

Baptism in the Spirit

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On the Goshen estate the blood that had been splashed on the lintel and door-post of each house was still wet. The smell of roast lamb pervaded every home. Each family was in a state of suppressed excitement and of feverish activity. Household chattels had been tied in bundles, ready to be borne on head or shoulder. Every robe was belted at the waist and every foot sandaled in readiness for the coming march. Round the fire they crouched to eat their hasty meal – meat, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. As the first grey streaks spread across the eastern sky, each Israelite father led his family out to join the great exodus. After 400 years a nation was coming out of slavery into freedom. “Redeemed!” they shouted one to another, as they turned their backs on Egypt for ever.

Baptism in Cloud and Sea

At the head of the long marching column, they could see a pillar of cloud that was mysteriously unaffected by the morning breeze. It moved before them, never so slowly that the marchers had to dawdle, or so quickly that the old or the young could not keep up. At the Red Sea, Moses, their leader, parted the waters for the final phase of Israel’s initiation into their new life as God’s people. When all had crossed, the waters returned, not only destroying the Egyptians, but also cutting Israel off forever from their past life. Old things had passed away, and all things had become new. This is one of the Bible’s most graphic pictures of Christian initiation. “Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...Now these things...were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:1,2,11).

What is the “One Baptism?”

“There is ...one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” says Paul (Eph. 4:5). Does he mean water baptism or Spirit baptism? He means **the “one baptism” into Christ** which involves both water and Spirit. This word about Israel’s baptism into Moses beautifully illustrates this. They were “under the cloud” that enveloped and led them, picturing baptism in the Spirit. They also “passed through the sea”, pre-figuring water baptism. So Israel’s redemption by blood was sealed by a twin baptism into Moses in cloud and sea. And this is “for our instruction.” But what does it teach us?

God’s people under the new covenant need to be initiated into Christ, as His old covenant people were initiated into Moses, that is by a baptism in cloud and sea. Neither water baptism nor Spirit baptism is an optional extra for the committed Christian. If we profess Christ as our example, then we must follow in His steps. Though He was the sinless Son, He submitted to being immersed by John in the Jordan river. As He came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit came upon Him. This was “when He began” (Luke 3:23). This was His messianic initiation. He was also blazing a trail for us to follow.

First Commitment Class

At Pentecost Peter took his convicted hearers through the first commitment class in the history of the church. He told them to repent, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. Tracing through the Acts record we find water baptism and Spirit baptism are constantly linked. It was so with the converts in Samaria (8:14-17). It was so with Saul of Tarsus (9:17-18). It was so in the Gentile outpouring in Caesarea (10:47-48). And it was so in Ephesus (19:5-6). In his epistle Paul never tells the young churches he had founded to get baptized or receive the Holy Spirit. He takes it for granted that they have been initiated, and appeals to them on that ground.

Paul could make that sort of assumption only because he and his fellow-workers had been personally involved in laying these foundations in the lives of their converts. What he would do today if confronted with the hotch potch of Christendom is perhaps suggested by his handling of the twelve disciples he found in Ephesus, in whose spiritual beginnings he had played no part. Sensing a missing dimension in their spiritual experience, he asked “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (19:2).

At no point did Paul ask them about the reality of their faith, but inquired whether their believing had been accompanied by a reception of the Spirit. He soon discovered that they were John’s disciples. John could only take His disciples as far as he had gone himself. He truly believed in Jesus as the Messiah, but had never come into the full blessing of the new covenant. Paul knew at once what these disciples needed, which is also needed by countless professing Christians in the churches today. It was the “one baptism.” It was full initiation into Christ. So he first immersed them in water in the name of Christ and then laid hands on them for the Holy Spirit. They all spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Did You Receive?

Let me put that question to my readers: “Did **you** receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Then let me anticipate some answers that I feel sure would be given. Someone will reply: “Of course I have received the Holy Spirit! You cannot belong to Christ without having the Spirit of Christ, can you? I know I belong to Christ, so I must have received the Spirit.”

It is true that Paul teaches that every believer has the Spirit of Christ. But I am sure that Paul would be decidedly unhappy with that kind of reasoning, for to him and to all the early Christians, receiving the Spirit was not theoretical, nor even merely theological, but experiential. **Having** the Spirit does not preclude you from the need of **receiving** the Spirit. Jesus surely had the Spirit for the first thirty years of His life on earth. But at the Jordan, the Spirit came to Him in a new and different way. This is pre-figured in the meal-offering of Leviticus 2:5, 6. Like all the offerings it speaks of Christ, and so of His body. It was to be of “fine flour unleavened” – our Lord’s holy humanity. It was to be “mixed with oil” – His union with the Holy Spirit. They were to “break it in pieces” – His utter self-surrender to death, as expressed in His baptism. Finally they were to “pour oil on it” – His anointing with the Holy Spirit. The offering had to have oil **on** it as well as **in** it. How accurate are the Old Testament types.

What It Means to Receive

Returning to my question, some would reply by saying, “I’m not sure what exactly you mean by ‘receiving the Holy Spirit’.” Tracing through its use in the Acts and the epistles proves that receiving the Spirit is not identical with receiving Christ. Conversion to Christ and the baptism in the Spirit are not the same, though we do have one solitary instance of both happening to individuals at the same time (Acts 10:44 ff).

The word that is used consistently and repeatedly to describe what happens in the baptism in the Spirit but is never used simply of conversion, is “upon”. The Old Testament prepares us for this. Anointing oil was poured **upon** the head of prophet, priest and king, not to make them God’s people, for they were that already, but to fit them for their special service. God put the Spirit that was upon Moses **upon** the elders of Israel to equip them for leadership (Num. 11:25).

The Spirit coming **upon** the Lord Jesus at the Jordan was not to make Him more holy than He was - an impossibility - but that the words and works of God, never before associated with the carpenter’s Son, might be manifested in Him. He in turn promised the disciples that they would be “endued (or clothed **upon**) with power from on high” when they received the Holy Spirit. So it was on the day of Pentecost. Later in the Acts we read how the Spirit came **upon**, fell **upon**, and was poured **upon** different groups of disciples. Paul reminds Titus of “the Holy Spirit which He poured out **upon** us richly.” Have **you** had an “upon” experience of the Holy Spirit?

How May We Know?

Some would answer my question this way: “There was an occasion some time after my conversion when I surrendered myself to God and asked Him to fill me with His Spirit. It was a wonderful experience at the time. Since then there have been moments when I have felt the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in my life, but I’ve never been really sure that I have been baptized in the Spirit.”

God wants us to have an **enduring** experience. “He on whom you see the Spirit **descend and remain**, this is He...” This was how John the Baptist was to identify his Messiah (John 1:32-34). “Descend and remain” was a key phrase. It tells us the age of preparation was dying and the age of fulfillment was dawning. Under the old covenant the Spirit descended on men, but under the new He would descend and **remain**. This was the Comforter that Jesus promised, “to be with you forever.” We are not to settle for an experience that comes and goes when we have been promised one that abides.

He also wanted us to be quite sure that we have received. “Wait for the promise of the Father,” He told His disciples. Implicit in these words was the assurance that they would know when the promise had been fulfilled. How else would they have known how long to wait? We are not to expect the confirmation of a rushing mighty wind or cloven tongues of fire, for that wasn’t in the promise. How then are we to know?

What Is the Sign?

Is speaking in tongues the sign? Did Jesus say, “You shall receive **tongues** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you?” No, He said, “You shall receive **power**...” We must put the emphasis where Jesus

put it. Power is the essential ingredient. Power to be, power to do, power to function according to our gift and calling in the body of Christ. “Should we not expect to speak in tongues?” Yes. The Acts record confirms that this is the normal manifestation when the Spirit comes upon men. But we are not to seek for tongues as the be-all and end-all of the experience. This may all too easily result in a shallow if not spurious experience. I have met a few believers who have received power without tongues. They need a release into the charismatic dimension. I have met all too many who seem to have tongues without power. Many of these need to be seeking God afresh for an enduement with power, which is what Christ promised. By and large you get what you seek.

How to Receive

Though it is essential to be convinced of the scriptural basis of the experience, this alone is not enough. There must be a deep desire for God to meet us in this way. Jesus set out this basic condition when He said, “If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.” Only the thirsty qualify. If you are not thirsty ask God to show you why. Often there is inner adjustment needed – cleansing from sin, righting wrong attitudes or motives and deliverance from fear or unbelief. Then we suddenly find that mental assent to a biblical proposition has turned into spiritual thirst.

Then you must come to the Lord in prayer, pleading the promises that God has quickened to you. Jesus said, “Come to Me and drink.” That means not only **asking** in faith, but **taking** in faith. This is the faith that appropriates the blessing, and says thank you. The ministry of laying on of hands by a mature Spirit-filled believer may greatly help you here to shift gear from the place of asking to the place of taking, and then again into a manifestation in tongues. Remember God is for you, He is not looking for grounds to disqualify you but for a reason to bless you. “How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to (you) who ask Him.”

Finally, remember that the baptism in the Spirit is part of Christian initiation. That means a beginning, not an end. It is getting our feet on the foothills of the Spirit, not planting a flag on the top of Everest! Some of us have been on the mountain for many years, and we find there is still so much to explore and experience. To those who have not yet tasted life in the Spirit, who may be hesitating to venture forth, we would say, “Come on up, it’s great!”