



here in spirit

knowing the Spirit who creates,
sustains, and transforms everything

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The Greatest Gift

WHEN I STEPPED onto the premises of the East Austin projects, I sensed a heaviness in the air. We were serving the community alongside another Christian group. Their group made the initial connection with project residents. Our group provided food and drinks and joined them in ministry. We were eager to lighten the atmosphere there with the hope of Christ. As time passed, the residents began to look forward to our visits. The youth loved connecting with the Christian hip-hop artists who came with us. I had several significant conversations with some of the residents and got to pray for them on the spot. The weight seemed to be lifting.

One afternoon I heard shouting and decided to follow the noise. The ruckus led me to a few residents surrounded by several Christians from the other group, who were praying loudly asking God to baptize them in the Spirit and to give them financial prosperity. I hung back, observed, and prayed. Afterward, one of the people from this group asked me if I was “Spirit filled.” I thought to myself, *It depends on the day—or the moment.* But I knew that wasn’t what she meant.

So I replied, “What do you mean by Spirit filled?” They responded by describing a person who has had a very specific experience, marked by speaking in tongues. I had in mind the passage in Ephesians where the filling of the Spirit results in singing, thanksgiving, and submitting to one another (Eph 5:18-21). We clearly had two different perspectives of “Spirit filled.” Although we both affirmed the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, our differences became so great we had to part ways. Sadly, our differing doctrines of the Holy Spirit divided us, not just in theory but in ministry among marginalized people. The parting was done in humility and love on both sides, but I left brokenhearted. Does it have to be this way?

Perhaps you’ve had a similar experience. Or maybe you’ve been on one side of the divide staring skeptically across the aisle. Or possibly you’re in the middle scratching your head. What’s so divisive about the “Spirit of unity” (Eph 4:3)?

SPIRIT OF DIVISION OR UNITY?

The Holy Spirit. Three words couldn’t divide the church more. I suppose “I hate you” is up there, but that’s more of a division between people rather than churches. Entire swaths of Christianity have divided over the third *person* of the Trinity. This division, over the place of the Spirit in the Trinity, left the Eastern Church (Orthodox) on one side and the Western Church (Roman) on the other, which, among other factors, eventually led to what was called the Great Schism.

Doctrine does divide. Attempting to forge unity, I’ve heard some people say, “Doctrine doesn’t matter.” Typically, they mean if we would all lay down our doctrines and just focus on Jesus, we would all get along. But that assertion is also doctrinal. It’s saying to

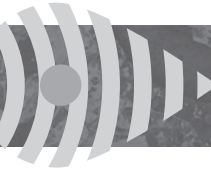
everyone else, if you lay down what you hold dear, and believe in the Jesus-only doctrine I consider precious, then we can all get along. This approach is well meaning but exclusivist, privileging its own view. It also leaves out the Father and the Spirit. We need to dig deeper. Why does doctrine over the Holy Spirit divide?

The fault line of division over the Spirit today is quite different from that of the early Church. The “great schism” affecting most of the modern church is over the *gifts* rather than the *person* of the Spirit. The division falls rather neatly along just a few of the Spirit’s more effusive gifts, things like speaking in tongues, prophecy, healings, and miracles. To simplify it for the moment, there are *charismatics* who treasure and practice these gifts, and *cessationists* who adamantly insist most of these gifts are no longer in effect. The groups shore up, take sides, and accuse one another of wary extremes. Some remain in the middle, self-described “open-but-cautious.” Entire denominations, seminaries, and churches divide over their views of these gifts of the Spirit.

Wherever you fall in this debate, I think there’s a deeper issue at stake. It’s interesting that we don’t divide over spiritual gifts like service and mercy. We don’t part company over whether mercy is still in effect or if service is still valid. And there aren’t too many divisions over faith, hope, and love, what Paul called “the higher gifts” (1 Cor 12:31). Everyone believes in those. Maybe, just maybe, we’re fighting over the wrong gifts. Certainly, there are things worth debating. Paul opposed Peter for his gospel-compromising racism. But what is the greater issue at stake here? Quibbling over a few of the Spirit’s choice gifts, we’ve missed the most important gift of all—*the Holy Spirit himself*.

Pigeonholing the Spirit based on a few of his gifts is like sizing someone up after a single conversation. I’m not a big Quentin

Tarantino fan. His films are too violent for me. I've seen clips here and there, and at the behest of several friends I did watch *Inglorious Basterds*. I'll admit the initial interrogation scene is riveting, but I still find the flippant ultraviolence deplorable. So my initial impression of Tarantino was not positive, but that was before I met him in person.



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One afternoon as my wife and I were waiting to be seated in a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant, I glanced over the hostess's shoulder. Recognizing a guy sitting by himself in the bar, my wife turned to me and said, "Honey, I think we were in college ministry with that guy." I smirked and said, "Honey, that's Quentin Tarantino." Lunch was dominated by debate over whether we would introduce ourselves to Tarantino after we were done. My wife won the debate, so we walked over to say hi.

To my surprise, Tarantino was quite affable. He asked our names. My wife made a quip about having a guy's name, and when Tarantino heard her name is Robie, he leaned in. He asked how she got the name. As Robie told the story, Tarantino tracked the plot, asked questions, and laughed along the way with two complete strangers. After a bit more chit-chat, he invited us to stay for a drink. We gratefully declined, but I walked away shocked by how kind and inviting he was. Based on his filmography, I figured he'd be a total jerk. If I'd stuck with my initial impression of Tarantino, I would have been wildly wrong.


Sizing the Holy Spirit up based on a few of his gifts is a big mistake. If we relate to the Spirit primarily regarding miraculous

gifts, and whether they are operative today, we distort and limit our understanding of the third person of the Trinity. He should be known for much more. Who is the Spirit? Is he a person or a spiritual force? How are we meant to relate to him? Can we pray to the Spirit? Can we worship the Spirit? What is his role in creation? Is he present in culture? What will he do in the future? And what does being filled with the Spirit look like after all? These are some of the questions I'd like to explore. Instead of relating narrowly to the Holy Spirit, I'd like to broaden our engagement with him by touring aspects of his vast character that are often unexplored. In focusing more on *who* the Spirit is, we may find ourselves less divided.

HERE IN SPIRIT

I don't want you to read this book simply to avoid division or handle it more winsomely, although that would be great. Motivation for knowing the Spirit should be much grander. And here it is—*the most meaningful, creative, satisfying life possible is one lived here in Spirit*. The key values of meaning, creativity, and satisfaction correspond to a primary aspect of our humanity—mind, body, and spirit. The Spirit enables us to thrive as whole persons.

The Spirit enables us to thrive
as whole persons.



The mind longs for meaning, coherence, and understanding. When we look up at the stars, we wonder who made them and where we came from. Do we have a purpose in life? Logically, when we balance the checkbook, we expect the math to add up. Philosophically, we ponder what it means to live well. We want to make sense of the world. At some level, we want what's *true*. We

value meaning, but we're also not just brains on sticks. We like to make stuff.

Early in life we feel the impulse to create. All three of my children loved to color when they were young. When finished with their thirty-second masterpiece, they would hand it to me and insist I hang it on the wall. As my daughter Ellie grew older, she took to adult coloring books. With precision, and a flair for unique color combinations, she creates brilliant versions of these stock images.

Once when Ellie had finished coloring a wolf, her sister Rosamund blurted out, "Ooh, it's half wolf, half creation wolf." What did she mean by "half creation wolf"? That half of the wolf was marked by a sequence of alternating yet wild and brilliant colors—yellows, reds, and turquoise. The other half of the wolf was filled in with more predictable colors and looked more realistic. Rosamund identified Ellie's creative impulse to expand on the realistic wolf as an act of *creation*.

Rosamund was on to what J. R. R. Tolkien describes as "sub-creation." He writes:

Man, sub-creator, the refracted Light
 through whom is splintered from a single White. . . .
 The right has not decayed.
 We make still by the law in which we're made.

As subcreators, our impulse to create is a refraction of the great light of God. Every human being is imbued with a desire to fashion because we are fashioned by a Creator who creates with his own two hands, the Spirit and the Son. We desire *beauty*. But creative expression and intellectual exploration alone do not bring ultimate satisfaction.

Deep down we long for something that transcends our own thoughts and cultural expression. We want to be satisfied. I've had nearly flawless days touring ancient ruins on the Wild Atlantic Way of the Irish coast or taking in some of the finest of the art in the world in Paris, accompanied by my favorite person in the world. Yet I still felt dissatisfied at the end of the day. What is that thing that's so difficult to find? Transcendence.

We want to be connected to something greater than ourselves. It's why we adore beauty, climb mountains, and explore religion. In fact, our search for satisfaction can be so intense it dislocates us from the present. Socializing with others, we may half listen to them while scrolling our device for fans, friends, followers, anyone who will pay attention *to us*. Alternatively, we may eject from the present to be connected with world events, up to date with the cultural or global moment. Twitter highlights these for us in a column called "Moments." But alas, our digital search for transcendence often leaves us disembodied in the present, unable to value the person in front of us or enjoy the moment fully.

I've invited several secular friends, along with some Christian friends, to join us for dinner once a week to explore some of life's deepest questions. In advance I encouraged my Christian friends to see this as an opportunity to learn from secular people and value them. One evening we were in the kitchen huddled around the potluck spread on our granite island. I looked up to see one of the Christians I'd invited entranced by his screen, while one of our secular friends stood idly beside him, for quite a while.

In our search for transcendence, we may be "here" but not in Spirit. Cadavers of disembodied yearning, we are "there," seeking satisfaction somewhere in the digital landscape.

Think of the last time you were “caught up in the moment”—singing along in a concert, playing with your kids, laughing with friends, making love. A real, embodied joy. Sociologist Peter Berger describes this experience as a “signal of transcendence.” Joy, he says, signals the existence of a transcendent, all-satisfying reality.

The psalmist directs our search to the love of God, “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps 90:14). He knows that true joy and satisfaction are found in God. The Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are uniquely positioned to satiate that longing *for all our days*. Unlike any other deity, they experience ongoing self-satisfaction and joy within their perfect community. They give what they have. Feuding gods or lone deities are unable to offer what they cannot experience, interpersonal joy and eternal love within a perfect, divine community. But the Spirit is described as the Father’s love “poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:5). He sweeps us up into the fountain of his divine love to bring about true human satisfaction. This is the *summum bonum*, the highest good—to enjoy God in his limitless goodness, truth, and beauty. Yet when we limit our search to the imminent, we flatten out transcendence and fail to trace the signal back to its source. The connection is dropped and satisfaction with it.

Meaning, creativity, and satisfaction correspond with the three Greek transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness. Each transcendental points away from itself to God, the fountain of all truth, beauty, and goodness. The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who initially opens the mind to true meaning, continually inspires creativity, and together with the Father and the Son satisfies us with the goodness of God. Therefore, the most meaningful, creative, satisfying life possible is one lived *here in Spirit*. And the Spirit

accomplishes this not by transporting us away from this life, but by transforming us in it.

How does he do this practically? That's what we'll explore in this book. As we follow the Spirit through the sweep of Scripture, beginning to end, we will explore who he is. He's quite stunning when you stand back to take him in. And we'll consider what he does. He's not given nearly enough press. As we do, my aim is to help you recover a present-tense relationship with the Holy Spirit, making him the constant reality of your life.

If you glance at the table of contents, you'll notice the chapters follow a general arc from creation to new creation. This keeps the big picture of the Spirit's creation-perfecting work in view, while allowing me to color in the chapters with reflections on how he influences the stuff of everyday life—things like culture, work, prayer, community, waking up, evangelism, suffering, sin and temptation, and our longings for peace. Individual chapters are like beads on a string: they can stand alone but do much better when they hang together. At the end of the book you will find questions for reflection and discussion. If you are reading on your own, take some time to pause and consider them. If you have a small group, consider discussing them together, taking a couple chapters at a time, to deepen your learning in community.

As you read and reflect, I hope you are encouraged to live the most meaningful, creative, satisfying life possible—a life lived here in Spirit.

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