

1:1 I WILL COME IN

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Revelation 3:20

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.

Acts 2:38-39

The picture of Jesus standing outside the door knocking and calling may well have been central to our taking a decisive initial step in asking Christ into our lives. It is more tangible and immediate than ‘receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ Yet both passages describe the same move of God, whether for a group of people or an individual.

There is a call to be answered. The Lord God is making himself heard in distinct and definite words, breaking in from outside. This is how the Spirit works. The alarm clock breaks into my slumber, jerking me awake. I have to do something about it.

There is an attitude to be abandoned. I thought I didn’t need God, Jesus was irrelevant to me, and ‘forgiveness of sins’ meant admitting I had gone wrong. What, me? As for ‘repentance’, that was all too holy and religious. Now, I realise that some kind of U-turn is vital. To go any farther down the road I’m on is to court disaster.

There is a Person to reckon with. Jesus has stepped out of a book, out of history, out of church controversy, to come where I am. He loved me and died for me. He came through to the other side of death to find me. He holds the keys of the kingdom. Do I want him?

There is a response to be made. It is either ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘wait’. There’s a meal on the table. While I’m waiting it could get lukewarm and then cold. Hold on – who is the guest, and who is the host?

I realise the Spirit is no less than Jesus himself. I thought the door handle was on my side, but you have been working away on the inside too. I trust your promise to come in, whatever that means. Thank you!

1:2 HOW WE KNOW

On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

John 14:20

If what you have heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.

1 John 2:24

This is how we know he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 3:24

How can I be absolutely sure that Jesus lives in me? Given the inconsistent nature of my personal life, might he not have tiptoed away without my knowing? Next question: if I can indeed be sure of his dwelling in me, because of his promise to do so (Revelation 3:20), should I have a steady awareness of his presence with me?

We are up against human psychology here. Some of us are naturally restless, others more contemplative. Some environments are peaceful, others, such as a family home, are less so. How can we train ourselves to realise his presence whatever our surroundings?

Consider an analogue watch (you may even be wearing one). Its face is never still, reminding us that time is passing. Inside it is a mechanism which though moving is at complete rest. Little cogwheels dovetail with each other to produce dynamic equilibrium. One cog in another, each doing its work, no stress, no strain.

Now of course we are people, not machines – but imagine three cogwheels labelled ‘Spirit’, ‘Word’ and ‘Faith’, driving our inner spiritual life. The Holy Spirit represents the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son in our hearts. The Word is the apostolic teaching we have heard from the start, always giving us more to grasp and integrate into our thinking and practice. Spirit and Word mesh with our faith and move us to realise the power of the indwelling Lord – no matter what’s going on in and around us.

‘If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you’ (John 15:7). This is a good prayer to begin with: that I may know the reality of your abiding presence in me.

1:3 REBIRTH

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Titus 3:5,6

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 Peter 1:23

Why do many churchgoing Christians react so strongly against the idea of a second birth? Why is the term ‘born-again Christian’ such a turn-off? Partly, perhaps, because it has become synonymous with superficial or over-emotional conversion. Many of us are Christians now as a result of years and years of fluctuating believerdom which has coalesced into steady discipleship. It didn’t happen all at once.

But that is to miss an important point, the very point Jesus makes to Nicodemus when he introduces the idea. We start our human lives as ‘flesh’, natural-born people. Flesh can’t evolve into spirit, the capability for eternal life with God, except by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit.

For me to make the transition from natural earthly life to eternal heavenly life, then, the life of God himself has got to switch on inside me. It isn’t a life I can switch on all by myself. But at the same time I need to receive and believe the word of God which is part and parcel of the same operation. In fact the word of God seems to possess the same life giving power as the Spirit, as indicated by Jesus’ parable of the Sower, when the seed burrows down into the earth and comes up as harvest crop. Only it isn’t automatic. The soil too has something to do with a successful birth. There are mysteries here.

As I hear God’s word, however it comes to me, I respond to it or reject it. If I receive it, it enters me as a thinking and willing person and lodges there, generating Spirit life within me. God knows when this happens, even if I don’t.

If I have got this new life, it needs nurturing. Every day I need my spiritual ‘breakfast’ of word and Spirit. Otherwise the life withers and dies. The battle with the flesh continues. But we have a Divine ally.

1:4 JESUS WITH US AND IN US

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the world.

Matthew 28:20

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

John 14:16-18

Jesus is teaching his bewildered followers about their future relationship with him through the Holy Spirit. He uses different words, names and images to put across this single, unbelievably wonderful fact: he may be going away, but he is coming back personally to be permanently with them, among them and in them.

It’s nothing they have to strive for or ‘be good enough’ for – it is a joint present from himself and the Father. It is God gift-wrapped for us. A promise delivered as soon as it is received.

‘Always’ translates a phrase meaning literally ‘all the days.’ He is not with us just on Sundays, or even specially on Sundays. He comes with us into the days of the week, the working days, the grim days, the joy-filled days, daytime, night-time.

‘Advocate’ is a word used only by John, translating the Greek word *Paraclētos*. It means ‘I’m on your side,’ however bad things get or however much of a mess you make of things.

The Spirit isn’t a strange God we have never met before and might be slightly cautious about asking on board – like a power-boat full of masked men with submachine guns. He is the Jesus we have seen in the Gospels, teaching, healing, showing compassion, dealing authoritatively with evil, correcting our misconceptions about God.

Lord Jesus, I can ask you into my life for the first time, and you will come as you have promised (Revelation 3:20). I can turn to you every day, and you will be there. Not just when I need help, but as a permanent Friend. Thank you!

1:5 TRUE FREEDOM

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
2 Corinthians 3:17

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.
John 8:32, 34-35

Jesus said he had come to set people free (Luke 4:18), according to God's word in Isaiah and through the Spirit that was upon him. The Gospels are full of him doing this: releasing people from illness, blindness, unbelief, fear, lust, even from death itself. He isn't here any longer, but his Spirit continues his work. How?

He simply said to a woman who had been bent double for eighteen years: 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity' (Luke 13:12). On this occasion he also put his hands on her, but there were other healings with just a word, sometimes at a considerable distance. One memorable evening they brought demon-possessed people to his door; he laid his hands on each one, and drove out the spirits with a word (Matthew 8:16, Luke 4:40).

So why isn't he continuing his freeing work today? Has his word somehow become disconnected from his Spirit? Paul, amazed that his Jewish friends can't see that Jesus is the Messiah, concludes that their minds are 'veiled' when the Scriptures are read. When word and Spirit operate together, veils are removed, shackles fall away, lives are released into freedom and joy. What is blindfolding our minds at the present time? Unbelief? A failure to ask for the Spirit?

Anywhere a church or someone 'holds to' Jesus' teaching, freedom results. This freedom isn't anarchy or chaos, it's the ordered life of sanity and creativity. The legion of devils departs, the chains are thrown off and another disciple sits at Jesus' feet, clothed and in their right mind. Must all this belong to the past?

'Your touch has still its ancient power, no word from you can fruitless fall; hear, in this solemn evening hour, and in your mercy heal us all.'

1:6 THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
Luke 4:18

You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.
John 14:17-18

The Lord is the Spirit.
2 Corinthians 3:17

Who or what, exactly, is the Holy Spirit? Is it some kind of power from God flowing through the universe? Or is he an actual Person? Is he the same as Jesus – or maybe just the influence of Jesus through his wonderful words and example?

When Jesus appears to his disciples after rising from the dead, they think he's a ghost (Luke 24:37). He replies, 'It is I myself!' On that occasion he gives them proof of his physical identity as the Jesus they knew and loved. It's the same with the Spirit. 'It is I myself.' Even though we can't see him, we believe in him as the same Jesus who walked the earth, and this gives us the same joy as we would have had if we'd been one of the disciples like Peter (1 Peter 1:8).

The key word 'anointed' links directly with the name of 'Christ', Jesus' title as Divine Lord. They aren't two different people being described. In Dostoevsky's great novel *The Idiot*, the leading figure, Prince Myshkin, is also called Leo Nikolayevitch. It takes a bit of working out if you missed it first time, but it becomes obvious after a while. You don't have to be an expert in Russian novels.

Similarly I don't have to be an expert theologian before I can understand about the Holy Spirit being Jesus in an invisible form. It isn't the assent of the mind that is difficult, it's the consent of the heart to Jesus being my Lord that I may have to wrestle with.

Lord, I so easily get bogged down in doubts about you. The Bible throws these terms around like spinning plates and I become bewildered. It's you I want. If having the Spirit is the same as having you, then give me the Spirit. That's all I ask.