

The Holy Spirit in the Bible

Discussion Tips for Facilitators



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.littlerockscripture.org

LESSON ONE (The Holy Spirit at the Beginning)

1. a) The doctrine asserting that the Holy Spirit possesses the same divine nature as Jesus was not established until the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE. Prior to that, the Spirit was understood as an *attribute* of God, rather than *as* God.
b) Scripture gives us a variety of ways in which God's Spirit is shown to act and carry out God's will in the world. Responses will vary as to how this insight impacts participants' spiritual lives and understanding of the Spirit.
2. The word *ruach* can also be translated as "wind" or "breath." The Bible is not always clear on when this word is being used to refer to natural phenomena or in the divine sense. Therefore, we must consider the context of the passage itself to discern when *ruach* refers to the movement of God's Spirit. Participants can share ways that they find "wind" and "breath" to be helpful and appropriate images for God's Spirit.
3. Genesis 1:2 describes "a mighty wind sweeping over the waters" of the abyss. The imagery implies that God is breathing life into creation, building form where before none existed. Responses will vary about any new insights participants may have gained from this passage.
4. People in the time when Genesis was written believed the waters above and below the earth were destructive and hostile to human life. In creating a dome to separate the waters, God shows mastery over chaos. Throughout time, God has maintained this control over chaos both in our own lives and in the events of the world around us. Chaos cannot be eliminated, but with God's power it will not permanently destroy us.
5. Responses will vary regarding the positive effect of God's creation in the lives of participants.
6. a) In the story of the flood, creation is undone and the world returns to the watery chaos that existed before God created. God desired a relationship with the world, but creation refused to comply; divine love has been rejected by human beings. Yet, as in Genesis 1:1-2, God "made a wind sweep over the earth" (Gen 8:1), pushing back the flood waters and restoring creation.
b) God recognizes that even if human beings continue to sin, God will continue to love and rejoice in creation. It is a revelation of God's unilateral and unconditional love. We, in turn, are to love God, ourselves, and others, respecting all life and all of creation.
7. Responses will vary as participants discuss the activity of the Spirit in their lives.
8. The use of *ruach* in Job 32:8 and 33:4 describes breath as relational; God is the animating force who gives human beings both life and understanding. This breath is within every person, implying an intimacy that we share with all human beings. Whether we like or dislike someone has little bearing on the fact that we are united through God's Spirit.
9. a) In Genesis 1, man and woman are created by divine decree, placed on earth through the power of God. Genesis 2 focuses on the human person; God fashions the first human from the dust of the ground and breathes life into him. This second creation story is more concerned with exploring how humanity is to live as part of creation.

- b) Naming is a sign of control and power. In giving Adam the right to name the living creatures, God reinforces the relational aspect of divine nature with humanity over the whole of creation. When we name something, in a sense it becomes our own. With God, we are responsible for its well-being and ability to flourish.
10. Responses will vary as participants discuss the knowledge and insights they have gained from reflecting on the creation story of Genesis 2.

LESSON TWO (The Holy Spirit and Individual Israelites)

1. Just as we can be moved by a magnificent sunrise, the beauty of an opening flower bud, the wonder of a child, and other gifts of the natural world, so can the created works of human beings move our spirits in awe of God and God's creation. Responses will vary according to the experiences of participants.
2. The judges of Israel ruled in the time before there was a king, and their role was to save Israel from its enemies. The typical pattern was: the people of Israel sinned; their enemies dominated over them; God provided a judge to defeat their enemies and restore peace. This pattern would continue until the judge died. Responses will vary as to how this pattern may be seen in participants' lives in terms of sin and restoration, or in terms of struggles and victories.
3. One might categorize Gideon as being insecure about his talents and abilities. Yet God knows what Gideon is capable of. The same is true for many of us, who waver in confidence about what we can do in service of God.
4. The Nazirite vow required one to refrain from wine, avoid contact with corpses, and never cut one's hair. Samson neglected this vow on many occasions. As a result, God's Spirit in him is wasted and Samson becomes powerless. But as Samson dies, bringing down the temple upon himself and all who are in it, God's Spirit acts through Samson for a larger purpose.
5. Responses will vary according to participants' experiences. Of course, no *life* is ever "wasted"—every life has value and purpose simply by existing. Every life is cherished and loved by God. But gifts or potential can be wasted for any number of reasons. This is a sensitive topic and one that should be discussed accordingly.
6. Leaders in every society are expected to have certain characteristics—physical attractiveness, education, wealth, social standing. Yet God looks deep into the human heart and sees beyond physical traits, recognizing what might be missed by our human understanding. Our challenge is to see beyond the expectations of society in recognizing those with the qualities of leadership.
7. From the start, Balaam is honest in relating that his abilities are dependent upon God. He agrees to Balak's request that he curse Israel, but in the course of attempting to do so, God's Spirit directs Balaam otherwise, and he blesses Israel instead—three times! Participants' experiences of being directed by God's Spirit will vary.
8. Jacob clearly favors Joseph, his eleventh son but the firstborn with his beloved Rachel. Because human beings are imperfect creatures, hatred, jealousy, and rivalry begin to tear apart this family, and Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. Responses will vary as to how participants respond to this story of family woundedness, even in such a prominent family of Israel.
9. Responses will vary as participants discuss the mysterious ways God sometimes works in our lives.

LESSON THREE (The Holy Spirit and the People of Israel)

1. Before the exile, the Spirit was understood as given to individuals. During the exile, Israel began to experience and understand the Spirit as the animating force of the entire people. Responses will vary as to participants' experience of exile and return in their own lives.
2. Bringing dry bones back to life can only be accomplished through the Spirit of God. In both Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 37, God first forms human beings (out of the earth or out of dry bones), then animates them with the breath of life, God's *ruach*. This process illustrates how God's life-giving breath is essential to human beings.
3. Responses will vary according to the experience of each participant.
4. Responses will vary. We live in a world filled with turmoil and uncertainty. People suffer from feelings of hopelessness and abandonment, affected by a society increasingly turning to violence, partisanship, and confusion about what is right and what is wrong. Yet we hold on to the belief that God will help us to resolve these crises in our lives and in our world.
5. Answers will vary about participants' need for God to help them create a "new heart."
6. We have seen God's strong desire to be in relationship with God's people, despite the human tendency to sin. Ezekiel states that God's reputation is at stake because if God abandons the people, others may conclude that God does not have the power to protect them. It is counterintuitive to our understanding of God acting solely on our behalf.
7. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells the apostles, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." The good news is meant for all people, and the prophet Joel recognizes this in his call for an inclusive society. Such a community may not be attainable in our lifetime, but it nevertheless is a goal we must work toward.
8. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. These are based on a passage from Isaiah 11:1-5. Participants' answers will depend on what they feel will best support their work for justice in the world.
9. More than ever, our world needs people who are willing to commit to a life of nonviolence. We have the means and the ability to destroy ourselves as a human race; to live in love and eschew all violence towards ourselves, our neighbor, and all of creation is the only way we can survive and flourish as a people.

LESSON FOUR (The Holy Spirit and Jesus)

1. In the story of the annunciation, Luke employs the “Birth Announcement Form” and the “Call Form,” both of which are key literary forms used by biblical authors. The use of these forms shows that Mary is a unique agent of God’s will.
2. The Holy Spirit had revealed that Simeon would not die until he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. We might imagine the Holy Spirit promising to fulfill something we have long dreamed for, or a resolution to a long-standing conflict in our lives, or another desire that is close to our hearts. Although we can be confident that God will answer our prayers, it may not always be in the way we want (or the timing we want) but in the way (and time) God deems best.
3. Participants may focus on the image of Jesus standing in the Jordan River, or the heavens being torn open, or the Spirit descending like a dove, or hearing the voice of God.
4. Jesus returns to Nazareth to begin his active ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus first went to the synagogue, where he picked up a scroll and read the words of the prophet Isaiah that spelled out the whole of what Jesus’ Spirit-filled ministry was to be: a ministry of justice and love for those who are most vulnerable.
5. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven. This sin is a wholesale rejection of God’s Spirit in Jesus’ teaching and deeds, done intentionally and without remorse. According to the commentary, to refuse God’s love is to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Participants’ responses will vary as to what this teaching of Jesus says to them about their own relationship with God.
6. Scripture states that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. This can be a comfort and encouragement to prayer, knowing that God hears all our prayers and answers them with God’s own presence. Other answers are possible, depending on the experiences of participants.
7. The Paraclete is the “Spirit of truth,” the personal presence of Jesus among believers while Jesus is with the Father. The word “paraclete” is often translated as advocate, but it can also mean witness, consoler, teacher, or helper. As Paraclete, the Holy Spirit acts on behalf of Jesus.
8. a) In John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit is given to the apostles on the night of the resurrection. In doing so, Jesus offers a sign of his own forgiveness.
b) The consequences of sin can continue long after the sin itself is forgiven. Participants will have different experiences of how sins they have committed had consequences that could linger on in their lives.
9. Matthew suggests that the triumph of Jesus’ resurrection is not complete until the kingdom of God is experienced in its fullness. We are to go out and help to build the kingdom of God by spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Spirit will compensate for the weaknesses of the disciples, which continues to be the case today.

LESSON FIVE (The Holy Spirit and the Church)

1. The Spirit is mentioned fifty-five times in Acts, more than in any other book of the Bible. Luke presents the Holy Spirit as the interior dynamic force of the church, impelling and guiding the plot of Acts, from Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Rome). A central message of Acts is that the Spirit will unfailingly impel and guide the church's mission to spread the gospel.
2. Luke does not want the reader to be distracted by sound, wind, and flame, and so he consciously softens the drama in relaying the Pentecost event. As the commentary tells us, the real miracle of Pentecost is found in the transformation of the apostles; with this, they are ready to begin their mission. Responses will vary as to participants' experiences of the Spirit as warmth, light, or burning.
3. Some examples of the Spirit's action in the early Church include inspiring the preaching of Peter (4:8) and Stephen (7:55), setting Paul and Barnabas apart for mission work (13:2), directing the ministry of Philip (8:29, 39), initiating the mission to the Gentiles (10:44-48), and filling the apostles with joy (13:52). With these and other examples, Luke wants to emphasize the key role of the Spirit in the establishment and growth of the early church.
4. In the ancient world, a *magos* could be an astrologer, soothsayer, wonder-worker, or person of wisdom. The word itself did not carry a negative implication. In Acts, however, Elymas is portrayed as a "false prophet," and indeed, his actions in Acts 13:4-12 bear this out. The Spirit is shown as guiding Paul's actions in defusing the work of Elymas against the gospel.
5. In our own world today, hearts filled with anger, hatred, false witness, and a desire for power threaten the work of the gospel. Responses will vary as to how participants can address these conditions and continue to root the gospel in our lives today.
6. We live in a time when truth seems to have lost all credibility in favor of personal perspective or popular opinion. Yet the voices of those who speak truth to power have become stronger as people recognize the deception and dishonesty prevalent in our lives. The Spirit burns the fire of truthfulness into the minds and hearts of all believers who desire to speak the truth no matter the cost. Participants will have various responses to the prevalence of dishonesty in our world today, and their own efforts to seek the truth.
7. Responses will vary.
8. The Spirit has guided Paul throughout his missionary endeavors. Although he is well aware of what lies before him when he returns to Jerusalem, Paul must continue on his mission, knowing that he will continue to be sustained by the Spirit. The fervor of his love for Christ impels Paul forward.
9. Responses will vary as participants discuss the knowledge and insights they have gained in Lesson Five.

LESSON SIX (The Holy Spirit at the End of Time)

1. The commentary notes that Paul does not view Jesus' resurrection as an end in itself, but as a crucial part of a larger plan by God to eliminate evil from the world. This is indeed good news!
2. Focusing too much on the "already" can make us indifferent to evil, injustice, and the imperfection of the world. Yet focusing too heavily on the "not yet" can lessen the hope that comes from Jesus' resurrection. A creative tension must be maintained between the two.
3. The Spirit serves as a bridge between God and humanity. Participants' experiences will differ about a time or event when they sensed that something was good or right through the prompting of the Spirit.
4. Responses will vary as to a time when participants' success was due more to God's grace than their own efforts.
5. Pauls' use of the word "flesh" refers to the way a person might be living in the present age, where evil and opposition to God's Spirit exist. To live in the Spirit means to possess God's Spirit now and to hope in the age to come, where believers will fully participate in the kingdom of God. We can be living in the in-between, where we are aligned with a desire to live and act in God's presence, yet still exist in the present age, influenced by sin.
6. The five characteristics that describe Paul's understanding of the Body of Christ are as follows: each member of Christ's body is gifted; the gifts of the body are diverse; the parts of the body are not the same; all parts of the body are necessary because they are all needed to form one body; and the difference in parts is intended by God to bring about unity in the body and care for the weaker parts. Participants' responses will vary about their reactions to these characteristics.
7. While Paul does rank the gifts of the Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor 12:28-30), *the people who have these gifts* share an equality in the Spirit. Just like parts of a body, some parts have more prominence and a larger role (e.g., the brain or the lungs are more primary than a finger or even an eye), but all parts are needed to work together to form and function as a healthy body. Thus there is an equality in our unity in the body.
8. The promise of the "first installment" assures us that we will participate in the full and final victory of Christ. Not only will we experience this as individuals, but all of creation awaits the glory that is to come. Responses will vary regarding new insights gained from this teaching.
9. All creation is groaning in labor pains as we await the redemption of our bodies, "that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Participants' will have different responses about the concept of "groaning" and whether it is a useful image in one's prayer/spiritual life.
10. Responses will vary as participants discuss the knowledge and insights they have gained throughout this study.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2022 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright holder. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321. Printed in the United States of America.