

The Confirming and Unifying Role of the Spirit

In our studies of the work of the Spirit in the early church, we have been puzzled that there was no discernible pattern for the falling of the Spirit on different persons. The apostles received the baptism on Pentecost though they were not baptized in water as Peter instructed others to be in order to receive it. Cornelius received the baptism before his water baptism.

Even though all who repent and are baptized are promised the gift of the Spirit, the Samaritans did not receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit until some time after their baptism when apostles laid hands on them. Paul received the Spirit after Ananias (not an apostle) laid his hands upon him, evidently before baptism. Spirit baptism is mentioned in some cases of conversion but not in others. Is this confusing? We will propose some answers.

Some of the freshest concepts on several subjects that I have found have come from Oliver Howard in the tapes of his classes taught at Pepperdine Lectures. I claim no originality for what I am to set forth in this essay. I give Oliver Howard credit for the thoughts that I am to present, yet I want to make it clear that I am not speaking for him. I am going to give my understanding of his main points, and that may give a different spin to them. He might think that I have missed his meanings in some areas. His topic was *The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Early Church*.

In making us what we are as God's people, the Spirit did some things in history that are not common to all people and may not be a part of his continuing ministry today.

We recognize Acts to be historical document written by Luke primarily to a man named Theophilus rather than to us today. Commonly, histories were written in the ancient world to defend a point of view. Greek histories were apologies for Athens being the greatest city of the world, and Roman histories set forth Rome as the great city whose manifest destiny was to rule the world.

The Christian religion had no legal status in Rome. Luke gave a defense of Christianity in the Roman world where it was being given no legitimacy. Disciples could be persecuted for practice of this new religion. The question was whether Christianity should be legalized or not.

Since the Romans permitted the peoples they conquered to practice their ancestral religion, they allowed the Jews to practice Judaism. Luke was writing a letter to "most excellent" Theophilus, evidently a man of position and influence. To him Luke set forth in historical account that Christianity was the true religion of the Jews. The church grew out of Judaism. Disciples were the true followers of Moses, for the law and the prophets pointed to Christ and the church. Judaism split with the death of Jesus with the church becoming true Judaism which should be considered legitimate.

Working on that historical premise, how does the Holy Spirit fit in? The Holy Spirit established the authority for identifying true Judaism. How do we know that Jesus and the apostles, rather

than the rabbis, taught true Judaism? Jesus performed miracles. The apostles performed signs and wonders. The deacon-evangelists were filled with the power of the Spirit. Paul had the power of the Spirit. The rabbis could make no such claim. The giving of the Spirit was the confirmation that Christianity was the true religion of the Jews.

There was a problem that needed clarification. There were all those non-Jews (Gentiles), the uncircumcised, in the church who were not Jewish proselytes. How could that be? Luke would show that this true Judaism was not limited like ancestral Judaism but its manifest destiny was to include all peoples.

The Spirit confirmed the mission of the church through the authority of Jesus and the apostles to include all mankind. The primary role of the Holy Spirit in the early church was to bring all together as one in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, man or woman, slave or free, black or white, rich or poor. It was the Spirit who directed the inclusion and expansion. Jesus had said to the apostles in his parting words, *“But you shall receive **power** when the **Holy Spirit** has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in **Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth**”* (Acts 1:8). Luke’s account follows that outline for expansion.

Who Receives Baptism?

At this point it is good to ask what Holy Spirit baptism is, who receives it, what it means, and its impact. It is first mentioned in Mark 1:8 by John the Baptist, who says concerning Jesus, *“I have baptized you with water; but he will **baptize you with the Holy Spirit** .”* That promise was not just to the apostles but a **general audience from Judea and Jerusalem** . The apostles had not been selected at that time.

Among his last words to the apostles, Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *“You are witnesses of these things,”* he continued. *“And behold , I send the **promise** of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with **power from on high**”* (Luke 24:47f).

Luke takes this up in Acts 1:8, *“But you shall receive **power** when the **Holy Spirit** has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses..”* On Pentecost, *“They were all filled with the **Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”* (2:4). In verses 32-33, Peter explains, *“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father **the promise of the Holy Spirit**, he has **poured out** this which you see and hear.”*

Going on to the tenth chapter, we see Peter and others going to Cornelius and speaking to him and many persons gathered. Peter told them about Christ who also offered salvation to all persons. *“While Peter was still saying this, the **Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word**. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the **gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles**”* .. “Then Peter declared, ‘*Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the **Holy Spirit just as we have?**’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”*

Later, in defending his actions in going to Cornelius, Peter explained, “*As I began to speak, **the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, `John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?***”

Who receives that gift? It is Peter who declared, “*And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the **Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him***” (5:32).

These passages identify the gift, promise, power, Holy Spirit, and the baptism, falling, or outpouring of the Holy Spirit as being one and the same and given to all the obedient. However, all did not receive outward manifestations which could be seen and heard. Neither were all recipients empowered in the same manner.

To those who wished to obey him on Pentecost, Peter promised, “*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of the Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him***” (2:38f). Who were “all that are far off”? Paul definitely identifies them as the Gentiles in Ephesians 2. In this great chapter, Paul declares, “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were **far off** have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility*” (v. 13f).

Luke shows how the Spirit brought salvation to Jew and Gentile, making them all one body. “*For by one **Spirit** we were all baptized into **one body** - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of **one Spirit***” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit signaled a new age where all the obedient are accepted, all drinking equally of the same Spirit though some, for special reasons, had special outward manifestations which others did not receive. Those outward manifestations were not for the saving of the individuals. They confirmed the authority passed from Jesus to the apostles, the deacons, and Paul to speak for God. They also confirmed the unity of all who believed.

Mankind became scattered after Babel when their tongues were confused. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit appeared as tongues of fire resting upon each of them. “*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” “*And they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.*” This work of the Spirit is symbolic of the unity he created and we are called upon to recognize, respect, and maintain (Eph. 4:1-4).

Expanding Beyond Jerusalem

Now we will observe the work of the Spirit as the prime mover in fulfilling the manifest destiny of the church in advancing from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria into the rest of the world. This will be accomplished through inspiration of the apostles and through manifestation of himself in select ways in directing the church in its universal mission. The impact is that true Judaism is universal in its scope.

From the beginning the apostles were informed of the universal nature of the gospel, yet they did not understand it. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter revealed, “...*this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh’ ... And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (Acts 2:17, 21). Peter then declared that this was being fulfilled in Christ. After his convicted audience cried out in despair and he told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and in order to receive the gift of the Spirit, he added this startling announcement, “*The promise is to you and to your children and to all that are afar off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him*” (v. 39). Again, in a sermon in Chapter 3, he declares the universality of the gospel based on the promise given to Abraham, “*And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*” He was sent to the Jews first but not exclusively.

The mission to the Gentiles was revealed to the apostles, but they did not act upon it. However, their Spirit directed sermons laid the authoritative groundwork for it. In Acts 6 we see the beginning of the Spirit-approved mission to the Gentiles.

There was a complaint in the Jerusalem church that the Hellenistic widows were being discriminated against. The Grecian (Hellenistic) Jews were those who had been living in other parts of the Roman Empire. As Jews lived among non-Jewish peoples, some tended to withdraw themselves from society and became more conservative. Others, however, learned to live with the Gentiles in ways that broadened their perspective. Though this made them a bit suspect by Judean Jews, they eased the tension by appointing Hellenistic men to serve the widows’ needs. It would be men from this Spirit-filled group that initiated the mission to the Gentiles.

Other Grecian Jews began to dispute with Stephen as he performed signs and wonders through the power of the Spirit. This is the first demonstration of power by anyone other than the apostles. Because of their accusations against him, he was seized and brought before the council where he made his masterful defense which brought his stoning. What was so inflaming about his speech? The Jews based their exclusive claims upon the promises made to Abraham which included their land and Jerusalem. Their king was to rule from that city. Worship was centralized around the magnificent temple where the Presence was presumed to be. Stephen shredded those cherished claims.

Briefly, he declared that Abraham’s inheritance was not Palestine, for he never received a foot of it; the Most High does not dwell in houses made by men; and Jesus is standing at the right hand of God as ruler of all. That was too much! He was setting forth the universal purpose of God through Abraham which gave Jews no exclusive claim.

A great persecution arose at the stoning of Stephen so that all the church was scattered through Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles. The apostles were not ready yet to extend the mission (Acts 8). Those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went to Samaria proclaiming Christ and baptizing great numbers of believers.

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord

Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. It was an outward demonstration of power that Simon could see. Why was such a demonstration needed?

Centuries before, Assyrians settled Samaria and later, with the help of an unauthorized priest, had built a rival temple on Mount Gerazim. Their worship was independent of Judea. They hated the Jews and the Jews hated them. Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman at the well had a special meaning when he told her that "salvation is of the Jews." If they had received the Holy Spirit directly, they might have concluded that they were right in being independent of Jerusalem and the Jews. So there was danger of a split with separate churches. Peter and John went to them in demonstration of their authority through the Spirit and laid hands on them. Thus they could see that they were of the one Spirit and one body in unity with Jerusalem. Peter and John then preached to Samaritan villages on their way back to Judea.

In Chapters 10, 16, and 22, Luke tells of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who was to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Ananias was sent to him. He explained God's mission for Paul, then laid his hands on him and Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit. You might have been taught, even as I was, that only the apostles could impart the Spirit by the laying on of hands. This meant that no one today could receive the baptism of the Spirit. But in this ritual by Ananias, the Spirit confirmed the empowering of Saul as an authoritative spokesman, especially to the Gentiles.

Cornelius

We have usually taught that Cornelius and his household were the first Gentile converts. The account of his conversion is recorded in Acts 10-11. However, after this account, Acts 11:19 takes us back in time to the scattering of the saints after the death of Stephen of Chapter 8 to pick up the chronology. The scattered disciples had gone as far as Antioch and began preaching to the Gentiles. Evidently, this was before the encounter with Cornelius.

The conversion of Cornelius is of special interest because he and many who were gathered with him received the baptism of the Holy Spirit before they had heard the full message of Peter ("as I began to speak") and before they were baptized in water. Was this to save them? No, the Spirit was never sent to give salvation to individuals. Why this variation?

Back in Jerusalem, Peter met criticism from the circumcision party (11:1-). Did they object to Gentiles being accepted? No, they complained, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Here was a group of saints whom they would not associate with because they were not also proselytes into Judaism. Peter gave a full account of how the Spirit had directed him to the house of this man and his family. Luke lets Theophilus know that this expansion was not a Jewish idea but a direction of the Spirit. He wrote: "*While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 'Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*" (10:44-47).

Philip had already been to Caesarea where Cornelius lived (Acts 8:40). Why did the Spirit not direct Philip to Cornelius instead of calling Peter all the way from Joppa? It seems evident that an apostle from Jerusalem was needed to confirm that Gentiles who believed were to be accepted in true fellowship in the one body without having to comply with Jewish regulations.

Since Christianity was to spread into the uttermost parts of the Empire, Luke was showing that it had authority for its claims. God had spoken through Moses; now it was through Jesus, the apostles, and the deacon/evangelists. This expansion among the Gentiles was authorized, not by the Jews who had not the Spirit, but by men acting under the direction of the Spirit. Any group that did not receive the attestation of the Spirit would be schismatic. All the men involved in this expansion demonstrated the power of the Spirit by signs, wonders, and miracles, just as God had attested to Moses.

In Jerusalem on Pentecost were Jews from many surrounding countries and continents. No doubt, many who came from those places for the Passover returned to their homeland without staying through Pentecost. Evidently, they carried the message of Jesus but did not have the complete message. Those who accepted their message became disciples of Jesus knowing nothing of what transpired on Pentecost. Apollos, of Alexandria in Egypt, seems to have been among that number. He converted some in Ephesus later, knowing only the baptism of John.

As we have observed in the case of the Samaritans, the church did not start out as a unified body of believers. This Ephesian group was different, tending to be schismatic. Secular history indicated that there were many disciples in Alexandria who were different in some beliefs, even as was Apollos. Luke tells us that Paul found these at Ephesus.

“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ And they said, ‘No, we never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’” And he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied” (19:1-6).

It is important to notice that Paul did not inquire if they were baptized for the remission of sins, but it was the reception of the Spirit that was the issue. It was important to know that true Christianity all came from the same authority and all pockets of believers had confirmation of it. That chain of authority came from Jesus through the apostles and was attested by the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was for the remission of sins but those disciples had not received confirmation of identity and fellowship with the Jerusalem church and the apostles in the one body. It was important that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ because there was unity in it as the reception of the Spirit verified. The Spirit did not fall in demonstration on all converts like Lydia, the jailer, and the Ethiopian for there was nothing schismatic involved. These disciples at Ephesus could not be allowed to be outside the unity of the body.

“Be Our Kind Of Christian!”

The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) is the last episode in the integration of all people. True integration was hard for the Jews to learn and accept. They had no objection to fellowship with Gentile proselytes, for they were among those on Pentecost. At the conversion of Cornelius and the crowd gathered with him, the Spirit testified that it was not necessary for Gentiles to become Jewish proselytes before conversion. But there were those in Judea who contended that after their conversion they should be circumcised, identifying themselves as Jews. In other words, they were saying, “You must be our kind of Christian!” Sound familiar?

For sake of brevity, we go on to the letter to be sent to Antioch by the apostles and elders: *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell”* (15:28f). Why list these specific restrictions? They were warnings against prevalent practices among pagan Gentiles, but even more they were offensive to Jews who looked back beyond Moses to the covenant with Noah for abstinence from blood. In order for relaxed fellowship of Jew and Gentile in their homes and associations, these scruples of the Jews should be respected. By this letter the Spirit was calling for a social unity in harmony with their integration into the one body. It called for the same charitable spirit that Paul set forth in Romans 14 where he urged the loving respect for those of different convictions.

Organic unity could not be the ultimate solution to the unity of the believers. There must also be a learning to live together in love. So Paul wrote, *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the **unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**”* (Eph. 4:1-3). God enables this through the Spirit also, *“because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us”* (Rom. 5:5). *“For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility”* Eph. 2:13f). Hostility is overcome by this love. This is the perfecting of the role of the Spirit in the early church, bringing the body into maturity.

So, in Acts, Luke sets forth his defense of world-wide Christianity as the true Judaism as attested and confirmed by the authority of Jesus, the apostles, and the deacons / evangelists by powers of the Holy Spirit. They were not a political threat but one body of people bonded by love for one another and all people in every nation.

In the midst of his discourse on gifts and demonstrations of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12, 13, 14), Paul inserts his exaltation of love as being more desirable and enduring than all these demonstrations of the Spirit. It is “that which is perfect,” which when matured and full-grown, would make further demonstrative gifts unnecessary. The confirming and unifying role of the Holy Spirit is completed in mature love. No longer would special outpourings and visible demonstrations be needed. *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:35).

Does this mean that the Holy Spirit is no longer active in our daily lives? Not at all. There is no indication that he has retired. His current help in our daily lives, however, is not the subject of this essay.

All who obey receive the baptism of the Spirit, but that is not in visible demonstration. Jesus has been set forth as God's messenger and savior once for all as the Holy Spirit has attested once for all. Authoritative spokesmen have given us God's message, so there is no need for more revelation. All races, nations, and peoples have been included in the one body, so there is no more need for confirmation of that. The bonding love has been offered to us. The confirming and uniting role of the Spirit has been fulfilled. []

(Cecil Hook)