

How to Know If It's Really the Holy Spirit Speaking

The Spirit of Christ

Somewhere along the way, most of us have heard someone say it. Maybe we have said it ourselves. I felt the Spirit leading me. God told me to do this. And then the thing they describe does not line up with anything the Bible actually says. Maybe it contradicts it outright. So what do you do with that? Do you assume they are lying? Do you assume the Spirit really did say something new, something the text never covered? Or is there a third option, one that actually takes both the Spirit and the Scriptures seriously at the same time?

That third option is where we are headed today, and it starts by asking a question most of us have never really sat down with. What is the actual relationship between the Spirit and the book He inspired?

Here is where we have to start. The Bible did not fall out of the sky finished. It was written by people, real people with names and personalities and particular circumstances, and Scripture itself tells us plainly whose voice was ultimately behind theirs. Paul writes to Timothy,

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

That is 2 Timothy chapter 3, verses 16 and 17. Breathed out by God. The word behind that phrase is tied directly to the word for spirit, for breath. This is not Paul saying the Bible is generally

inspiring, the way we might say a sunset or a piece of music is inspiring. He is saying its very origin is the breath of God himself.

Peter says something just as direct.

“No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

2 PETER 1:21

That is 2 Peter chapter 1, verse 21. Carried along. The prophets were not left to their own imaginations, guessing at what God might want said. The Spirit Himself was moving them, so that what came out in human words and human personalities was, at the same time, God's own address to His people.

So here is the first thing to get settled in your mind. When you open your Bible, you are not opening a substitute for the Spirit's voice, something to make do with until He shows up personally. You are opening the Spirit's voice. He is the one who breathed this. If you want to know what the Spirit thinks, what the Spirit wants, what the Spirit is like, the first and most reliable place to find that out is the book He wrote.

That raises an obvious question, though. If the Spirit already gave us His Word in full, complete, breathed out, then why do we still talk about the Spirit's ongoing work with Scripture at all? Why do we pray before we read the Bible and ask Him to help us understand it? If it is finished, what is left for Him to do?

This is where we need a second move, because the Spirit's work with Scripture did not stop the moment the last page was written. His work shifted. Paul gives us a picture of this in 2 Corinthians chapter 3. He is talking about people reading the Old Testament, the law of Moses, and not getting it, not really seeing what it was pointing to. He says,

“But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

2 CORINTHIANS 3:14-18

Notice what Paul is not saying. He is not saying the text itself was unclear or incomplete. The words on the page were the same words whether a veiled reader or an unveiled reader picked them up. What was missing was not information. What was missing was sight. The Spirit's ongoing work is not to add new content to what has already been written. It is to remove the veil, to give you eyes that can actually see what has been there all along.

Paul says something similar earlier in his letters to Corinth, and it is worth hearing in full because it names exactly what we are after in this session.

“These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of that man, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And that is what we impart in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

1 CORINTHIANS 2:10-14

That is 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verses 10 through 14. And then he closes the thought with a line that should stop you for a second.

“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.”

1 CORINTHIANS 2:16

We have the mind of Christ. Not because we are naturally perceptive people. Not because we studied harder than everyone else. Because the same Spirit who breathed out the words is the one who opens our eyes to receive them. Illumination is the word theologians use for this, and it is a good word, because that is exactly the image Paul is working with. A light coming on in a room that was always furnished, always full, but dark until now.

So put those two pieces together. The Spirit wrote this book. And the Spirit is the one who makes you able to actually see what is written in it. Those are not two separate, competing sources of authority in your life, the Spirit over here and the Bible over there, occasionally agreeing and occasionally not. They are one voice, doing two connected things. Inspiration gave us the words. Illumination opens our eyes to receive them.

Which brings us back to where we started. Someone tells you the Spirit led them somewhere the Bible does not go, or somewhere it actively contradicts. How do you weigh that? Jesus gives us the test Himself, and it is worth hearing His exact words. Speaking of the Spirit, He says,

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

JOHN 16:13-14

That is John chapter 16, verses 13 and 14.

He will not speak on His own authority. Sit with that for a second, because it tells you something crucial about how the Spirit operates. He is not in the business of freelancing, of handing out private information disconnected from Christ, disconnected from what has already been revealed. His entire ministry is to take what belongs to Jesus and make it known. He glorifies Christ. He points to Christ. He never competes with Christ or contradicts what Christ, and the Scriptures that testify to Him, have already made plain.

So here is the test, plainly stated. It is not, did this feel spiritual? It is not, was I moved, was I stirred, did I sense something? Feelings are not nothing, and the Spirit certainly can and does work through them. But feelings are not self-authenticating. The question is whether what you sensed actually matches what He has already said. Does it point toward Christ or away from Him? Does it agree with His Word or does it require you to set His Word aside to accept it? If a prompting, however strong, however sincere, pulls you toward something Scripture forbids, or asks you to treat as settled something Scripture leaves open, that is your signal. Whatever that voice is, it is not operating the way the Spirit of truth told us He operates.

This matters for how you live day to day, and it matters for how the King of this world actually reigns in it. Christ is not an absent monarch ruling from a distance through vague impressions that anyone can interpret however they like. He has given His people His own recorded Word, breathed out by His own Spirit, and that same Spirit now lives in you to help you see it clearly and walk in it faithfully. That is what His kingdom actually looks like close up. Not a king whose will is a mystery you have to guess at, but a king who has spoken plainly and given you His own Spirit to help you hear Him.

So here is where I want to leave you, because this is not just a topic to file away. The next time you sense a prompting, the next time you find yourself thinking, I think God is telling me to do this, do not just ask yourself how strong the feeling was. Ask yourself whether it lines up with what He has already told you in His Word. Open the book before you act on the impression. Test the prompting against the text, not the other way around. If it truly is the Spirit, it will never ask you to move past what He has already breathed out, and it will always be leading you closer to Christ, never away from Him.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why might a sincere, strong spiritual impression still need to be tested against Scripture, and what makes that feel uncomfortable for some people?
- 2 If the Spirit's work with the Bible is to open our eyes rather than add new content, how does that change the way you approach reading it?
- 3 John 16:13-14 says the Spirit will glorify Christ and not speak on His own authority. What are some practical ways a prompting can be checked against that?

Self-Reflection Questions

- 1 Can you think of a time you were certain God was leading you somewhere? Did you hold it up against what Scripture says before acting?
- 2 When you open your Bible, do you expect to meet the Spirit's own voice there? What would change if you did?
- 3 Is there a decision you're facing now where a feeling or impression is carrying more weight than the written Word?

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