

How We Treat the Holy Spirit Within

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‘What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?’ (*1 Corinthians 6.19*).

THE PERSONAL indwelling of the infinite, eternal Holy Spirit in the believer is such an amazing blessing and privilege that the mind never wholly grasps it. A daily succession of joys, sorrows, temptations and trials produces various reactions in us, often without stirring our awareness that God is in residence, and will be pleased or grieved by what we think, say or do, or that he is ready to help if asked.

The body of every true believer is the property of God, and if it is defiled, either by the entry of worldliness, or by other sinful tastes and desires, the indwelling Spirit is said to be grieved. Writes Paul – ‘Grieve not the holy Spirit of God’ (*Ephesians 4.30*), or according to the solemn word order of the Greek, ‘Grieve not the Spirit, the Holy One of God.’

How can we so easily lose touch with this awesome, immense fact of spiritual life – that the incomprehensible God takes a place in every redeemed heart, declaring, ‘I will never leave thee nor forsake thee’?

The Holy Spirit indwells every Christian from the moment of conversion, so that the inspired Word may say, ‘If any man have not the Holy Spirit of Christ, he is none of his’ (*Romans 8.9*). The same passage immediately speaks of Christ being in us, showing that it is on the Saviour’s behalf that the Spirit dwells within. Christ indwells, by his Holy Spirit.

Three terms stand out in the New Testament to describe ill-treatment of the Holy Spirit. He may be resisted, or quenched, or grieved, each word describing a level of offence inflicted on our Divine Resident. How easily we forget that he is within, becoming detached from gratitude to him, consideration for him, and dependence upon him!

In his remarkable sermon to self-righteous Jews, Stephen, the first martyr, cried – ‘Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost.’ The Greek word means to fall against, such as when one puts one’s shoulder to a door to prevent it being opened. To resist is to oppose the Holy Spirit. Stephen’s hearers resisted salvation, but as believers we may also resist the clear will of God at times, perhaps by refusing to put away a great sin, or by taking a path of self-indulgence, or by ignoring a clear call of God (in the Word) to take up a spiritual duty or a burden of service. We know what is right, and yet we put our entire weight against the door of obedience, resisting the Member of the Godhead who acts within, that sublime, infinitely kind and glorious Custodian of our ransomed soul. It is madness and self-injury combined to resist the Holy Spirit, so what induces us to do so? Surely it is because we lose touch with the staggering, marvellous realisation that the Most High God has lodged within, and that it is his promptings and urgings that we resist whenever some standard or duty of the Bible is laid on our heart, and we slam shut and barricade the door. Sometimes resisting the Spirit even leads believers to articulate opposition to biblical standards (as many Christians do today over the commands to separate from worldly activities).

The second term for offending the Holy Spirit appears in *1 Thessalonians 5.19*: ‘Quench not the Spirit.’ The Holy Spirit’s work is pictured here as a flame of holy conviction, zeal and warmth generated

in the heart. Quenching the Spirit suggests the idea of overriding him and his work. He is not violently opposed, as he is when resisted, but his stirrings and urgings are suppressed and the mind simply passes over them and moves on. The believer may remain faithful in doctrine, but is no longer so amenable in areas of conduct.

The flame or fire produced by the Holy Spirit is love and zeal for the Lord, for the Truth, and for lost souls. It includes conviction of sin when it leads to godly sorrow, indignation against our own wrongdoing, coupled with carefulness, vehement desire and zeal to reform. (All these terms are found in 2 Corinthians 7.11.

The flame of the Holy Spirit may urge us to witness, or to go with compassion to the aid of another person.

Do we quench the holy fervour of godly aims kindled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit? Do we quench and suppress the promptings of conscience? Is the maintaining of spiritual zeal sometimes inconvenient, because it is contrary to our mood, or too costly for us? Do we therefore turn from praise, prayer, thankfulness, dedication and good works?

How can we do this, as Christians? Simply by forgetting that it is the ever-present, mighty Holy Spirit of God who is the author of all godly sensations. We do not merely have a Divine Visitation, which would be wonderful, but something vastly greater – a Divine Resident who ignites the dying embers of spiritual activity, restoring them to full vigour. But we lose sight of both the doctrine and the reality and smother this reviving, energising work of God within.

The third term describing our insulting treatment of the Holy Spirit appears in Ephesians 4.30 – ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’ This exhortation opens to our view the invisible heart of the Spirit. Surely one of the ‘deep things of God’ is the disclosure that he is grieved, which literally means caused distress and sorrow, by the disrespect and waywardness of believers. Our infinite, all-powerful Divine Resident may be offended, injured and wounded in heart by the indifference of those he is taking to Heaven.

The Holy Spirit is grieved when his work in us and for us is ignored. The fact that the invincible, indestructible Spirit may be pained is largely beyond our understanding, but revelation tells us it is so. The Holy Spirit’s love for us – like Christ’s love – is so great, that he feels for people who are tiny specks of dust before him.

A mysterious question in James 4.5 asks: ‘Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?’ This has been more helpfully rendered thus: ‘. . . the Holy Spirit who yearns jealously over us’. With powerful protective love he grieves over our backslidings and failings, as we do over the mishaps and misfortunes of our own children and loved ones.

If only we were more constantly aware of the Spirit’s sufferings over us, what a difference it would make to our care over our walk, and to our conscientiousness.

Paul seems to have been very aware of his debt to the Spirit, saying, ‘I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit . . .’ (Romans 15.30). How he loved the Holy Spirit! In this passage he says, in effect, if only we would love the Holy Spirit, we would strive in prayer as never before for the progress of the Gospel.

The exhortation to ‘grieve not the Holy Spirit’ is made in the context of holy living, putting off the old person and putting on the new. Corrupt speech is to be curbed, whether boastful, worldly, dishonest, exaggerated, unclean and lustful remarks, or bitterness, gossiping, and hurtful words.

How do we grieve the Holy Spirit? By ignoring the pangs of conscience that the Spirit activates, and failing to check the offensive words or deeds. If we suppress these promptings, and sin regardless, then they will eventually cease, conscience will become dormant, and we will fall headlong into unrestrained sinful speech and action, forfeiting real communion with God and blessing from him.

Similarly, if we fail to pray for and implement active personal kindness toward others, with tenderheartedness and forgiveness, then we grieve the Holy Spirit who works to promote these virtues within us (*Ephesians 4.29-32*).

Would we not take the stirrings and urgings of conscience much more seriously if we remembered and respected that it is our Divine Resident who works to purify and develop us? Perhaps it will help if we consider some of the possible reasons why the Holy Spirit is grieved over us.

1. Nature of the Holy Spirit

Clearly the first would be that he is holy. Of course the Holy One is offended when those he indwells prefer to wallow in things that to him are filth and stench. The altogether pure and Holy One stoops to indwell, but we entertain and harbour offensive things in our thought life, to injure him.

2. What He Has Done for Us

The Holy Spirit will also be grieved when we trample on all his past work in our souls. It was the Spirit who opened our hearts to the Gospel by a regenerating act, softening our antagonistic wills, opening our eyes to our spiritual predicament, bringing us under deep conviction of sin, and showing us Christ the Lord, as the only Saviour. We then yielded to Christ, and pledged ourselves to him, but now we pay no heed to the Spirit's continuing shepherding, and in practical terms we barely acknowledge his existence.

3. What Christ Has Done for Us

The Holy Spirit will equally be grieved bearing in mind all that Christ has done for us. Who knows more than he and the Father how great a price the Saviour paid for the redemption of each single soul? The eternal, crushing weight of sin was taken by Christ to redeem us, so that he is ours, and he will be our visible King in the eternal glory. But how do we repay him? So often by an inconsistent walk, treating slightly the duty of stirring ourselves to holiness, and serving our earthly interests with greater fervour than the work of the Lord.

4. The Consequences for Us

The Holy Spirit is undoubtedly also grieved for our sake, because he knows the consequences we bring upon ourselves by neglecting his promptings, such as the loss of assured communion with God, the loss of instrumentality for the Gospel, the loss of response to prayer, and the loss of deep Christian joy.

5 Harm to the Gospel

Surely, also, the Holy Spirit will grieve because of the blow our poor spiritual walk delivers to the cause of Christ, as younger believers receive from us no example of holiness and zeal, and as watching eyes, especially unconverted people close to us, see our coldness and inconsistency.

6. Eden in Our Hearts

The Holy Spirit is bound to be grieved when the Garden of Eden is replicated in our hearts, when in moments of rebellion we draw back from full commitment to some Christian obligation or duty, thinking to ourselves in the tempter's words, 'Yea, hath God said?' If the cancer of pride grows, and self-love increases, or if covetousness assumes control, or the loss of gratitude deepens, then the Spirit will grieve over us to a degree we cannot grasp.

The Promptings of the Holy Spirit

In all that we have said here about the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we do not mean to give the impression that the Spirit will reveal things to believers that are outside the Bible. He will not reveal to us authoritative doctrine, because Scripture teaches emphatically that everything we need to know has been revealed once for all in the Book of God. This Bible is the complete, full and sufficient authority for the knowledge of God, for salvation, for the living of the Christian life, and for the operation of churches. All modern claims to fresh information by vision or direct word are totally mistaken.

The Holy Spirit, however, constantly stirs the conscience, reminds us of Scripture, enables us to understand the Bible (if we humbly ask, and use the Bible's own rules of interpretation), clarifies our minds (as we think through issues), and even reminds us of spiritual duties, and of other important things that we may forget. Frequently he infuses into us immense joy and appreciation of the Word, as we reflect upon its riches. The mighty Holy Spirit, dwelling within, interacts constantly with believers, but never so as to bypass or cause neglect of the infallible Word already revealed by him. The person who says, 'The Lord told me this,' following an imagined inner voice, has wandered far from the standard of the Bible.

The gracious work of the Holy Spirit in believing hearts is also described by Paul in *Galatians 5.16-17*. We are urged to walk in the Spirit, and by so doing to avoid fulfilling the lust of the flesh. There is, says the apostle, a battle in the heart, caused by our residual tendency to sin rising up in desire for gratification, resenting the new nature created by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, however, opposes these sinful desires 'so that ye cannot do the things that ye would'. He activates the conscience, so that we cannot lightly and easily commit the proposed sinful deed, or say those wrong words. We are pulled up short, and made aware that we are about to offend our God. But what if we press past the sudden barrier? This is what this article has largely been about. What if we sin in spite of the Spirit-activated conscience?

It may be a major matter, or a persistent offence, and we resist (oppose) the Spirit. It may be, however, that we do not express any opposition or resentment, but simply quench (quietly override) his promptings. But either way we shall certainly grieve the Holy Spirit.

'If ye be led of the Spirit,' says Paul, 'ye are not under the law', meaning that the person who is sensitive to the work of the Divine Resident, and conscientiously obeys, may be assured that he is truly saved, and no longer under the condemnation of the law. The law, of course, remains as the ruling moral standard of our lives, but we are no longer to be judged by it, for Christ has taken away its sting.

'If we live in the Spirit', writes the apostle, 'let us also walk in the Spirit.' Then, ever being overwhelmed by the kindness of his presence, sensitive to his stirrings, and conscientious in response, we will taste and prove the Spirit's power and blessing in advancing godliness, joy, peace, understanding and usefulness.

Resist not his stirrings in the heart, calling to greater commitment and spiritual service. Quench not his urgings nor his movings of conscience. And grieve him not by neglect.

Finally, resist not, quench not, and grieve not, the Holy Spirit by neglecting the facility of prayer and intercession. Resist not any duty, and quench not any urgings, for it is the Holy Spirit who perfects and translates prayer into the language of Heaven, helping our infirmities, making intercession for us with an earnestness far beyond our reach, and conforming our prayers to the glorious will of God (Romans 8.26-27).

A remarkable hymn of William Bunting, a nineteenth-century Wesleyan preacher, captures the thoughts of sincere believers in relation to the Spirit, and puts an appropriate response into the heart:

*Holy Spirit! Pity me,
Pierced with grief for grieving thee;
Present, though from sense apart,
Listen to a grieving heart.*

*Sins unnumbered I confess,
Of exceeding sinfulness;
Sins against thyself alone,
Only to Omniscience known:*

*Deafness to thy whispered calls,
Rashness midst remembered falls,
Transient fears beneath the rod,
Treachurous trifling with my God.*

*Tasting that the Lord is good,
Pining then for poisoned food;
At the fountains of the skies
Craving creaturely supplies.*

*Worldly cares at worship time;
Faithless aims in works sublime;
Pride, when God is passing by;
Sloth, when souls in darkness die.*

*O how lightly have I slept
With my daily wrongs unwept,
Sought thy chidings to defer,
Shunned the wounded Comforter*

*Still thy comforts do not fail,
Still thy healing helps avail;
Patient Inmate of my breast,
Thou art grieved, yet I am blest.*

*O be merciful to me,
Now in longing, Lord, for thee!
Father, pardon through thy Son
Sins against thy Spirit done!*

William Bunting, 1805-66 (Psalms & Hymns 310)