

**Asking the Elders:**  
***Questions and Answers on the Holy Spirit's Indwelling***

Q. Does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit indwells believers?

A. Yes. When a person becomes a Christian, he or she begins a new, personal and permanent relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Bible uses, among other terms, the term “indwelling” to describe this new relationship.

Q. Is the “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit in believers different than the “filling” or even the “baptism” of the Spirit?

A. Yes. While both ministries of indwelling and filling describe the Holy Spirit’s relationship to believers, each term actually describes distinct yet inseparable aspects of the relationship between believers and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s “indwelling” describes the permanent and abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in all believers. The Spirit’s ministry of “filling” describes the ministry of His *control* of believers, resulting in the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in the life of believers. There is yet a third term the Bible also uses which has been much misunderstood and that is the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” which occurs when believers are baptized (“immersed” or “placed into”) the body of Christ by Christ Himself, using the Spirit of God as His instrument to do so (see 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Q. Is it wrong to say that as a believer in Jesus Christ, I have the Holy Spirit living inside me?

A. No. But it’s important to understand that when we say this we are talking about spiritual realities. Believers must not attempt to press these spiritual realities into literal understandings. When the Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, it is speaking metaphorically in an effort to describe the believer’s intimate relationship with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is taught in Scripture to be omnipresent (see Psalm 139 for example), so technically, He dwells everywhere at all times. So, rather than thinking of the Holy Spirit dwelling somehow inside of your physical body, the biblical concept of the Spirit’s indwelling should focus our attention more on our intimate relationship with Him than on his geographical location!

Q. What about the biblical idea of the “corporate indwelling” of the Holy Spirit?

A. This is a biblical truth that has been overlooked by most Christians today, especially Christians in the Western world. Corporate indwelling refers to the concept that the Holy Spirit has a unique relationship not merely with individual believers but especially also with any gathering of a community of believers. He corporately indwells all believers who are for instance, gathered for a corporate worship service, or as believers corporately minister to one another, or else in any number of corporate opportunities for fellowship and interaction (whether these corporate times are made up of only a few believers or many).

Q. In what way does the Bible teach this concept of the “corporate indwelling?”

A. First, the Bible often uses plural pronouns when describing the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit toward believers in the body of Christ. This is not to imply that the Holy Spirit does not spiritually dwell within each individual believer, but it does strongly imply that the Spirit's corporate indwelling of Christ's body is how His ministry to believers is to be primarily understood.

Q. So are you saying that there are specific ministries of the Holy Spirit that uniquely occur in a corporate setting?

A. We have to be very careful here. We must only draw clear boundaries when Scripture teaches us to do so. We have already affirmed that all believers are indwelt by the Spirit, but we also find in Scripture (Matthew 18:15-20, especially verses 19-20, for instance), that Jesus—through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit—is *uniquely present* with the corporate body of believers during the process of Church Discipline. Again, this is not to suggest that the Spirit of God is not present with us when we are alone, but it is to acknowledge that He is abiding with His church in unique ways when we are gathered as the church.

Another example of this same truth is shown in Scripture when it comes to the celebration of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-34, especially Paul's reference to the "brethren" in verse 33, and "com[ing] together" in verse 34, implying that this ordinance is to be celebrated corporately). We believe that the Spirit is *uniquely present* with His gathered church in a way that is different when He is ministering to individual believers. Paul's warnings about eating and drinking judgment to oneself (vv. 27-30, 33-34), would make little sense unless understood in the context of the Spirit's *unique presence* with His people and their corporate celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Yet a third example is seen in 1 Corinthians 12 and the Spirit's ministry of spiritual gifts (v. 4), ministries (v. 5), and effects (v. 6) within the corporate body (notice that Paul states in verse 7 that all these gifts, ministries, and effects are given "for the common good"). While this teaching on spiritual gifts is not limited to what occurs when the body is corporately gathered, and that spiritual gifts, ministries, and effects could not be carried out from one individual believer to another, the entire context of this chapter must be understood as referring to the entire Godhead's *unique ministry within the corporate body*.

Q. Why does this distinction between the Holy Spirit's individual and corporate indwelling of believers really matter anyway?

A. First, it is very important in the sense that as we read about the ministry of the Spirit in the New Testament, we should seek to precisely understand what the Bible teaches. Our tendency in the Western world is to read most Bible passages by first attempting to apply them to ourselves individually. But much of what the New Testament teaches about the Holy Spirit's indwelling relates more to His corporate presence than to His individual and personal abiding with believers.

Q. How then can I tell in my Bible which statements about the Spirit's indwelling apply personally and which apply corporately?

A. The context of each passage is of immense help, as will an understanding of the use of various metaphors Scripture uses. Understanding the function of the biblical languages is also very helpful. In general however, the New Testament is more often describing the corporate ministry of the Spirit than His personal ministry to the individual. Having said that, we must emphasize the biblical truth that the ministry of the Holy Spirit has always opened the individual heart of a person to repent and believe, in both the Old and New Testaments. This is commonly called the doctrine of regeneration. And it is the Holy Spirit who also ministers grace which enables all believers to experience greater levels of spiritual growth. If the Holy Spirit was somehow to withdraw or remove Himself from any believer at any time, that believer would be left helpless to fight against his remaining sin!

Even though the Spirit's work of regeneration and sustaining grace was true of believers throughout the ages, we must also recognize the unique aspects of His work at Pentecost as described in Acts 2. What occurred there was utterly unique in the history of the world, both before and since. Some of those unique aspects are: (1) The Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh (see vv. 1-17), which means that His presence would be experienced by both Jews *and* Gentiles; (2) The Holy Spirit began His new ministry of guidance and leadership over the newly created Body of Christ, an organism that had not previously existed in the Old Testament (see vv. 37-47). It is this "corporate indwelling" of the Church—the Body of Christ—by the Holy Spirit that the New Testament writers primarily focused.

Q. So, if I'm a believer in Jesus but I'm not a part of a local church, am I missing some of the Holy Spirit?

A. First, we need to understand that the New Testament knows nothing of a believer who is not a part of a local church. Apart from some unique or mitigating circumstances (like someone who is aged and unable to attend a local church—but who is still considered a church member—or someone in the military, who is temporarily unable to attend his local church and where his tour of duty might prevent him from seeking corporate worship elsewhere), every believer must be a part of a local community of believers that assembles regularly to hear the Word of God preached, mutually share in the church's ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to hold one another accountable for both their individual and collective holiness.

This essentially means that there is a *significant* and *unique* ministry of the Holy Spirit which only occurs when the church functions as a gathered body and which simply cannot occur with lone believers (see Hebrews 10:23-25 for one important implication of this). If a professing believer in Jesus Christ is not a part of the local church, he or she will forfeit the corporate dimension of the Holy Spirit's ministry and presence, and therefore will experience irreparable harm to their own individual spiritual growth, to say nothing of their lack of spiritual support for others within the body. And for a person's actual refusal to align themselves with a local church where they could otherwise benefit from the Spirit's corporate presence, may well be sufficient warrant to question the validity of their relationship to Him (see 1 John 2:19-20).