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Jesus, Continued

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Introduction

A few years ago a young man sat in my office feeling deeply frustrated with his faith. Although he knew a lot of truths about God, he sensed very little relationship with God—at least, not the dynamic relationship he wanted. God seemed distant.

It seemed that everything God had done, he had done in the past: he created the world, died on a cross, and then inspired a Bible to tell us about it. Then he gave us a mission and left through the clouds. God seemed like a busy teacher who had given an assignment and then stepped out of the room, leaving his students to get it done on their own.

So this guy was busy at work, trying faithfully to learn the lessons, follow the instructions, and complete the assignments. He had a “relationship with God” in the sense that he prayed about his problems and tried hard to trust that God was working somewhere, somehow, to help him. Yet he lacked any vibrant *interaction* with that God.

But as he read the Bible, he saw a God who interacted with his people, spoke to them, corrected them, and comforted them. In the days of Moses, God had taken up residence among his people, first in the pillar of cloud and fire that guided them through the wilderness and then in the glory that settled down permanently on the Tabernacle. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God spoke to his people

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through prophets, warning them, encouraging them, and instructing them. He was present.

Then there was Jesus—Jesus had not merely given his disciples a body of doctrine to learn, but also escorted them on a guided tour of its application. How awesome would that have been? And then came the book of Acts. You get the sense reading Acts that the church is being blown about by this mighty, rushing wind called the Holy Spirit. He shows up fifty-nine times in Acts, more than twice per chapter, and in nearly forty of those times he is speaking.

“Where was *that* God?” the man asked.

Must be for a different time and place, he assumed. *Maybe one day in heaven, I’ll relate to God like that*. But for now, he thought, “I better just get after the assignments. After all, the teacher is coming back.”

But a problem was developing. He told me he was feeling increasingly burned out by the weight of “the assignment.” There was always one more person who hadn’t heard, one more language group without a copy of the Bible, one more orphan in need of adoption. The weight of the assignment, which once had inspired him, now felt paralyzing. In a world of seemingly infinite need, how could he ever feel like he had done *enough*?

So his life oscillated between summers of feverish, radical activity and winters of paralyzed despair. He gradually began to tune out the heart-wrenching stories of global need. He knew that was wrong—but he simply didn’t know what else to do.

And then another problem began to develop. His sense of disconnect from God left a boredom and yearning in his heart that made the dark appetites of the flesh all too appealing. He knew these sinful indulgences were wrong . . . but at least they felt *real*.

He sat in my office a weary, burned-out man, wondering if there really was a God who could be *experienced*.

What would you say to such a guy? I confess that I didn’t know what to say to him. I mean, what unexpected, spine-tingling insight can you share . . . with *yourself*?

Yes, *I* am the guy in this story. For many years, even as a pastor with a PhD in theology, I sensed a relational disconnect with God. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand that God had reconciled me to himself in Christ, and I was “in him” and he “in me.” I understood all that and had embraced it.

But how to interact with that Infinite now living within? I was clueless.

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Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel like God is someone you know *about* more than someone you *know*—*like he’s more of a doctrine than a person*? Does God feel truly present in your life? Do you interact with him *personally*? Do you read the book of Acts and say, “Yeah, that’s similar to my experience,” or does that world seem like a completely different one than the one you live in?

In this book I want to tell you what I was missing, how God restored it to me, and how you can have it too. I want to show you how you can have a deep, satisfying relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

Better than Jesus beside You

The Holy Spirit tends to be the forgotten member of the Trinity. Most Christians know he’s there, but they are unclear about exactly what he does or how to interact with him—or if that’s even possible. Yet *something* was so important about the Holy Spirit that Jesus told his disciples it was to their advantage that he go away—if his departure meant the Spirit came. The Spirit’s presence inside them, he said, would be better than himself beside them. In fact, they needed the Spirit’s presence so much that Jesus told them not to so much as raise a finger toward the Great Commission until that Spirit had arrived.

Do you consider *your* connection to the Holy Spirit so strong and real that you regard his presence *in* you to be a better advantage than even Jesus himself *beside* you?

Be honest. Seriously.

I’ve written this book to help you experience that kind of relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Personal relationship, you see, has always been God’s plan.

From the very beginning, he has passionately expressed a profound desire for a close, growing relationship with his people. In the garden of Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of each evening. Many centuries later, he directed his people to construct a temple in the heart of their nation so he could *dwell* among them. Through the prophet Micah he told us that what he requires of us is not simply that we “*do* justly,” but also that we “*walk* humbly” with him (Mic. 6:8, emphasis mine). In the same way, Jesus told us, “*Follow me*,” not just,

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“Obey my teaching.” In other words, he didn’t want us merely to follow a plan or learn a doctrine, but to *follow* him. That requires real, personal *interaction*. Like any other relationship.

He has always been a God who is close and present—but only since Jesus returned to heaven has he taken up residence *inside of us*.

And that makes him closer than ever.

This is not to say that the Christian life is a series of spine-tingling experiences, inner voices, or burning bushes, and that there are not times when we must walk through dark, silent valleys by faith alone. As I’ll show you, walking by faith often means staying the course when you can’t see or feel anything, and to suffer through times of dryness when you have nothing to cling to but the promises of God. But that is not the same thing as saying that God is *absent* during those times. In the Holy Spirit, God is literally with us until the end of the age, and he has promised never to go away, forsake us, or leave us stranded (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5; John 14:18) In our darkest moment, he is as real as the breath in our lungs.

Do you interact, personally, with God? Think about this question very carefully:

Is Christianity more of a set of beliefs to which you adhere and a lifestyle to which you conform, or is it a dynamic relationship in which you walk with the Spirit and move in his power?

Jesus birthed the Christian movement by sending his Spirit like a mighty, rushing wind into his disciples. The place where they met shook with God’s power, and as a result they turned the world upside down. The first church was not primarily a study group, a self-discovery seminar, or a building program. It was a mighty movement of the Spirit that propelled Jesus’ followers into the whole world, preaching the gospel. Acts is the story of disciples following that Spirit, being filled by that Spirit—trying to keep up, but feeling like a kite in a hurricane.

Does that metaphor characterize your church? Does it characterize *you*?

Through the pages that follow, I want to help you experience that very real presence of God. *How* you experience him may surprise you; much of what I learned differed greatly from what I expected. But his presence in those things is real—I can assure you.

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And just to manage your expectations, you should know that I'm still not the guy who gets up every morning and sees God spell out his daily assignment in my Alpha-Bits. The Virgin Mary has never appeared to me in a grilled cheese sandwich. God doesn't put a strange restlessness in my spirit when I need to change the oil in my car—I have to check the little sticker on my windshield for that. But the presence of God is every bit as real to me, and as powerful, as the presence of God I see with his people in the past.

This is a book about the Holy Spirit, though perhaps not a typical one. Many books about the Holy Spirit seem to me to get stuck in secondary questions that, while important, never focus on the truly essential issue—how is God present with his people today? How do we perceive his movements? You see, we can disagree on some of the secondary questions (like whether the gift of tongues is in operation today, or even the distinction between baptism and fillings with the Spirit) and still agree on this one, central truth: *God wants to be vitally present in and through his people.*

So that's what this book is about. I have not written this book to tell you everything anybody ever learned about the Holy Spirit. I've written it to help you experience his presence and power in a personal way.

Our generation of Christians—mission-driven, but burned out, weary, and longing for joy—desperately needs to recover the dynamic presence of God. The good news is that God wants us to know it. He created us for that very purpose.

You see, maybe you've never realized it, but you yearn for it.

Maybe you picked up this book knowing very little about God but sensing a disconnect in your life that you suspected had something to do with needing to know God better. Maybe you picked this book up as a last, desperate attempt to find something worth living for in this world—something that goes beyond the drab and dulling pursuit of pleasure, something that takes you far beyond yourself. I hope that in this book you will discover the God who has reconciled himself to us in Christ and offered himself to us in the Holy Spirit. *He* is that purpose you have always been looking for.

So let's get started. An infinite amount of power and possibilities await us.

PART 1

THE
MISSING
SPIRIT

CHAPTER 1

A False Dilemma

“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”
—*John 16:7 ESV*

... Religion is what happens when the Spirit has left the building.
—*Bono*

I have a friend—I’ll call him Brennan—who served for several years as a leader in our church. A bright young college senior, Brennan was well-spoken, well-regarded, and a leader both on his college campus and in our church. But Brennan had a dark secret he had shared with no one. He had a same-sex attraction that led him into pornography and eventually to a string of hook-ups with random guys he met in Internet chat rooms.

By the time Brennan finally confessed his sin to his campus leader and me, he was a broken young man. He had already desperately tried everything he could think of to fix himself. He had memorized Scripture, made vows, and even gotten rid of his Internet connection. Yet his “problem” was getting worse. So together, we plotted out a course of recovery that involved professional counseling, more Scripture, and high accountability. Brennan progressed a little, and for brief seasons

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it looked as if he was gaining victory . . . only to fall back down into the same dark valleys. Eventually he checked himself into an intensive ministry that helps believers get control of the lusts of their flesh.

Brennan showed up at my house eight months later, noticeably different in his demeanor. I asked him what he had learned. “I didn’t *learn* anything new,” he said. “I learned to *lean* on the Holy Spirit. I always knew he was in there, but I didn’t know how to relate to him.” Brennan told me he had been surprised at how frequently the counselors at this ministry, all of whom had come through their own struggles and sexual addictions, referred to the Holy Spirit. They talked about him like he was *real*, like someone they met with daily. For them, the Spirit was not a theological concept, but a Person with whom they interacted and on whom they depended.

Brennan, who had grown up in Baptist and Reformed circles, knew all *about* the Holy Spirit. He knew the Holy Spirit came into his heart when he trusted Christ and that he was in there, helping out somehow in the sanctification process. But never, he said, had he been taught to seek the Holy Spirit like these believers did. They sought his presence as if their lives depended on him. Brennan began to understand that he needed more than “right beliefs” to subdue these lusts of his flesh. He needed power. Resurrection power. And a constant Companion who would always be there to help.

“And this discovery,” he said, “marked a turning point in the struggle with my sin.” He added, “These temptations are still with me, and I suppose always will be. But I have found in the Spirit of God a power more potent than the lusts of my flesh. Being filled with God the Holy Spirit has done more for me than all the seminars I sat through or coping techniques I mastered.”

Do you know the Holy Spirit in this way?

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, he told his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans; *I* will come to you” (John 14:18, emphasis mine). At the ascension Jesus did not become an absentee God. He, as God, simply came to his disciples as a different Person. The mystery of the Trinity is that only one God exists in three Persons. Each person is distinct from the other two, but in experiencing one, you experience the one God who *is* them all. (If your mind feels as if it just exploded, that’s okay. Christian theologians have been wrestling with that for centuries!)

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In the same way that he could tell his followers, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” so it would be true for him to say, “When you hear from the Spirit, you hear from me.” And, remarkably, he told his disciples that his presence *in* them would be even better than his presence *beside* them. Wow. Think about that.

This Spirit, he said, would bring to their minds all that he had said and taught. In other words, he would make the Word of God come alive in their hearts, *applying* that Word to their questions and doubts. The Spirit would lead them through the Word, and they would gain the ability to obey that Word by his power.

An Eternal Partnership

In Scripture, the word of the gospel and the power of the Spirit always go together. The Word is God’s revelation to us, profitable for rebuke, for correction, for training and instruction in righteousness, capable of making us complete, sufficient for any and all good works (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But only through the ministry of the Spirit, Jesus said, could we ever understand or obey that Word:

“When the Advocate comes . . . he will testify about me.” (John 15:26)

“He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.” (John 16:14)

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

“When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” (John 16:8)

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

The Spirit makes the living Word come alive *in us*. He brings it to our remembrance at the times we need it. He explains it to us. He gives us spiritual eyes to see God’s beauty in it. He empowers us to obey it. He shows us specific ways we are to apply it.

Paul believed the study of the Word without this illumination was useless. That’s why after expounding the gospel in great detail in the

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first three chapters of Ephesians, he stops explaining and starts praying that the Spirit would enable the Ephesian believers “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. . .that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18–19). Do you catch his play on words? He prays they would understand something that is *beyond all knowledge*. Isn’t that a contradiction?

Not at all. We arrive at certain kinds of “knowledge” not through the accumulation of more cognitive facts, but personal experience. There are two words for “knowledge” in Greek. *Oida* refers to facts, data, and cognitive pieces. *Ginosko* refers to an internalized knowledge gained through experience. In asking God to help believers *know* the love of Christ, he used *ginosko*. Paul wants us to have a knowledge of the love of God that we *experience* deep within our soul.

It’s like the “knowledge” of color that comes into blind eyes opened for the first time, or the “knowledge” of sweetness that comes with a tongue’s first taste of honey. It is the knowledge of a lover who cannot only tell you *about* her beloved, but knows the joy of his presence and the warmth of his embrace.

When we know God’s love this way, Paul says, we will be “filled with all the fullness of God” (see Eph. 3:18–21 ESV; see also Rom. 5:6–8). The Spirit of God takes the revelation of God in his Word and consumes our hearts with it, so that “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” and we overflow with it (Rom. 5:5 KJV), our hearts burning with its warmth.

Two Extremes

Christians, you say, tend to gravitate toward one of two extremes regarding the third person of the Trinity. Some pursue experience in the Spirit apart from the Word. They listen for voices in their hearts or seek “signs” from God in the heavens. They always seem to be talking about what God “said to them” through a stirring in their spirit or in a strange confluence of circumstances.

Others, however, seek to know and obey the Word without any interaction with, or real dependence on, the Spirit. These Christians might know who the Holy Spirit is and that he floats around in their hearts somewhere. They might even know that he produces “spiritual

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fruit” in their lives, but they relate to him in ways similar to how I relate to my pituitary gland: I know it’s in there somewhere, and that it’s necessary somehow for bodily growth and life, but I have no real “interaction” with it. I’ve never spoken to or heard from my pituitary gland. Its work remains invisible and undetected, even though I know it’s essential.

Once, as Paul taught on the Christian life to a group of new disciples at Ephesus, he mentioned the importance of the Holy Spirit. They immediately interrupted him: “Wait . . . *who?* We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!” (Acts 19:2, my paraphrase).

Many Christians might well still be in the same place, functionally speaking. Though they have *heard* of the Holy Spirit in a doctrinal sense, they have no real interaction with or dependence on him. Functionally, they live in ways “unaware” that there is a living, moving Holy Spirit. These Christians have all but excised the Holy Spirit from the Trinity; instead, they believe (functionally speaking) in “Father, Son, and Holy Bible.”

But the Spirit and the Word work inseparably. One without the other leads to a dysfunctional Christianity. Just as a toaster without a plug is useless, biblical knowledge apart from the Spirit is impotent.

The Floodlight Ministry of the Spirit

Let’s talk first about how walking with the Spirit depends on knowing the Word.

We cannot know the Spirit apart from the revealed Word. That Word, Jesus said, was all about him (John 5:39). The Spirit points to *Jesus’* words and works, not his own (John 16:14). In fact, there is a certain irony in how the Spirit operates; whenever he is really present, you are not thinking about him, you’re thinking about Jesus. The Spirit’s work is to direct you to notice something else.

If you’ve ever driven into Washington, DC, on Interstate 395 late at night, you’ve seen the magnificent splendor of the Washington Monument like a shining ivory needle illuminated against the night sky. Hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of lights shine directly on the stone pillar, memorializing the father of our country. Yet I doubt you have ever noticed, or maybe even thought about, those expensive, brilliant

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lights. That's because they are there to illuminate something else. If they are doing their job, you're not thinking about them; you're thinking about the Washington Monument.

The same is true of the Spirit of God. His purpose is to illuminate the gospel and bring glory to Jesus. J. I. Packer calls the work of the Spirit a "floodlight" ministry, quietly turning everyone's attention away from himself and to the Savior.¹ Theologian Dale Bruner calls him, in fact, the "shy member of the Trinity," because he doesn't like attention on himself!²

This means that when someone claims to be filled with the Spirit and yet spends most of his time talking about his own experiences with the Spirit, you have reason to doubt whether he really is filled with the Spirit. When the Holy Spirit speaks through someone, you tend to forget about the person speaking. You don't even really think about the Holy Spirit. You find yourself thinking about Jesus.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the fullness of the Spirit comes as we plumb the depths, heights, widths, and lengths of God's love as revealed in the gospel. The more he comes into us, the more we know his love; and the more of his love we know, the more of his fullness grows within us (Eph. 3:17–19). The Spirit moves us in the Word. The Spirit moves us to go deeper into that Word.

So do you want more of the Spirit? If so, then seek greater knowledge of God's love through the Word of his gospel. As you do, Paul promises, you'll experience the "fullness of God."

Where the gospel is not cherished, the Spirit will not be experienced. And, on the flip side, where the Spirit is not sought, there will be no deep, experiential knowledge of the gospel. The two always go hand in hand. Jesus said, "The words I have spoken to you—they are *full of the Spirit* and life" (John 6:63, emphasis mine). Spirit and Word, inseparably united.

Seeking experiences with the Spirit apart from the Word leads not only to confusion, but to disaster. Leviticus 10 records a chilling event involving Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron the High Priest. These two men offered "strange fire" before the Lord. God had prescribed a certain way to offer sacrifices, but Nadab and Abihu thought they had discovered an alternative way. Their new fire burned just like the old fire, and it seemed to accomplish the same purpose ... but God killed

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them for their presumption. God's not looking for a "new thing." God has laid out very clearly how his presence is to be sought and experienced. If we want to experience the fire of God's presence, then we must seek it in exactly the way he has appointed.

We Cannot Fulfill the Word Apart from the Spirit

Just as there is no real experience with the Spirit apart from the Word, so there can be no true obedience to the Word apart from the Spirit. "Apart from me," Jesus said, "you can do nothing" (John 15:5). *Nothing* is a big word, and I'm sure Jesus chose it intentionally. Without his divine presence living inside of us, we cannot truly accomplish even the first word of his commands. This means we cannot overcome sin without his presence. We cannot love others. We cannot win others to Christ. We cannot raise our children. We are like an appliance unplugged from the socket. We can do *nothing*.

Jesus told his disciples that if they truly understand that the Holy Spirit was so essential to their lives and would be such a help to them, they would be glad Jesus was returning to heaven, because only then would the Holy Spirit come:

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." (John 16:7 ESV)

Think for a moment about how absurd this idea must have sounded to those first disciples. It would be *to their advantage* for Jesus to go away? What would it have been like to walk around with the all-knowing, miracle-working, God of the universe—and then to have him tell you that you shouldn't feel sad over his departure because it was to your *advantage*?

Really?

Apparently so.

"For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." (John 16:7)

Jesus claimed that having the Holy Spirit *in* them would be better than having him *beside* them. Wow. Let that sink in for a moment. I mean it. Go back and read that sentence again.

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Now, be honest with yourself: Is *your* experience with the Holy Spirit like that? Do you feel as though your relationship with the Holy Spirit is *better than* if you had Jesus for a personal companion? Is the Spirit's presence inside you really preferable than having Jesus beside you?

I said, "Be honest."

Or, to raise the stakes a bit: Does your experience with the Holy Spirit validate Jesus' promise—that it is to our *advantage* that he go away, if it means we get the Holy Spirit? And if not, doesn't that mean you are missing something . . . and likely, something *important*?

Jesus believed that the Holy Spirit would be a better teacher than even he was. That may sound hard to believe, but the Spirit, Jesus explained, could apply the Word more powerfully than he did, because he could speak it into the deep recesses of our heart at just the right moments (John 14:25–26; 16:5–14; 1 John 2:27–28).

Only through the Holy Spirit can we live victoriously over sin. In Romans 8, Paul's great chapter on how to live the victorious life, he refers to the Spirit twenty-two times. (To put that in perspective, he mentions the Holy Spirit only ten other times throughout the other fifteen chapters of Romans!) The implication is clear: If we want victory over our sinful flesh, we must be filled with the Holy Spirit! Paul cannot conceive of victory over sin without him. Apart from him, we have no hope against our "wretched body of death." But with him, we are more than conquerors (Rom. 7:24; 8:37; cf. John 15:5).

And the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised, would be a better director of mission. He could supply the right words at just the right moment, whatever our circumstances (Luke 12:12). He would not be merely God beside us, coaching and inspiring us, but God inside of us, working in us and through us. And that was *better* even than sitting around a campfire each night with Jesus discussing your day.

In fact, the Spirit was so important that Jesus told the disciples not to lift a finger in pursuit of his mission until the Spirit came.

Your First Assignment: Do Nothing

I've always thought that Jesus gave a very odd first step to completing the Great Commission, basically telling them, "Do nothing until the

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Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Luke 24:49, my paraphrase). With millions of people waiting to hear the gospel, he instructed the only ones who knew anything about it to sit and wait until he had sent them something mysterious from above. That meant they were not to write books. They were not to go out to try to make converts. They were not to plan. They were to do *nothing*.

Why? Until he came, they couldn’t really do anything of value to the mission. Jesus had promised that *he* would build his church, and he could accomplish more in one moment through his Spirit than they could accomplish in 10,000 lifetimes on their own.

As you pursue God’s mission in your life, do you live with that sense of dependence on the Holy Spirit? Do you really believe that you can do *nothing* without him? As a parent, as a spouse, as a friend, as a witness?

The book of Acts tells the mind-blowing story of how a group of underqualified, mostly blue-collar workers filled with the Holy Spirit can turn the world upside down. We’re still reeling today from that first Christian century. New Testament scholars have pointed out that when later Christians gave a name to the book of Acts, they probably chose the wrong title. Rather than “The Acts of the Apostles,” many say it should instead be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” They say this because even a quick read of Acts reveals that the Spirit of God is the primary actor. *He* guides; *he* speaks, and *he* moves; the disciples are simply trying to keep up. *At their best*, they are conduits of this mighty, rushing wind. *At their worst*, they are obstructions. In fact, they seem to spend a lot of time in Acts arguing with the Spirit (see, for example, Acts 9:13–14; 10:14–16). He slowly drags them to victory. It becomes readily clear that the Spirit, not them, is the one accomplishing the mission Jesus gave in Acts 1:8.

Keep in mind that Acts is the only example God gave us of how Christians walk with Jesus in this present age. Of course, it is true that some unique, once-in-history things happen in Acts, and that means we need to approach certain stories with some caution (more on that later). Not all examples apply to us in exactly the same ways. I don’t walk down the beach trying to heal people by letting my shadow fall on them, and I’ve never struck anyone dead for lying (Acts 5:4–5, 15). Though I’ve been tempted to try a couple of times. But since Acts really is the only example God gave us of how to walk with him in this age,

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doesn't it make sense that we can look to the stories for instruction in how to interact with the Holy Spirit? Are you telling me we are to have nothing in common with the only biblical account of people experiencing the Holy Spirit?

As the apostle John told the first Christians:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, *so that you also may have fellowship with us*. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3, emphasis mine)

Fellowship means we have something in common. We should have the *same kind* of relationship to God that he and the other apostles had, a relationship of fellowship. We are to *commune with God*, not just obey him, just like John did with Jesus. That communing happens, he says, through the gospel, in the person of the Holy Spirit (1 John 1:6–9; 2:26–27; 4:13).

John Newton, the Puritan writer of the song *Amazing Grace*, wrote to a friend:

Many . . . who would not flatly contradict the apostle's testimony in 1 John 1:3 [i.e., that we should have fellowship with God in the Holy Spirit] attempt to evade its force by restraining it to the primitive times . . . but who can believe that the very nature and design of Christianity should alter in the course of time? And that communion with God, which was essential to it in the apostle's days, should now be unnecessary?³

We depend as much on the Holy Spirit as they did, and the Holy Spirit wants to fellowship with us as much as he did with those first believers. Their experience is in many ways a model for ours.

You see, when I read the book of Acts, I don't have any problem seeing how the apostles would have considered the Spirit's presence *in* them to be better than Jesus *beside* them! They turn out, after all, to be much more effective witnesses *after* Jesus leaves! Think about it: The same Peter who denied Christ three times in one night before the Spirit came boldly tells a crowd in Acts 2, "You crucified Christ by wicked hands!" Then three thousand get saved and baptized on the spot. And while the Holy Spirit worked through Peter in Jerusalem in Acts 15, he was simultaneously speaking through Paul in Philippi in Acts 16. He

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was two places at once! Jesus in his incarnation couldn't have done that! Now that the Holy Spirit had come, God's power was not localized in one person in one place. He was in every believer, scattered all over the world with his power.

Now, maybe you still feel skeptical. You cannot understand how it possibly could be better to have an invisible presence inside of you rather than a bodily Jesus beside you. Fair enough. We'll get to that. But at least concede this: What Jesus said has to mean *something*, right?

Be encouraged. That "something" is what God has waiting for you.

The Word and Spirit Dynamic

Throughout the remainder of this book, I want to show you how God's Word and God's Spirit operate together in one powerful dynamic. While pursuing one without the other leads to spiritual ruin, pursuing one *in* the other leads to power and life. We see this interdependent relationship of Word and Spirit over and over throughout Scripture. Let me show you.

In the beginning, God established the world by his Word, but the Spirit hovered over the expanse and brought order and beauty to the firmament God had spoken into being. That's a good example of how the two relate: the Word issues the command and establishes the foundations; the Spirit quickens and makes alive.

The Spirit takes God's timeless truths and makes them come alive in us. He helps us understand them, shows us how to implement them, and empowers us to accomplish them. He transforms task lists into a relationship.

The Word is eternal and unchanging. The Spirit's direction is temporary and varied.

The Word gives us promises. The Spirit compels us to risk in certain situations.

The Word outlines the mission. The Spirit inspires a vision.

The Word sets the standards. The Spirit guides the operations.

The Word shows us the end game. The Spirit points to a starting place.

The Word sets our expectations. The Spirit inspires our dream.

The Word describes the character of God. The Spirit pulls us into his emotions.

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The Word recounts God's acts of salvation. The Spirit sheds abroad his love in our hearts.

The Word gives us the revelation. The Spirit illumines the explanation.

The Word provides the content. The Spirit brings the conviction.

The Word helps us to know. The Spirit enables us to learn.

The Word commands us to hear. The Spirit empowers us to listen.

The Word commands us to obey. The Spirit beckons us to follow.

The Spirit makes God's Word *personal* to us.

Has Christianity become *personal* to you? Have the doctrines and declarations turned into relationship? Has the Great Commission been translated into some specific vision for your life? Do you know you are walking with, and following, Jesus in the Holy Spirit?

Has the Spirit of God generated in you holy ambitions in ministry that function something like the arrow of a compass, pointing you to God's "true north" for you? Do you know your *specific* role in his kingdom? You see, that's a major component of his leadership: He shows us what part of the mission belongs to us specifically and assigns to us our unique role in his kingdom.

For example, while the responsibility to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth is the responsibility of the *whole* church, Paul felt called specifically to preach the gospel where Christ was not known (Rom. 15:20–21). That was his personal "ambition," and he considered that particular assignment to be his life's "race" (Acts 20:24).

Has part of the Great Commission become a personal assignment for you? Which part of the mission has become your passion? Have good ideas in your life been replaced by *God* ideas?

In my experience, it's better to discover those one or two "God ideas" for your life than to be marginally involved in a thousand good ideas. Because that's when Christianity explodes.

Christianity Ignited

I have seen this kind of "explosion" happen in the church I pastor. It came when we realized there were specific aspects of the mission the Spirit of God was calling us to give ourselves more fully to. We looked

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back through our history and realized the Spirit had given us a few “personal ambitions.” Let me explain what I mean.

Back in 1962, over a decade before I was born, a man named Sam James planted our church. He worked with a core team for eight months, but on the Sunday the church officially launched, he left to become a missionary to Vietnam. That day he preached the only sermon he would ever deliver at that church. Using Isaiah 54:2–3, William Carey’s famous missionary text, he explained that just as God had commanded Israel to “expand her borders” and “lengthen the cords of her stakes,” so God had called this new church to expand her vision in order to bring the nations into God’s tent of blessing. He sensed that this was part of what God had in mind when he moved that core team to plant the church.

Sam James then left for Vietnam and didn’t return for forty years.

Sadly, the church wandered from the vision Dr. James had laid out. Like many churches, it turned its focus inward, tending the gardens of the faithful rather than storming the gates of hell.

I came to the church as pastor in 2002. During the interview process, I sensed God stirring in the hearts of the church leadership about international missions. I had never heard of Sam James and didn’t know anything about the church’s history. But it seemed clear by the questions the leaders asked me that God’s Spirit had placed a call on this church for the nations. Yet they weren’t really doing anything about it.

God had put a specific call on my life for international missions, so I began to preach about it. What surprised me was how quickly the vision took root in the church. After the first year, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention recognized us as the highest missions giving church, per capita, of the 42,000 churches in our denomination. I’d love to say that was due to some unusual preaching or leading ability on my part, but that would be false. (I have tried to lead many things, even in our church, that never came close to this level of success!) It seemed as though, in this area, an unseen hand propelled us forward.

College students “discovered” our church in 2003. College students, if you don’t know, travel in herds. So our attendance tripled in three weeks while our average weekly giving went up about \$13.48. We learned that while we were not destined to be a rich church, we would have a lot of workers to mobilize for the nations.

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Today, more than 190 of our members live overseas on one of our church-planting teams. In the last ten years, we have sent out close to 500 on domestic and international church-planting teams. Earlier this month, we commissioned another 100 college seniors who have given their first two years after graduation to serve on one of these teams, and 130 who will be leaving our church to plant churches in unreached cities around the United States.

I'm not being falsely humble when I tell you that I'm not quite sure exactly how all this has happened. I really can't figure it out; our success in this area has come too fast and too strong to explain it merely as the result of good leadership techniques.

Another reason, you see, explains it.

This is what God's Spirit had called this church to specifically. He put it in our DNA. He beckoned our church to follow him, and then waited. It took nearly forty years, but when we finally put up the sail, the mighty, rushing wind of the Spirit propelled us forward, like a dinghy in a hurricane.

A couple of years ago, I discovered Sam James was still alive (he is now in his eighties), and I brought him back to Durham for our church's fiftieth anniversary. For the first time, I heard his story. As he told it, a lot of our past ten years began to make sense. For the last decade that I've served as pastor, we've simply followed the Spirit's lead, according to a vision he put in Sam James's heart more than fifty years ago. It's not that we're doing this *for* God so much as we're doing it *with* him. He is working through us. And it sometimes feels like we're just along for the ride.

To be involved in international missions is, of course, the responsibility of *all* churches. The whole mission belongs to the whole church. And there is a sense in which we are each to be involved in every aspect of the mission. But the mission is bigger than any one person or any one church, so the Holy Spirit will highlight for each of us a few specific parts of the mission, calling us to engage with particular focus in those things. (A calling, you see, is usually just a specialization in an assignment given to all believers.) God gave difficult, unreached people groups, particularly Muslim people groups, as his "special assignment" to our church.

Recently, I've sensed the Spirit of God pressing this vision deeper

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into my heart. God's command in Psalm 2:8 feels like a personal invitation to me: "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance." This verse belongs to *all* Christians, of course, but the Spirit of God has beckoned our church, in a special way, to believe it and take it for ourselves. As Paul had a personal ambition to take Christ where he had not been named, reaching Muslims is our ambition. So we have asked God to let us plant a thousand churches by 2050, to send out over five thousand members on church-planting teams, and to let us be a part of seeing a major gospel awakening in at least three countries.

I don't know what the future holds for our church, of course; I cannot even guarantee I'll wake up tomorrow! But I know that I have heard the Spirit's voice beckoning in this, "*Follow me.*" And I feel more confident than ever. I am not merely obeying assignments laid out in the Scriptures; I am following the initiatives of the Spirit. His vision outreaches mine.

How about you? Has the mission of God translated into a specific vision for your life? Do you, like Paul, have a personal ministry ambition? Through his Spirit, God invites you to join the purposes for which he has created you specifically (Eph. 2:10). When you grasp this, the Great Commission becomes a focused burden for some person or group of people. Kingdom work becomes a personal calling. Good ideas get replaced with *God* ideas.

Led by the Spirit, Taught by the Word

I once heard a Christian leader say, "Better to spend one hour on your knees pursuing the Holy Spirit than ten hours studying the Bible." Tweetable, maybe, but very wrong. Better to spend one hour on your knees pursuing the Holy Spirit *through* the Bible. Scripture invites you into a relationship that involves both Word and Spirit, each being indispensable for the other.

Every word of Scripture is a revealed Word of God, but God desires more than for us to learn the doctrines and obey the precepts. He desires relationship.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a Reformed, British pastor of a previous generation, said, "I spend half my time telling Christians to study doctrine and the other half telling them doctrine is not enough."⁴

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Many Christians, you see, function as deists. They act as if God rules from the heavens and has spoken in his Word, but does not act on earth or move in their souls—at least in any way that they can sense those movements. Yet, if the Holy Spirit is a *person*, shouldn't we expect him to move dynamically, and sometimes perceptibly, on earth? If he lives in us, should we not expect some kind of movement?

Lloyd-Jones described his relationship with the Holy Spirit this way:

Those who have received the Holy Spirit are aware of a power dealing with them and working in them. A disturbance, something, someone interfering in our lives. We are going along, and suddenly we are arrested and pulled up, and we find ourselves different. That is the beginning; that is what always happens when the Holy Ghost begins to work in a human being. There is a disturbance, an interruption to the normal ordinary tenor of life. There is something different, an awareness of being dealt with—I cannot put it better; that is the essence of the Holy Spirit dealing with us.⁵

“But wait a minute,” you say. “What does that kind of communion feel like? How do I know when the Spirit is moving in me? Should I hear a voice? Get goose bumps? If I don't feel those things, am I not walking with God?”

Excellent questions. Let's try to find some answers.

CHAPTER 2

Mystery and Clarity

“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 3:8*

To profess to know a great deal about the Spirit of God is contrary to the nature of the Spirit of God. There is a hiddenness to the Spirit that cannot be uncovered. There is an immediacy of the Spirit that cannot be shoved into vision. There is an invisibility of the Spirit that cannot be forced into visibility. There is a reticence of the Spirit that cannot be converted into openness. For these reasons one feels helpless, inadequate, and unworthy to write . . . about the Spirit.
— *Bernard Ramm*

Several years ago, a college friend and I dove into unpacking what the Bible taught about various spiritual gifts. We came from different church backgrounds and had conflicting views about some of those gifts. Neither of us had ever really studied it personally, so we agreed to meet together for several weeks with nothing but our Bibles, open hearts, and dependence on the Spirit.

We had just started to unpack some of the key passages when my friend called to say that he would no longer continue our study, because the Spirit had assured him that his church's views on the question were

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correct and that he needed to study the Bible no further. I asked how he knew the Spirit had really said that, and he replied, “I just know. I am as sure about this as I have been about anything.”

And that was that.

Now, I have a hard time believing that the Spirit said any such thing. My reason is simple: We aren’t told to seek the Spirit *apart* from the Word; we are to seek him *in* the Word.

I’ve met people with all kinds of theories about how to “know” when the Spirit is speaking to them. Perhaps you’ve known people who equate the voice of the Spirit with some strange set of phenomena: “You won’t believe this! I was praying about whether to ask Sarah out, and driving on the interstate, I saw a billboard and the first letter on the billboard was the first letter of her last name and the last two digits of the phone number were the same as her age, and right at that moment, my favorite Christian song came on the radio . . . and so I just KNEW God was telling me to ask her out! Jehovah Jireh!!!! God is good, all the time!” (Or, girls, maybe a guy has used some line like that to ask you out. If so, on behalf of all guys everywhere, I apologize.) *#manupanddonthidebehindGod*

Perhaps you’ve gone through a set of circumstances so strange you had to wonder, “God, are you trying to tell me something through this?” To be honest, I have. But how do we *know* when he is communicating with us? Does he use a voice to speak in our hearts, and if so, what does that voice sound like? Is it a strange sense of peace in your heart, a sense of calm that would make even a Buddhist jealous, or an inexplicable, burning urge—a holy hunch?

Later in this book we’ll spend some time probing that question, but here I want to offer a biblical insight that will serve as something of a ground rule for our investigation: A certain mystery enshrouds the Spirit’s leadership.

And I’ll admit this much: as a type-A person who majored in mathematics and law in college—someone who likes to have everything in neat, tidy, spread sheets—this can feel more than a little frustrating to me. Generally, I don’t like mystery. I like clarity.

But Jesus said there is a certain mystery to walking with the Spirit:

“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 3:8)

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Think about his imagery. When a gust of wind hits, you don't know exactly where it came from, where it's headed, or when it will come again. Experiencing the movement of the Spirit is, according to Jesus, something like that. While the Word that God gave to us in Scripture is clear, eternal, and unchanging, the Spirit guides us in ways mysterious and varied.

(And, to be clear, when I say that mystery enshrouds the Spirit's leadership, I'm not talking about some kind of New Age mysticism or a Christian version of reading tea leaves. I'm simply pointing out that the Scriptures never give us a clear, detailed description of the experience of being led by the Spirit. For whatever reason, we just aren't given a great deal of specificity on that.)

If we fail to acknowledge this mystery, we either reduce God's working to a formula that will cause us to miss the Spirit's genuine movement in our lives, or (and perhaps worse) we become over-confident in what we think he is saying to us, elevating our interpretation of his movements to a level of authority we should only give to Scripture. (The only thing worse than not being open to the Spirit's leadership is elevating your subjective sense of it to a level that obscures the objective revelation he has provided in his Word!)

Where God has given clarity is in his Word. So throughout Scripture, God leads his people through both the mystery of the Spirit *and* the clarity of the Word.

The Mystery in Acts

This mysterious leadership of the Spirit pervades the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit speaks at least thirty-six times at various places throughout the book, but we discover no "standard" way in which he does so. Typically, Luke does not tell us how he spoke, just that he did.

Here are some examples:

- In Acts 16, the Spirit of God guides Paul through a dream in which a man Paul had never met invites him to a country he's never visited. Paul "concludes" this is the voice of God (Acts 16:8–10).
- A few verses earlier, the Spirit of Jesus forbade Paul and Silas from preaching the gospel in a certain place. But Luke doesn't describe *how* the Spirit forbade them (Acts 16:6–7). Acts 19:21

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says Paul “resolved in the Spirit” (ESV) to pass through Jerusalem and then proceed on to Rome. But what exactly does it mean for Paul to “resolve something” *in the Spirit*? That simply doesn’t tell us.¹

- In Acts 10, the Spirit tells Peter not to fear the Roman soldiers who have come to question him about the gospel, and to go wherever they take him (Acts 10:20). But *how* did the Spirit make this clear—was it a strange, peaceful confidence in his heart; did thoughts appear in his head; or did he hear syllables in his ears? The Bible doesn’t tell us.
- In Acts 15, church leaders validate their instructions to new believers with the words, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28–29). What does *this* mean, exactly? I’m not sure, but it doesn’t sound like the Spirit wrote something out on the walls or spoke to them through a vision. It just “seemed good to them and the Holy Spirit.” Did God give them such unusual insight or conviction that they just knew they had heard from God? Or did they conclude that this decision, which made sense to them after having prayed about it and searched the Scriptures, was also in line with the Spirit, since he had not guided them otherwise? Hmm. The text simply doesn’t say! Paul made a similar statement in Romans 9:1: “my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit.” What does your conscience confirming it “through the Holy Spirit” *feel* like? Paul doesn’t exactly tell us.
- In Acts 8:29, Luke records that the Spirit “told” Philip he should go stand near a stranger in a chariot. How exactly did he *say* that? Is this what I sometimes feel when I sense God “telling me” to share Christ with the person sitting next to me on the plane? Why would we assume that God has ceased to guide us like that? “Ethiopian eunuchs” exist all around us.
- In Acts 16:13–15, Paul seems to assume that God’s work in Lydia is an invitation for him to stay and continue to preach in Philippi, even though he started the chapter with clear, determined plans to go somewhere else.
- In Acts 21:10–14, a disciple named Agabus warns Paul through the Spirit that Jews would deliver him into the hands of the

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Roman rulers if he went to Jerusalem, leading the other disciples to urge Paul to avoid the city.² Paul does not heed the warning, however, saying, “I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13). He also seemed to be willing to go because he believed God had called him to go to Rome (19:21). Eventually, Paul ends up in police hands because of his Jerusalem visit just as Agabus had warned, but he also ends up in Rome, just as he had hoped. Both impulses turn out to be from the Spirit.

- In Acts 5, the Spirit gives Peter insight that Ananias and Sapphira have lied to God in their offering. How did he know his insight came from the Spirit? Did he hear a still, small voice whispering in his ear? Did he feel a strong “check” in his spirit? Again, the Bible simply doesn’t say.

Paul’s references to Spirit guidance in the epistles yield similar ambiguity. For example, when the apostle Paul lays out his future plans in 1 Corinthians 16, he says (my paraphrase):

Yeah . . . when I arrive in Corinth, I’ll see what everyone thinks about me going on to Jerusalem. I tried to get Apollos to come visit you, but he didn’t think it was a good idea to do it now. So for now, my plan is to come to you after I go through Macedonia. I’ll probably stay awhile, maybe even the winter. I want to take my time, if the Lord permits. I’m also going to spend some time in Ephesus because God seems to be doing some great things there.

Reflecting on this passage, Kevin DeYoung says,

You’re not getting the sense that Paul got angelic visits every other day and waited for his dreams, visions of his heart, and supernatural messages written out in the clouds to tell him what to do. . . . With few exceptions, Paul planned, strategized, and made his own decisions about the non-moral matters of his life. . . . Paul never sought out special words of knowledge concerning his future. . . . When he gets to a fork in the road, hesitating and pleading with God to know which way to go seems completely foreign to the apostle.³

Does that mean that the Spirit only *occasionally* led Paul and that the rest of the time he got on by himself? Certainly not! Paul thought of

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his whole ministry as led by the Spirit. Evidently, however, Paul's means for following the Spirit did not entail getting up each day and waiting on a message to spell itself out in the foam of his cappuccino. Paul based most of his decisions on wisdom he gleaned from the Scriptures, not on extra revelation supplied by the Spirit in "Magic 8-Ball" fashion. (You know where you peer into your heart and see what words float to the top, and you assume that's the Spirit.) Getting guidance by "revelation" was the unexpected exception, not the rule.

The disciples had clear, general commands given by Jesus in the Great Commission to obey. But as they did so, they had no choice but to look to the Spirit for power and guidance in pursuing those commands. Seriously—have you ever thought about the overwhelming nature of the Great Commission? At the beginning, they were only twelve strong, with no money, no power, and no people in strategic positions of influence. They were just a group of local, blue-collar workers with the entire world arrayed against them. Unless the Spirit guided them through this mission, they couldn't help but fail. They had no choice but to look to the Spirit for help.

Yet, even in this extreme dependence, they never reduced the Spirit's activity in their lives to some formula. They grounded themselves in the Word, obeyed Jesus' general commands, and looked to the Spirit to lead them—watching for him, but assuming he was leading even if they couldn't see or feel him.

The Mystery in the Old Testament

We see this mysterious interplay of Word and Spirit even in the Old Testament. The psalmist called God's Word a lamp to his feet and a light to his path (Psalm 119:105). The word, he said, established his foundation, made his paths straight and cleansed his way (Psalm 27:11; 119:9 KJV). Yet throughout the Old Testament, we see God guiding his people in various situations through special, extra-scriptural instructions. And here again, *how* he gave that guidance varied with the circumstances.

Sometimes, prophets delivered a special word of instruction. Sometimes, God spoke audibly.⁴ Sometimes, he directed "regular" (non-prophet) people through dreams and visions.⁵ At other times, he spoke through angels.⁶ Frequently, he guided leaders through the casting of

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“Urim and Thummim,” a type of divinely ordained dice.⁷ Once, he controlled the moisture content in a hand towel to bolster the wavering faith of a would-be general,⁸ and another time he rebuked a wayward prophet through the mouth of a donkey.⁹ Still another time, he chastised a whole nation by posting a message on a wall at a drunken king’s party.¹⁰

Several times he simply put godly ambitions in the heart of his people—like Esther wanting to appear before the king to save the Jews,¹¹ Jonathan wanting to besiege a garrison of Philistines,¹² or David feeling provoked to fight Goliath.¹³ Nehemiah deduced that God “put it on his heart” to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:12), even though we find no explicit command to that end. These were, John Piper says, invitations of the Spirit to “risk” an exploit for the kingdom.¹⁴

I’m not suggesting that God uses *all* these same methods to guide his people today. The book of Hebrews says that while God spoke in past times through “various means,” he speaks to us in these last days primarily by his Son and through the Word (Heb. 1:1–4; 2:3–4; John 14:26). The testimony of the apostles has replaced a lot of what people depended on prophets to provide in the Old Testament. God’s revelatory activities in the “Scripture” sense have ceased. Nothing in Paul’s epistles directs us to consult the Urim and Thummim, leave hand towels outside overnight, or wait on our pets to speak God’s will to us.

Nevertheless, in the book of Acts we see a church still actively being led in various ways by the Spirit of God. For example, the Holy Spirit said to the church in Acts 13, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). We aren’t told exactly *how* he said it, but *that* he said it is beyond question. As the early church devoted itself to the apostles’ teaching, its members were guided by the Holy Spirit in its application through dreams, visions, open and closed doors, prophetic words through others, yearnings, circumstances, and a number of other things. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit *was* leading, but we cannot reduce how he led to a formula in which we simply plug in variables and pull out the answer.

A Model, Not a Formula

Regarding the guidance of the Spirit, Scripture gives us a basic *pattern*, but not a detailed *prescription*; a general *model*, but not a precise

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formula. We know that the Spirit leads and guides and acts in line with the Scriptures that God has already inspired. In his written Word, the Spirit of God is *always* speaking and *never* silent. Yet he also sometimes “breaks in” to our experience in unexpected ways to give us specific guidance, strength, or insight at particular times. The precise nature of this “breaking in” we can never script, demand, predict, or even anticipate. It is like the wind. The most that we can say is that it will never contradict, violate, or diminish the Word he already has given to us. This is the joyful, mysterious journey of the Christian life.

Wise is the theologian who recognizes and embraces the mystery, not the one who tries to remove it. One such theologian said it this way:

To profess to know a great deal about the Spirit of God is contrary to the nature of the Spirit of God. There is a hiddenness to the Spirit that cannot be uncovered. There is an immediacy of the Spirit that cannot be shoved into vision. There is an invisibility of the Spirit that cannot be forced into visibility. There is a reticence of the Spirit that cannot be converted into openness.¹⁵

Reducing the Spirit’s activity to a formula will likely cause you to miss when he actually does move. The prophet Elijah, for example, felt discouraged when God didn’t move in the mighty ways he had for Moses and Job. Elijah expected God to speak in awesome ways, punctuating his thunderous voice on earth with earthquakes and bolts of fire. God took Elijah out to that same Mount Sinai where he had spoken in boisterous thunder to Moses, where he made a strong wind and an earthquake and a fire, all to pass before Elijah. “But the LORD *was not in* the wind . . . the earthquake, [or] . . . the fire.” Instead the Lord spoke through a small, low whisper that Elijah heard *after* those things.¹⁶

The meaning? God’s activity in our lives doesn’t always come in the ways we expect or in the same ways it happened with others. God did his work in Elijah’s time differently, but he was no less active than he was with Moses.

Scripture has given us parameters for how to expect the leadership of the Spirit, and we’ll get into a few of those later. But I think it’s really important as we begin to acknowledge the mystery of the whole enterprise before we even get started. Go outside, feel the wind blow

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against you, and say to yourself, “This in some way was to be like how I experience the Holy Spirit.”

Honestly, as I admitted at the beginning of this chapter, this drives the Type-A in me a little crazy. I want a chart, or at least some Geiger-counter type of device—as they had in the movie *Ghostbusters*—that lets me know with absolute certainty when God is present and speaking. But God didn’t give us that. Except in one thing.

The Clarity of the Scriptures

God did give us something in which he speaks to us with absolute clarity. We call it the Bible. The apostle Peter said these writings were the “completely reliable” word from God (2 Pet. 1:16-19). Peter even compares reading those Scriptures to his hearing the voice of God speak directly from heaven at Jesus’ baptism. And Peter says that the *written word* of Scripture is even “more sure” than that voice (v. 19 NASB)!

Every detail of Scripture is accurate and every promise of Scripture is true. God breathed out each word, Paul says, and the Holy Spirit guided the authors infallibly in their recording of each word. When it comes to the voice of God, the Scriptures are in a class all by themselves.¹⁷ God is always speaking clearly and reliably there. Want to hear the Spirit? Open your Bible.

A pastor friend of mine told me about hosting a rather well-known Christian leader whom he had invited to speak at a large, area-wide event. When my friend asked this guy what he planned to preach that evening, the man replied that he didn’t know, the Spirit of God had not told him yet. That night, the man walked on stage and told the crowd that after spending several hours alone with God, he had received no “word” for the evening. “I guess God just does not have a specific word for us tonight,” he said, and asked the music team to come back up to lead in worship.

My friend noticed the man had left his Bible, unopened, sitting on the seat beside him.

God *has* given us “a Word.” Sixty-six books full of them, in fact. They are always relevant, always speaking. They are perfect, complete, fully sufficient for every good work, that we may be complete, not lacking in anything (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

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The vibrant Christian life is a union of clarity in the Word and openness to the Spirit. If we seek the Spirit of God apart from the Word of God, our faith will end in shipwreck. More havoc has been wreaked in the church following the words, “The Spirit of God just said to me. . . .” than any other phrase. God’s Spirit *never* operates independently of his Word. Why would he? Think about it: Why would he call the Scriptures a “more sure word,” “fully sufficient for every good work,” and then proceed to ignore, abandon, or contradict it?

But, in the same way, if you seek to obey the Word apart from the power of the Spirit, not only will your spiritual life be lifeless and dull, you’ll also miss out on the help God wants to give you and the most exciting things he has planned for you. You’ll miss out on the dynamism of *relationship*.

So, seek the Spirit in the Word. His guidance functions something like steering a bicycle: It works only once you’re moving. The Spirit steers as you obey God’s commands. You start pedaling in obedience; he’ll start directing.

Or here’s another way to think about it: The Spirit of God draws upon our knowledge of the Word of God to counsel and encourage us like a gunner draws upon a stash of ammunition. If no ammunition waits in the chamber, the gunner simply has nothing to work with. The most powerful gun with no ammunition is impotent.

If you want to be led by the Spirit of God, then devote yourself to the Word of God.

The Word, the Spirit, and a Beautiful Girl

When I ponder how I met my wife, I can see the clear leading of the Spirit of God—but during that time I was simply obeying the Word of God. Veronica was both a counselor and a worship leader at a Christian camp at which I was the speaker, and I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I had this strange sense that I should go talk with her, even though forced, awkward conversations were not usually my style. I thought, “Is that strong impression from the Spirit of God? Or is it simply the forces of biology at work?”

I “obeyed” whatever it was. And . . . our first conversations did not go well. In fact, in the middle of one of my sentences, she actually got

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up and walked off, seeing a friend she was more interested in talking to (I kid you not!). A less confident (or more sensible) guy would have assumed she had no interest; I, of course, just assumed she was nervous.

After striking out all week, I was walking my stuff out to the car when I had another strong sense that I ought to go back and try to talk with her. Again, was this from God, or just a type-A refusal to admit defeat? I didn't know. I did find it curious that I felt *so* strongly motivated by this urge to talk with her, despite being rebuffed all week. I stood at my car for a moment in indecision, and then thought, "Well, what have I got to lose?" And so I walked back to try one more time.

What happened, you ask? Well, over a decade of marriage and four kids later, you can probably figure it out. I went back, sat down with her on a deck overlooking the lake, and we got into a theological discussion about Calvinism. (Okay, you probably couldn't have figured out that part). We then recognized that I was going to be in her hometown for a two-week missionary training session, and so we exchanged phone numbers and agreed to get together. Then I left to go serve in Southeast Asia for two years, and during those years we filled cyberspace with enough emails to replace the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. We were married on July 28, 2000.

I have no doubts now that she is God's gift to me, and that God was leading in every detail of that fateful week in 1997. But during that week, I was *not* absolutely certain that my determination to talk with her came from the Holy Spirit. (And, by the way, even if I had suspected such a thing, I never would have admitted it, because that's just a really creepy thing to say to a girl! Seriously, guys. Restraining orders begin with such claims!)

What I did know for certain, however, was that God wanted me to pursue for a wife only someone who shared my love of Jesus and the ministry (Prov. 18:22; 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14). I knew I could depend on him to "supply all my needs" (Ps. 127:1–3; Phil. 4:19).

As I obeyed the clarity of those words, God led me in the mysterious specifics. On this side of the decision, it's obvious the Spirit of God was leading me, and that has been a great source of confidence for my wife and me, particularly in those difficult times that go along with any marriage. I knew the Spirit of God guided me to her and will supply all that we need to make the marriage he has given us work.

THE MISSING SPIRIT

Most of the major decisions in my life had been made in much the same way as above—obedience to the Word and dependence on the Spirit of God, even as I assume that a lot of his work is in the background. Sometimes he leads very obviously (in biblical ways we’ll discuss in chapters to come), but at other times, as in this situation, in ways that leave me unsure in the moment. (If Veronica had shot me down that last time, I would have had no choice but to assume that it was simply not God’s will for me to pursue her and that the strong “urge” to talk with her was not his urging!)

So, again, let me be clear: Most of the decisions I have made in my life have not come out of strong, mysterious urgings, tingly feelings, or obscure revelations from the Spirit. I have simply obeyed the will of God as revealed in the Word of God and trusted that the Spirit of God was guiding me in the process, just as he promises.

Later we’ll look more in depth on how to perceive the dynamic leadership of the Spirit, but for now, let me ask you to consider two related questions:

Are you obeying what God has revealed in the Bible?

Are you seeking to know his will more through diligent study of his Word?

You won’t know the Spirit any more than you know the Word of God. So if you want to walk with the Spirit of God, get on your knees and open your Bible.