

The Brown Street Beacon

"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,

holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)



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How Are You Standing?

We have seen in our last few articles that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was something that was promised only to the apostles, and there is no longer any purpose for it. Someone may ask, "What about the case of Cornelius and his household?" In this final article on Holy Spirit baptism, let's look at what happened to Cornelius and the other Gentiles in his house as recorded for us in Acts 10.

The events of Acts 10 represent the only other Bible example of one receiving a miraculous measure of the Spirit without the laying on of an apostle's hand. Was Cornelius and his house baptized with the Holy Spirit on that occasion? Let me be honest and say I am not sure. Yes, the Spirit fell upon them miraculously, but is that irrefutable evidence that they were baptized with the Holy Spirit? Maybe not. While the events that transpired on this occasion reminded Peter of the baptism of the Holy Spirit which the apostles experienced, that could have been due simply to the great similarities between the two events. On both occasions the Spirit fell on individuals without the laying on of hands, and on both occasions it was followed by the gift of speaking in tongues. However, there are three things which cause me to hesitate in assigning this the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

First, it is not called Holy Spirit baptism in the text. I realize that it is not specifically stated that what the apostles received on Pentecost was Holy Spirit baptism in Acts 2, but there the context and events leading up to Acts 2 make it obvious (Acts 1:1-5; Luke 24:49).

Second, there is no evidence that Cornelius and his household received the same power that the apostles received when they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Someone may say that this only proves that there were different degrees of Holy Spirit baptism. That might indeed be the case, but is there any evidence of different degrees of Holy Spirit baptism? Did not the apostles all receive the same measure of the Spirit which allowed them all to do exactly the same thing? All the apostles were inspired. All the apostles could transfer miraculous gifts to others. These were directly related to their receiving the baptism of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). Again, it could be that Cornelius and his household received a lesser degree of Holy Spirit baptism, but it seems as if we must at least consider the possibility that what they received was not Holy Spirit baptism at all.

Third, the promise of Holy Spirit baptism was a promise made to the apostles alone. We have seen conclusive evidence of this. The promise of the Comforter was made to the apostles alone (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Jesus told the apostles to wait at Jerusalem for the promise of Holy Spirit baptism (Acts 1:4-5), and in Acts 2 we find them receiving the promise. This is the biggest problem I have with calling what happened in Acts 10 Holy Spirit baptism. We teach the truth to our Pentecostal friends about to whom the promise was made, then we turn around and say

that Cornelius, a man who was not an apostle, was baptized with the Spirit. That's a hard argument to sell to Pentecostals in a discussion about this matter. Of course, that does not mean that it is wrong, and I am not yet totally convinced that Cornelius was not baptized with the Spirit, but these are some of the problems that I have with that conclusion.

Having said all this, let us now assume momentarily that Cornelius and his house were baptized with the Spirit. The language of the text still reveals that what happened was for the express purpose of showing that the Gentiles were granted repentance unto life (Acts 11:18). Since this no longer has to be proven, there is no purpose for Holy Spirit baptism. Furthermore, the language indicates that what happened on this occasion, i.e., the receiving of the Holy Spirit without the laying on of the apostles hands, had not happened since Pentecost ten years earlier (Acts 11:15). If every Christian receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit like those associated with the Assemblies of God affirm, why did what happened to Cornelius remind Peter of the day of Pentecost? Why did it not remind him of what happened the week before, month before, or whenever the last conversion took place. It is clearly inferred that what happened in Acts 10 was a rare occurrence, not something that was happening on a regular basis. Indeed, the only other time anyone received a miraculous measure of the Spirit, apart from the laying on of an apostle's hand, was on the day of Pentecost when it happened to the apostles. That's why this event immediately reminded Peter of Pentecost.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a promise, not a command

Pentecostals indicate that being baptized with the Holy Spirit is more than a promise. To them it is something that is commanded. In the previous articles we have quoted them on this, but hear them again.

“The Baptism is thought by some people to be a luxury rather than a necessity. They consider the experience to be desirable but optional. The Scriptures indicate beyond all doubt that all believers are to receive.” Listen to them further.

“For salvation? No, for we are justified by faith. For life and service? Yes! Jesus commanded His disciples not to depart from Jerusalem until they had been filled with the Spirit (Acts 1:4, 5). To the converts at Ephesus, Paul gave this instruction: ‘Be filled with the Spirit’ (Ephesians 5:18). This is a clear directive. These are more than words of invitation; they are a Biblical command.”

So, their teaching is clear on this. They believe that Holy Spirit baptism is a command, not just a promise. Their conclusion, however, is not scriptural. No where did God command anyone to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. As we have already seen, Holy Spirit baptism was only for the apostles, and to them it was a promise (Acts 1:4; Luke 24:49). If Holy Spirit baptism is a command, it must be within our power to obey it. Has God ever given us a command that we could not obey? No! But how does one obey this command? Remember, Jesus is the administer of this baptism (Matthew 3:11). So, if the Pentecostals are right, we have God giving us a command that is not within our power to obey, and then condemning us for not obeying it. Furthermore, if this baptism was so absolutely necessary in order to live right, and Jesus is the One who baptizes folks with this baptism, would He not automatically baptize every Christian with it? And if we have not been baptized with the Holy Spirit and therefore are unable to live right, is it not Jesus' fault since He is the One that does the baptizing with the Holy Spirit? Who can believe this? The fact is the baptism of the Holy Spirit was not given to help people live right, it was given for inspiration and confirmation. It was never a command to be kept, it was a promise to be received by those it was promised to, that is, the apostles.

Being filled with the Spirit does not mean to be baptized with the Spirit

Another mistake that Pentecostals make is thinking that every time the Bible speaks of being filled with the Spirit it is a reference to Holy Spirit baptism. This is clearly not true. Some were filled with the Spirit before Pentecost (John the baptizer [Luke 1:15]; Elisabeth [Luke 1:41, 42]; Zacharias [Luke 1:57-67]). Then we have Acts 4:31, Acts 6:1-5 and Ephesians 5:18. It is clear that not one of these passages refer to Holy Spirit baptism. One must look at the context to determine what a particular passage is referring to when it speaks of being filled with the Spirit. Some of the passages are not even miraculous in nature. In Acts 6:5 we are told that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. That was not a miraculous filling for Stephen was filled with the Spirit before the apostles laid hands on him. It simply meant he lived a holy life being full of the fruits of the Spirit. All the men chosen to serve tables had to have that characteristic (Acts 6:3).

Holy Spirit baptism has ceased. There is no longer a need for it. Today we have the inspired written word of God to guide us into all truth. If people were being baptized with the Spirit today, they would have the gift of inspiration and would be able to transfer miraculous power to others by the laying on of hands. There is not a person living today who has these miraculous abilities.

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