

# A Biblical Understanding of the Holy Spirit for Today

## INTRODUCTION

The United Methodist Church is in a season of profound change. Church witness has been changing within the United States within the winds of changes. Changes to denominational health and congregational strengths. There are challenges to Christian values held in traditional, practical, or with liberal theological viewpoints. There are changes in the social fabric and priorities in the world. For those who love God and submit to follow the example of Christ these are unsettling times for being witnesses to the rule and message of God. We need the very presence of God to guide the direction of what we call church. Some may say we need the Holy Spirit's guidance. What does that mean when we invoke the language of the Spirit today? [John T. Carroll. The Holy Spirit in the New Testament. p.32.]

As an exercise: Recall everything you were taught about the Holy Spirit? Take time to say what is your understanding of the Holy Spirit? How is the Holy Spirit represented in the Old Testament?

Here are some other questions?

Is the Spirit an experience of all persons, or only of some?

Is the Spirit more an individual experience or for the community?

Is the activity of the spirit seen as post conversion reality as equipping believers with spiritual gifts/

How can one identify the Holy Spirit or the Spirit's activities?

Who has the Spirit?

These are important questions about the character and presence of God. These questions we have and answers we carry indicate how humans experience the divine.

Some letters of Paul offer the experience of the Holy Spirit as the power for unity in diverse expressions of gifts, e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. Yet the story of Christianity has offered a vision of the Holy Spirit that shows disunity. Could we be missing more a nuanced understanding of the Spirit that is right before us?

This study will explore in wide brush strokes some ways in which the language of Spirit/spirit is used in the bible. When the Spirit is being talked about what is that focus?

## Words used to describe imagery and thought of the Spirit

In Hebrew and Greek languages that constitute the background to the Bible, the words translated as *spirit* are typically translated as *breath or wind*.

Hebrew uses RŪAH (row-ach) [Genesis 1:2 and 2:7]

Greek uses *pneuma* (new-mah) [Luke 1:47; Acts 7:59; 1 Cor 4:21; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 1 Thess 5:23].

Some times the human spirit in connection with the divine Spirit, which is the invisible presence of God.

Another note is that while “God is spirit” (described in the gospel of John 4:24) there are spirit beings, that are *unclean, evil, or demonic – unseen, malevolent beings* whose hold on humans must be broken.

In the New Testament Greco-Roman world these *unseen spirits were known as daimon or daimonion (demon)* (John Carroll. P. 32). Christian usage of the term *spirits* against forces/power influences opposed to human development became popular later on.

As we take a short look at the expressions of the Spirit and what may mean for Christian mission be mindful of the many studies published on this topic. Among the topics in these books or studies are

- a) *The role of generating prophetic proclamation*
- b) *Sacramental view – Spirit baptism as entry into a believing community at water baptism*
- c) *Pentecostal view – Spirit baptism as dramatic event of empowerment for witness and service.*
- d) *“God’s empowering presence”*
- e) *Viewed as material reality via relations and ethical*
- f) *Importance of gifts of the Spirit and role of Spirit in the salvation of the people of God.*
- g) *Power that fosters life in creation and subjective nature of the Spirit communally.*
- h) *Spirit as liberating presence for the oppressed*
- i) *Spirit activity in unique activities in the global south*
- j) *Connecting Spirit and Christ to God’s reign in “way of salvation.”*
- k) *Challenge the divide to divine and human spirit toward pursuit of a life with wisdom and virtue.*

Question: Do you know that the Spirit of God is leading you?