

## **Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord**

It was the traditional harvest festival of Pentecost. The day called for all faithful Jews to come to Jerusalem to worship, and Jesus' followers also gathered there. Suddenly, there was the sound of wind sweeping through the room. Divided tongues that were fire-like appeared on the heads of the disciples. They began praising and talking about the wonderful things that God had done in languages that they had never spoken before. Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit on his church!

But what, exactly, does that mean? What is the work of the Holy Spirit? Ever since Jesus sent the Spirit, Christians have often been confused and have disagreed about the nature of the Spirit's work. This was certainly an important question in Martin Luther's time, and much of his teaching focused on the Holy Spirit. Luther came to understand that we can only believe in God through the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit works through the gospel.

One of the reasons Luther wrote "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord" was to teach people about the Spirit's work. This hymn remains a beautiful and helpful overview of those key truths. At the same time, it is an invitation and a prayer that the Holy Spirit would come to us and be present with us. Throughout the hymn, we can see the blessings given to us by the Spirit. Each stanza explores those blessings by using a different name or title for the Holy Spirit that highlights a kind of gift that he gives to us.

The first stanza is the most general. It's addressed to the "Holy Ghost, God and Lord." "Holy Ghost" is a slightly older way of referring to the "Holy Spirit," but its meaning is identical. It is important, though, that the hymn calls the Holy Spirit "God and Lord." People sometimes think of the Holy Spirit as an emotion or a power that we have in our hearts. The Spirit can cause that, but the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is, if fact, a person of the Trinity, our three-in-one God (John 14:26, Matthew 28:19).

Stanza one goes on to ask that the Holy Spirit would be poured out "on each believer's mind and heart." The Spirit's blessings are for both places. 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 tells us that the Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God. Through him, we can understand deep mysteries of God's wisdom. Other parts of the Bible, such as Galatians 5:22–23, talk about gifts of the Spirit that affect our attitude and even feelings toward God and other people. Our lives of faith include thoughts, attitudes, and emotions, and the Spirit works all of these in us. The stanza ends by

asking that the Spirit would guide Christians from “every land and every tongue” to be united. We long for a time when God could draw the Church together in greater agreement and unity around everything God teaches us.

The second stanza asks the Holy Spirit to make God known to us as the “holy Light, guide divine.” 2 Corinthians 4:6 says that God “made his light shine in our hearts” to know Jesus. In fact, the Bible says that it’s completely impossible for us to believe in Jesus unless the Holy Spirit works that belief in us (1 Corinthians 12:3). And so, the hymn asks for the blessings that guide us toward God and help us to “know him aright”—that his word would “shine,” that we would stay away from errors and false teaching, and that we would “confide” (trust) in God completely.

An especially beautiful part of stanza two talks about our relationship with God. It asks that we would be able to “call him Father with delight.” Luther loved this picture and way of addressing God. When we call God “Father,” we’re saying that God has chosen to adopt us into his family, that he loves us and wants to give us everything good. It’s the Spirit who teaches us how to have that relationship with God.

In the last stanza, we call the Holy Spirit “holy Fire, comfort true.” Jesus called the Spirit the “Comforter” (John 14:16-17). “Fire” is a picture of the Spirit both because of the fire-like tongues on Pentecost and because believers are baptized “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). We often think of fire as zeal or excitement, but the Bible most often uses fire as a picture of God’s presence. By his Spirit, God is with us in all his power. This stanza reflects on this as it discusses our task in this world, namely, to willingly serve and do the work God has given us and run our race without being turned aside by hard things, being strengthened by the Holy Spirit, so that, at last, we would go home to be with the Lord.

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“Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord” is traditionally the main hymn in the Lutheran Church for Pentecost Sunday. Part of what gives it its useful and instructive flavor comes from its structure. The first stanza was probably written about 500 years before Luther. To help congregation members, Luther kept the same melody and expanded the hymn. The result is that the hymn starts by discussing the overall gifts of the Spirit

to the Church and then considers how the Spirit works in the life of each Christian.