

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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BAPTISM (5): RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 2:38

The topic of baptism is closely linked with the question of the Holy Spirit. Just a superficial reading of the NT gives us already the impression that there seems to be something between ‘baptism’ and the ‘Holy Spirit.’

Baptism and the Holy Spirit

For example in Acts 2, when Peter was explaining to the Jewish crowd what was happening to them on the day of Pentecost, Peter said, ‘What you see is precisely the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy – the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us.’ They received what Jesus called ‘a baptism with the Holy Spirit’ in Acts 1:5.

Paul wrote in 1Corinthians 12:13, *For by **one Spirit** we were all **baptized** into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one **Spirit**.* ‘By the Holy Spirit, we were all baptized.’ You see again that the Holy Spirit and baptism are tied together. Every believer, regardless of racial or religious connection, or social standing has been united by the Holy Spirit into one spiritual body (the Church) in baptism.

We also have the words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 where John said, ‘I baptize you with water. Jesus baptizes you with the Spirit.’ John the Baptist was contrasting his own baptism with the baptism that Jesus will later administer. ‘I give you only water (which is external). I cannot give you a new life. Only Jesus can give you a new life. I give you the external ceremony of cleansing when you repent. When Jesus comes, He will give you what corresponds to that external act – the washing of regeneration.’

Sometimes we hear this question. ‘When do we receive the Holy Spirit. At what point does the Holy Spirit come into the life of a person? Is it before baptism? Is it after baptism? Or is it at baptism?’

This question is important because it has to do with the definition of being Christian. ‘What is a Christian?’ The fact that you believe all the doctrines of the church, does that make you a Christian? Of course not. This is Paul’s answer in Romans 8:9: *But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now **if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His**.* Paul is very clear. If the Spirit of God does not dwell in you, you are not a Christian. You may accept the Bible as the word of God, you may go to church regularly, you may be very active for God, none of these things as such makes you a Christian. The scriptural answer is simple: you are a Christian when and only when you have the Holy Spirit in you. When you receive the Holy Spirit,

then you are a Christian. If you do not have the Holy Spirit, you do not belong to Christ. You are not His.

You shall receive the Holy Spirit

Now let's go back to our initial question. Since everything depends on having the Holy Spirit, it is fair to ask, 'When do we receive the Holy Spirit?' At what point in relation to baptism do we receive the Holy Spirit? In this respect, Acts 2:38 is an interesting passage. This is what we read.

Acts 2:38. Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We have here another passage where baptism and the Holy Spirit come together. And the passage seems to say that the Holy Spirit is received at the baptism of the Christian. 'Be baptized ... and you shall receive the Holy Spirit.'

Let's take a closer look at this passage. Peter was speaking to a Jewish crowd gathered in Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Many people were filled with the Holy Spirit, and that created a great stir. Then he said in v. 39, *For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.* What is the promise? All God's promises are wrapped up in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, you have none of his promises. The promises come to us through faith. The gift of the Holy Spirit is granted to us through faith. When we have faith, God gives us the Spirit and all his promises are there. There is no other promise outside the Spirit of God.

When the crowd heard Peter, they were totally stunned. *They were cut to the heart*, we read in v. 37. And so they asked him, *What shall we do?* 'What shall we do now that we know that this Jesus whom we crucified is Lord and Christ?'

This is when Peter said, *Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* A few things to observe here. First, 'Repent.' Repentance implies a complete change in the direction of your life. Repentance, *metanoia* in Greek, means a complete change of mind. It is not simply a mental change of attitude or a feeling of remorse. You do not just say, 'I'm sorry.' You have to be sorry to the extent that you are willing to do something drastic about it. You declare, 'I am finished with sin. I am turning away from my godless way of life. From now on, I am changing the whole direction of my life.'

After you repent, then what? 'Be baptized.' Baptism is the visible proof of repentance of a person who is committed to follow Christ. Baptism itself does not result in the forgiveness of sins. Rather, forgiveness of sins is the result of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, and should lead to baptism. Both are needed: the inner conviction (repentance), and the outward display (baptism). Jesus said, 'If anyone confesses me before men, I will confess him before my Father (Matthew 10:32).' If truly you believe in Jesus, you will accept to confess him before the world, and you will get baptized.

You repent, you get baptized, and then what? *And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* This is not to be confounded with the Holy Spirit's gifts, i.e., the fruits of the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit as a gift. It is receiving the person of the Holy Spirit in your inner being. You repent, you get baptized and then you will have the Holy Spirit. So is Peter saying that it is at baptism that you receive the Holy Spirit?

Here we need to consider a related question. 'When do you receive the Holy Spirit' is connected with the question of 'How do you receive the Holy Spirit?' Not one person has ever entered the kingdom of God without first having been touched by the Holy Spirit's conviction, the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting people of sin. This is where everything begins. The Holy Spirit works hard at

revealing to us the true nature of our sin and creating in our heart a deep regret for the transgressions we have committed. For certain people, at some point in their lives, they respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit by making Jesus Lord and Savior of their souls. At that moment, the Holy Spirit enters into their being and regeneration takes place. A person who was spiritually dead is born anew. That is an instantaneous act of God in response to believing faith. In this act, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the physical being of the person who is regenerated (1 Corinthians 6:19). From this, we understand that by the time a believer asks to be baptized, the Holy Spirit has been in that person for some time already. A person without the Holy Spirit does not ask to be baptized (except for those situations where the motivation is unspiritual). Therefore it would be incorrect to affirm that a believer receives the Holy Spirit only at baptism.

How then should we understand Acts 2:38? ‘Repent, be baptized, and you shall receive the Holy Spirit.’

Receiving the Holy Spirit as a seal

In order to answer that question, we have to talk about the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, and more specifically about two things. The NT describes the Holy Spirit as a seal and as an anointment. The Holy Spirit is given to the disciple as a seal and as an anointment.

The sealing of the Christian is mentioned in several places: Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; Revelation 7:3. The passage in Revelation is particularly interesting. This is what we read. *Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.* In Greek, the word ‘servant (*doulos*)’ means ‘slave.’ What is a slave? A slave is a person who is subjected to forced servitude and can be bought at a price. How do you get a slave? You go to the market, you choose one that you like, and you buy that person. After you pay, that person becomes your property. In order to show to that you own him, the practice was often to put a seal on the slave, much like the livestock branding we do nowadays. In a way, a seal is a proof of purchase. It is a proof of ownership.

The seal of the Holy Spirit indicates that a believer belongs to God. God bought him with the price of the blood of his Son. He is identified as God’s possession because of the seal he has. Also this seal becomes a protection for the slave. Bearing the seal of the owner means that anything that is done to that slave is like doing it against his master. That is the point of Revelation 7:3. The servants of God are sealed to be protected from the power of the evil one. We read later that those who carry God’s seal will not be touched by the judgments of God.

The Holy Spirit is a seal to us, and this is linked with baptism in Romans 4:11. This is what Paul writes in Romans 4:11. We find that the word ‘seal’ is applied to circumcision. *And he (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also.* Circumcision is described here as a seal. It is treated as an external seal of that righteous status which Abraham already had, long before he was circumcised. This is particularly interesting because we too are circumcised. We also have the seal. But we are not circumcised in the flesh. We are circumcised in the heart.

Let’s read Colossians 2:11-12.

*Colossians 2:11. In Him you were also **circumcised** with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the **circumcision of Christ**, 12 buried with Him in **baptism**, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

Paul here passes from our circumcision, to the circumcision of Christ, and then to baptism. What is the link? Circumcision was a sign of the Jews' covenant with God (Genesis 17:9-14). For Christians, physical circumcision (cutting off the foreskin of the penis) has been replaced by a circumcision made without hands (cutting off the old life of sin). When was the evidence of this spiritual circumcision seen? At baptism, when we were 'buried with Jesus.' This is what Paul calls the 'circumcision of Christ.' So here we see a kind of equation. The Holy Spirit is the seal. The seal is connected to the circumcision of the heart. The circumcision of the heart is connected to baptism.

Receiving the Holy Spirit as an anointment

Let us come to the anointing of the Spirit. Several verses affirm that Christians are people who have been anointed:

- 2Corinthians 1:21: *Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has **anointed** us is God.*
- 1John 2:20: *But you have an **anointing** from the Holy One, and you know all things.*
- 1John 2:27: *But the **anointing** which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same **anointing** teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.*

A believer has 'an anointing from the Holy One,' by the Holy Spirit.

What is the biblical meaning of 'anointing'? In Israel, kings and priests of the OT were anointed. The anointing of these people represented the giving of a spiritual authority by God to them. The king has no authority unless it is given to him by God. That is why Jesus said to Pilate, *You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above* (John 19:11). The kings of Israel were not like the kings of the world. They were God's representatives in Israel. That is why they had to be anointed by God. They could not anoint themselves. This anointing showed that their authority was given to them by God. The same thing applied to the priests, especially the high priest. The anointing indicated that the priest has received his calling, his authority as a priest from God.

We can say the same thing about the prophets. The prophets were anointed by the Holy Spirit because without the Holy Spirit, a person has no authority to prophecy. It is the Spirit of God who enables him to declare the will of God. That is why in Isaiah 61:1-2, the prophet said, *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.* What is the anointing? Again we see that the Holy Spirit was the prophet's anointing, which enabled him to preach the good news to the afflicted.

Jesus' baptism: receiving the Holy Spirit

The Lord Jesus quoted these same words in Luke 4:18 and applied them to himself. 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because God has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.'

Now here is an important question. When did God anoint Jesus? When was Jesus anointed? Well, interestingly, it was at His baptism. We need to take a close look at this passage. Matthew 3:16.

Matthew 3:16 And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him.

The expression 'the Spirit of God' is intended as an allusion to the anointing of the Son of David by the Spirit of the Lord in Isaiah 11:2. The one who is to 'baptize in the Holy Spirit' must himself experience the formal anointing in the Spirit. Remember what we said about the meaning of

anointing. It shows that someone receives spiritual authority. When the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, it marked the inauguration of his earthly ministry. Jesus is visibly equipped and commissioned to undertake his messianic mission.

Notice that Jesus received the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Does that mean that He was without the Holy Spirit before that? Of course not. Matthew 1:20 tells us that Jesus was from the Holy Spirit from his conception. The gift of the Holy Spirit at his baptism has to do with the office to which He was appointed. 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor.' It was the public approbation of Jesus by God and a sign of his being set apart for his work.

It is important to notice also that the Lord Jesus, like the believer, was sealed by God. We see this in John 6:27: *Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the **Father has set His seal on Him.***

When did God the Father set his seal on Jesus? Again, it was at Jesus' baptism, by the descent of the Holy Spirit on him and by a voice from heaven which declared that He is the beloved Son of God. Let's read again Matthew 3:16-17. *And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."*

We see the importance of this event. When Jesus was baptized, God anointed and sealed his Son with the Holy Spirit. This was accompanied with an audible voice saying that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. It was an official event signifying that Jesus was now about to enter upon his mediatorial work as He is publicly identified and accredited by God.

Baptism: receiving the seal and the anointment of the Holy Spirit

The baptism of Jesus is intriguing, intriguing because we wonder why Jesus accepted to be baptized by John the Baptist. Baptism requires the repentance for one's sins. Jesus had no sin. Why getting baptized? The reason is because Jesus did not come to earth as God. He came as man to be our Savior. He had to identify himself with sinful man. He had to be one of us so that He can die for our sins. Our baptism is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). The baptism of Jesus was for the purpose of identifying himself with our sinful nature.

But even though they are different, they have important similarities.

Baptism marked a fundamental change in the life of Jesus. From that point on, Jesus was no longer the carpenter that people used to see. He left Nazareth, his hometown, and began to preach the gospel. He began officially his salvation ministry, with the public endorsement of his Father, and with the sealing and anointing by the Holy Spirit. It was at this point that He was anointed and that he began to preach the gospel to the poor. The Holy Spirit has always been with him. But the receiving of the Holy Spirit at his baptism had to do more specifically with the work of the Holy Spirit in sealing and anointing him.

Baptism marks also a fundamental change in the life of the believer. From that point on, we declare publicly that we renounce to continue in our sinful ways and that we embrace a new way of life in righteousness. The Holy Spirit has already entered our soul, before we get baptized. That is how we were led to ask for baptism, in obedience to the instructions of Christ. So at our baptism, the receiving of the Holy Spirit does not have to do with regeneration, but with the work of the Holy Spirit in sealing and anointing us. At that point, we embark officially on the mission that Jesus left for us to accomplish in his absence, i.e., 'to make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).'