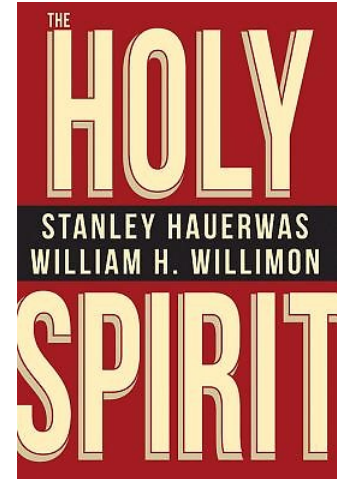


The first and last words of this book are a prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit!” Readers will soon discover that authors Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon believe that even the praying of this prayer is the work of God’s Spirit. Or as one teacher put it, the Spirit is the “through which” of our redemption and life—of all that lives and moves and has its being. Much more than the source of an individual’s experiences of grace, the Spirit is what makes the church the church, the body of Jesus sharing his saving work in an all-too-graceless world.



This study guide will help small groups talk about their understandings and experiences of the Holy Spirit by providing discussion-prompting questions that resonate with issues raised in the book, *The Holy Spirit*.

Below is a basic template for each session. Thoughtful leaders will adapt it to their group setting by choosing questions that fit the situations of the people gathered to read this book. There is not time to use all of the questions, so pick and choose a couple. The group’s own thoughts and questions will be key to their engagement across the five weeks, so every session should include a time to ask, “What did you read? What are the writers getting at? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?”

### **Opening Prayer**

Best practice is to open each gathering with prayer. No formula is necessary, but many leaders will want to pray for each participant by name and end every opening prayer with the phrase “Come, Holy Spirit.”

### **Using the Discussion Questions**

Discussion leaders are encouraged to **choose two or three discussion questions** and encourage their groups to come up with their own. Pick and choose. No groups will have time to discuss them all. Starting week two, some leaders will want to invite participants to share one way they “trimmed their sails” (see below) from the previous week’s discussion of things they can do to live as people upon whose bodies the Spirit rests.

### **Thinking about Key Quotes**

Leaders may also want to encourage group participants to **choose a key quote from the reading** each week and ask themselves (and the group) the following questions:

1. What does this mean to me? to my church? to my community?
2. If this is true, would it change anything in my life? my church? my community? the broader culture and world?
3. What is lost if this is not real to me? in my church? in my community? for the broader culture and world?

### **Trimming Our Sails—Actionable Insights**

Ask the group to volunteer **one thing they will do in the coming week** to invite the Holy Spirit to breathe life into the everyday world where they work, live, and play. This could be as simple as praying, “Come, Holy Spirit” every time they start the car or drink a first cup of coffee. It could also involve commitment to recognizing the Spirit in the faces of people they would normally ignore (due to busyness or lifestyle enclaves that separate us from others). It needs to be something doable, something simple, and something they can share with the group when they gather the following week.

### **Closing Prayer**

Many thoughtful Christians seem oblivious to the church’s teaching about the Holy Spirit for reasons the authors name (and some they don’t). It is not enough to confess neglect. Faithful life in Jesus calls us to trim our sails if we ever wish to be driven into the deep waters of a mature and grace-filled faith. One way to do that is to think about how God is with us as saving love in Jesus Christ—and where God’s animating, restoring, and life-giving presence is spoken, trusted, invoked, and invited to help, bless, change, and gift our world. Invite the group to be on the lookout this week for ways that God is with us. Allow them to share any prayer concerns for the coming week. End with the prayer “Come, Holy Spirit!”

**At the first and last group session, some leaders may have participants read aloud together the authors’ words from the introduction:**

“When we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are talking about God, who is One as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is more than a personal experience; the Holy Spirit is who God is and what God does as the Trinity, whether we feel it or not. Because the Holy Spirit is intensely communitarian, relational, and embodied, we have the church. Whatever we say about the Holy Spirit must be tested by and congruent with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is that gift whereby even in a world at war, we may live in peace, our enemies can become friends, and even in a culture of lies, we can tell the truth. “Come, Holy Spirit!” is the first and last prayer of the church, our only hope in life and death. In receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can begin the adventure of discipleship and end all our attempts at self-justification. Holiness is the fruit of the Spirit and a sure test of holiness is love.” (*The Holy Spirit*, pages ix–x)

**Or, read both the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds aloud (pages 93–95).**

Above all, affirm the presence and power of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus wherever two or more gather—and beyond in every created space animated by the breath of God Who gives life to all.

## Week 1 – Introduction (pages ix–xi)

1. Can you recall a person or group from your childhood that seemed to talk about the Holy Spirit more than others? Do you remember any fears or anxieties (or hopes/joys) whenever you heard “Holy Spirit” talk?
2. What do the authors mean when they say the church is “utterly dependent upon the gifts of the Spirit” and that the Holy Spirit is “nothing less than a life-and-death matter for the people of God”? Is this true?
3. Do you know anyone who seems Spirit-filled or animated? What are the recognizable (or even invisible) qualities of those who live “life in the Spirit”?
4. What would you do if someone dared you to live a life out of control (trusting God completely without managing outcomes)? Does it comfort or scare you when the authors say that Christians are to be “out of [self] control,” completely dependent and accountable to God’s Spirit?
5. What do you think it would mean in your own life to live in the power of the Spirit?
6. Talking about the Spirit is talking about God. Why are some people put off by Spirit-talk? Why do others gravitate to it? Does language about the Holy Spirit make God seem closer or more distant in your experience? Why?
7. The Bible uses metaphors for the Holy Spirit (breath, wind, fire, water, dove) and implies others (voice as the breath across vocal chords in speech and song). What do these have in common? Where do we find these deep symbols in scripture (what stories or songs or poetry)? Discuss why the biblical writers might have been drawn to these images for God as Spirit.
8. Encourage the group in the coming weeks to make a list of ways the authors describe the Holy Spirit (for example: the Holy Spirit is “what God does as the Trinity,” a gift that helps us makes peace and friendship with enemies, what helps us tell the truth in a culture of lies, or the way we bear fruit).
9. Read aloud the authors’ summary of the book in a nutshell together (the last paragraph on page ix, continuing on to page x).

## Week 2 – Trinity (chapter 1, pages 1–31)

The authors stress that Christian teaching about the Trinity was a response to heresies that “blessed” the church by forcing it to think through its deepest convictions. Teaching about the Trinity keeps Christians from leaving out crucial aspects of God’s care for creation through a people called into being as the church. So the doctrine of the Trinity is a sometimes complicated way to make sure key parts of the Christian story and vision aren’t oversimplified.

1. Will and Stanley say speaking about the Holy Spirit is really speaking about the Trinity. Is this true? Can you think and talk about the Spirit of God without also talking about God the creator and Jesus as God’s Son?
2. The authors identify Spirit neglect as the root cause of dull preaching and unmoved congregations. What are some real ways that your church/tradition neglects the Holy Spirit or makes the Spirit seem like an afterthought?
3. What makes Pentecostalism and other Spirit-focused forms of Christian life so embarrassing to mainline Christians (Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, etc.)? Is there any chance your church (like John Wesley and his friends) would be accused of “enthusiasm”? Why or Why not?
4. Read the Apostles’ Creed and/or Nicene Creed aloud as a group. Does the Spirit get shortchanged on “back story” in these statements of faith? Which has more Spirit-friendly language (or tone)? Why? Can you imagine a more storied description of the Spirit’s work (in the faith of Israel and the life of Jesus extended through the birth of the church and the acts of the Apostles)?
5. If the Spirit’s work is “first and foremost to point to Jesus as the Son of the Father,” then how will every Jesus story really be a Spirit story? Think of examples.
6. “The Spirit rests on Jesus’s body.” What does this tell us about the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit or even where we will find the Spirit’s life? Does this mean bodies are the first and last place to look for Spirit?
7. For Hauerwas and Willimon, the Holy Spirit is the gift that makes it possible to share in God’s life. The Spirit helps us pray and makes prayer possible (Romans 8:26-27). Can you think of times when God’s Spirit helped you (or someone you know) pray when you didn’t know what or how to pray? Does it seem too bold to say that when we pray we are being drawn into the very Trinitarian life of God, where God speaks to Godself on our behalf?
8. As advocate, teacher, and truth-teller, the Spirit works to make us one body, the one Body of Christ. Have you ever been a part of something (a team, a crowd, a movement) where it

seemed as though something bigger was unifying the experience—something more than a common cause or ideals?

9. What are the implications of saying “the Spirit is present in all times and places, making Christ known”?

10. The Spirit that points to and rests on the crucified body of Jesus also rests on the equally broken and “full-of-holes and beaten body of Christ, the church.” What would happen if we looked for God’s Spirit resting on the very people who frustrate and repel so many (the church)? Does this mean God is powerfully present to those who suffer or fall short? What kind of grace is required to see God in places that seem bereft of God’s presence?

### Week 3 – Pentecost: The Birth of the Church (chapter 2, pages 33–59)

1. The same creative Spirit that made all things and rested on the body of Jesus creates a new form of community and life: the church. What are the qualities/features of an Acts 2 church (hint: read Acts 2)? If Jesus communicates God’s reconciling love in the language/culture of his time, what might that mean for how the church communicates good news today?
2. The same Spirit that rested on Jesus rests on the church—bodies assuring the world that the crucified one is God with us to save us. Why is it important that the church be visible and show up in the lives of people who need God’s presence (like Marjorie on page 39 or the people described in Acts 2)? Does that mean anything called “spiritual” must look like Jesus (grace/forgiveness, acts of healing love, table fellowship with outsiders made insiders, communicating truth to power)? Why or why not?
3. The authors point out that the church is not a substitute or extension of an otherwise absent savior (“Christ has no hands but yours...”). They also highlight another danger: failing to see that the church is more than it seems to be. What are the perils of thinking “it’s all on us” or that the church is only what we make it?
4. Mistakes about who Jesus is contribute to errors about the church and a failure to trust that it is the gift of God’s Spirit that makes the church, the church. Have your group pick one or two mistaken views of Jesus (Docetism, Ebionism, Manicheanism, Pelagianism, etc.) and describe them. Then ask: how does this view of Jesus lead the church to a mistaken view of who it is and what it can do in its own strength?
5. Is your church more like the “fast-asleep church” or the “frenetic church”? Both? Neither? How does “believing the church” differ from “believing in the church”? Why does it matter? We trust God—not the church—to renew, say the authors. If the church really is God’s Spirit creation then how might that change some of our “churchy” efforts? Would it make us suspicious of an “up by our bootstraps” faith?
6. Free life in the Spirit is freedom to love, the first aspect of the Spirit’s fruit, but this requires we cede control and our culture’s managerial impulses to God. How is “life out of control” a countercultural idea?
7. The unpredictable character of the Spirit is predictable in this sense: the Spirit always points to Jesus. Can we live in both reckless abandon and trust while simultaneously pointing with predictability to Jesus? How?
8. “Under the guidance of the Spirit Christians can expect to be shocked by gospel implications they had not anticipated.” The authors describe boundary-leaping moves by God’s Spirit in Acts when Peter sees God at work in Cornelius and his house. What are some real-life ways we restrict the Spirit’s work to our tribe or club or circle of spiritually like-

minded affinity groups? Where are you called to be a witness this week? How is the Spirit already working there?

9. How might the Spirit's work outside of the church (recognized by those who can't find anything inspiring *within* the church) judge or call us to account?

10. The oneness or unity we are called to seems bound up with whatever the Spirit of Jesus is up to, even beyond the boundaries of inside-church practices of Word, sacrament, and ministry. How might praying "Come, Holy Spirit" open us to greater love for those beyond our favorite boundaries? Could the Spirit's work of making us witnesses to Jesus actually empower us to see God (the shape of saving love) in these beyond-boundaries places? Offer some examples.

**Week 4 – Holiness: Life in the Spirit** (chapter 3, pages 61–83)

1. John Wesley said, “I want you to be all love. This is the perfection [holiness] I believe and teach.”<sup>1</sup> How has love made a real change in the lives of people you have known or observed? Could you describe that as being “caught up in the life of the Spirit”? Think of one way that grace/love has made you more loving or at least on the way to being “all love.”

2. While many of us would be uncomfortable describing the Spirit’s work in our life as “perfection,” we can probably name ways that our family (or even our church) has become more loving, “a communal reflection of *God’s* glory and holiness.” Think of real-life ways that growing closer to God has made you or someone you know more aware of the distinction between their best efforts and God’s love in Jesus. How is your own feeling for this difference a paradoxical song of holiness? Does the “more” of God’s love make you want to love more?

3. Being holy means being on a mission. The Spirit sets us apart, sending us on a mission from God—or so the authors say. What divine assignment have you been given? What divine assignment has been given to your church? How does this set you apart from other well-meaning efforts? What stories or examples from scripture tell of people sent on God’s mission (called and moved by God’s Spirit)?

4. What does it mean to say that God has made a public commitment to you (like God’s commitment to Israel)? Does that give you a sense of belonging to God (and so a sense of not belonging to pretenders clamoring for your loyalty)? What practices set you apart from those for whom faithfulness to God is an alien concept? How does God’s care for you influence the way you care for those who need your help?

5. Like Israel, we have been called to reflect God’s glory. We pray to be caught up into the life of God. Do you believe the Spirit makes your prayers God’s prayers? How does the Spirit remind us of all that Jesus taught (love one another)? Pray this prayer this week: “Spirit, remind me to love like Jesus.”

6. We live in a dishonest, violent world. The Spirit, say Hauerwas and Willimon, creates a community of friends who tell each other the truth and help each other do what they’ve been called to do. Do you have a group of friends like that? Who tells you the truth (without crushing your spirit)? How does friendship give us strength to do what needs to be done?

7. What do friends do for one another that acquaintances or strangers don’t? Have you ever been around people who are “at home” in their friendship? Do you have friends like that? How is seeing a close friend after a long separation like “going home”?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 27, Letters III, 1756–1765* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 302.



8. The Spirit inhabits our friendships, where helping love rules the day. What concrete things can you do to cultivate friends in faith so church becomes a space where the Spirit's work of love multiplies? Have you ever thought of church that way—as a gathering of friends for the sake of multiplying love? If you or someone you love longs for deeper, more lasting friendships then pray today, "Come, Holy Spirit! Make us friends, bring us home."

## Week 5 – Last Things (chapter 4, pages 85–91)

1. We sometimes say that someone has “missed their calling.” What are the qualities of a life lived well, with purpose?
2. If you had to describe the significance of your own life in a three-sentence story, what kind of tale would you tell (roles/activities/experiences: parent, neighbor, friend; military service, career accomplishments, education)? What are some ways that you mark time when you tell your “my life has a purpose” story? Which moments would you select for the movie montage recapping your (or a loved one’s) meaningful life? Are any of these “Spirit” moments?
3. For the authors, time is not meaningless because God’s Spirit reveals the Trinity in time. The Spirit is the way God meets history, right here, right now. They also say that God is our purpose and destination (our “end” in both senses of the word). Where do you see the Spirit revealing God’s ends (purposes, destination) in our time?
4. Think of some ways that our culture denies death (not only the fact that we all will die, but the deaths of people victimized by forces beyond their control). Are there ways that aren’t morbid that will help us remember that we will all pass away? How do Spirit people affirm the reality of death yet resist death-dealing forces?
5. Christians believe that death will come but that the last word in Jesus Christ is life. Through baptism Christians become citizens in a new time zone that overlaps ordinary time and anticipates resurrection: the new age of God’s kingdom in Jesus. How does baptism symbolize both participating in the death of Christ and the promise of life of the age to come?
6. The authors stress that we exist to worship God. Through worship we tell the story of God’s saving love in calling/rescuing Israel and creating a people called the Church through the faithfulness of Jesus, the Nazarene. Where does the Holy Spirit appear in some of these saving stories (Genesis creation story, call of the prophets, overshadowing Mary the mother of Jesus, baptism of Jesus, the upper room in Acts)? How is the Holy Spirit still writing this story (in your life, in the world)?
7. Have your group read Romans 8 out loud (alternating verses for those willing to read or together as a group). What is the promise to those upon whom the Spirit rests? How will this promise be kept? What can separate us from the Spirit’s promise?
8. The Spirit rests on the body of witnesses to God’s saving work in Jesus. Living in this Spirit time, where the power of sin is broken, brings us into conflict with the forces of our culture. What do the authors mean by the “politics of death,” and how is life in the Spirit of Jesus a radical alternative? What is the answer to the question, “Is the Church possible?”

9. Read aloud together the authors' summary of the book in a nutshell (the bottom paragraph on page ix, continuing on to page x). What questions about the Holy Spirit remain unanswered for you? Where will you go to learn more?

10. The prayer of Spirit people according to Hauerwas and Willimon is "Come, Holy Spirit!" Will you make this prayer a part of your devotional life moving forward? What will help you remember this prayer?