to exalt the name of Christ (Rev. 5:9–10), even though we do not always see the responses we work for. Yet whatever the visible results on this side of eternity, our very labors fulfill part of our mission by glorifying God. God created us to bring him honor with both our lips and our lives, yet God is so great that only his Spirit working within us can create genuine, sincere praise appropriate to his majesty.

Early Christians recognized that the Spirit needed to empower them to offer praise worthy of a God greater than all his creation. As we have noted, they spoke of worship in the Spirit (John 4:24; Phil. 3:3; see also Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). Some passages provide glimpses into the early Christians' Spirit-led worship, which apparently included singing, sometimes in tongues not even known to the worshipers (1 Cor. 14:13–15; compare Eph. 5:18–20). God is no less great today than he was in the Old Testament and in the early church, and no less deserving of Spirit-empowered praise. We should seek the Spirit's presence and empowerment for our worship of God today, for he dwells near the sincere and humble heart that desires his honor above all. We do not all need to express our worship in the same way, but God wants us to worship him in sincere desire for his honor. We should ask him and trust him to turn our hearts toward him.

## Worship as a Foretaste of the Future

No earthly temple can contain God's glory (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18); no sacrifices we finite creatures offer could prove worthy of the eternal, infinite Creator of the universe. But when Solomon and Israel determinedly offered God their very best—and it was a considerable offering

(1 Kings 8:5, 63)—God met them there. He filled his earthly house with glory, as he had previously done with the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35). By so doing, God confirmed his love for his worshipers. Today, as then, God remains eager to meet us and make up for our finiteness if we will just come to him with the greatest zeal we have to offer.

Lest we underestimate the intensity of God’s confirmation, we should note that the priests were not even able to minister in the temple because of God’s glory (1 Kings 8:10–11; compare Exod. 40:35; Ezek. 44:4; Hag. 2:7). Yet, though God’s glory filled his earthly house of worship in the Old Testament, someday, God promises a greater glory. He declares that his glory will fill the whole *earth*, just as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). We may need “bodies of glory” (1 Cor. 15:43; Phil. 3:21) to be able to withstand the fullness of God’s glory in that time (compare Rev. 22:4–5). Our present experiences in worship are merely a foretaste of eternal worship—but if we earnestly yearn for eternity with Christ, we should relish the foretaste we have now.

The Book of Revelation abounds with scenes of worship. The Lord gave John this revelation for churches in Asia Minor, churches very much like churches in various parts of the world today. Some of these churches were suffering persecution, while others were compromising with the very world system that was persecuting their fellow Christians elsewhere! Most of John’s scenes of earth are unpleasant (especially the slaughter of saints as the world worships the beast), but his scenes of heaven are glorious: the saints and all the creatures of heaven worshiping God.

In fact, heaven in Revelation looks like a temple: It includes a tabernacle, altar, incense censers, a sea (like Solomon’s temple), trumpets, and so forth (Rev. 4:6; 5:8; 6:9; 8:2–6; 11:19; 15:2, 5). Heaven is a place designed for worship! Indeed, the New Jerusalem in 21:16 is shaped like the Old Testament holy of holies, but whereas access to God’s presence was once severely limited, we will enjoy his presence in all its fullness forever! As the seven churches of Asia Minor heard this book read in their worship services, it summoned them to join all of heaven in worshiping the sovereign God. It is heaven’s perspective that enables us to triumph over our present sufferings and temptations. And we are never as close to our heavenly future in this life as when we worship God.

The Spirit enables us to participate in this future kingdom in the present. In the midst of severe hardships, the Spirit guarantees our future inheritance, the greater glory resulting from our present testings (Rom. 8:16–18). The Old Testament linked the Spirit’s coming with the age to come, so

early Christians, who knew the Old Testament well, understood that the Spirit connected them with the future. They recognized that those who have the Spirit taste the powers of the coming age in advance (Heb. 6:4–5). The Spirit makes us people of the future and enables us to view our identity in terms of our destiny in Christ, rather than by how the world's pressures define us (1 Cor. 2:12–16).

Thus, Paul speaks of the Spirit as the “firstfruits” (Rom. 8:23). The offering of firstfruits marked the actual beginning of a coming harvest (Lev. 23:10). We who long anxiously for our Lord’s return have the foretaste of the coming harvest. We do not simply await a theoretical hope for the distant future; we await something we know beyond any shadow of a doubt, because we have already begun to experience the life of the coming world.

Elsewhere Paul speaks of the Spirit as the “down payment” or “earnest” of our future inheritance (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13–14). Businesspeople in Paul’s day used this very term to speak of the first installment, the initial payment, on what was to come. God has advanced us part of our inheritance now, so we can experience the life of the Spirit, “eternal life,” in this present age (John 3:16, 36). Some promises await Jesus’ return, but God’s presence and power in our lives right now should enable us to live as heaven’s people on earth. Can you imagine how it would revolutionize the lives of believers and churches if we actually recognized and believed this reality? We should mean it when we pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”!

## Conclusion

If we desire to recognize the voice of the Spirit, we should begin by cultivating the means he has already given us. That is, we should get to know God’s character by means of what he has already said in the Bible. Such knowledge will sensitize us to the true voice of the Spirit when he speaks. We should also recognize by faith that God has already given us his presence; we can begin to relate to him even before we feel him. Finally, we should worship him, bringing what we know about God into the intimacy of our relationship with God.

These basic principles help prepare us to hear the voice of the Spirit more accurately. In the next chapter, we investigate some other principles and practices that can prove helpful in learning to hear God’s voice.