

# Questions About the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>

Gary McDade

## The First Question

*When did the disciples receive the Spirit—when Jesus breathed on them (Jn. 20:22) or at Pentecost (Acts 2:4)? According to John, they received the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed on them. According to Luke (Acts) they had to wait in the city for the spirit (Acts 1:4-5). Or, was what they received in Jerusalem something else?*

The passage in John reads, “And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost.” The context bears out that this passage is a Pentecost pointer; it points to Pentecost when the actual receiving of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit) would take place. For, the next verse says, “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” In Luke 24:46-48, a passage which is in reference to time parallel to the verses in John twenty, says, “And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.” The time which marks the beginning of the preaching of repentance and remission of sins according to Luke would be when all nations were at Jerusalem to hear it. That time was Pentecost, and interestingly, Luke recorded, “And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). These developments are recognized in the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah. Isaiah wrote, “The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:1-3). The prophecy in Micah 4:1-2 duplicates Isaiah 2:1-3.

One additional passage of scripture that makes clear that Jesus’ statement to the apostles in John 20:22 was not enjoyed as an immediate blessing or bestowal of the Holy Spirit but anticipated a future fulfillment is John 16:7 where Jesus said, “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” The Comforter is the Spirit of truth or the Holy Spirit (Jn. 15:26). The Lord said, “If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” Therefore, the Holy Spirit was not sent to the apostles until after the ascension of Jesus at which time he departed from the disciples (Acts 1:9-11).

## The Second Question

*When did the Samaritans receive the Spirit—when they were baptized (Acts 8:12) or when the apostles prayed and laid hands on them (Acts 8:15-19)? We teach that you receive the Holy Spirit when you are baptized (Acts 2:38). But, these believers had been baptized but had still to receive the Holy Spirit. It makes no sense to say they had already received the Spirit at*

*baptism because Peter and John prayed that they might receive the Spirit (Acts 8:15). Why would they pray that they might “receive the Spirit” if they had already received it?! The passage seems to differentiate between baptism and receiving the Spirit (Acts 8:16). These people were baptized into the name of Jesus after Pentecost, not before, so it wasn’t as if they had received the baptism of John. There is no mention of gifts being imparted—just the Holy Spirit, in clear terms. No speaking in tongues or prophesying is mentioned. The passage does not say that Peter and John prayed so that they would receive the out dwelling Holy Spirit. It makes no distinction. It talks of receiving the Holy Spirit, plain and simple. I can’t get my head around this one. Can you shed some light on it?*

The text under consideration reads, “But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done. Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost” (Acts 8:12-19).

Perhaps the best way to understand the operation of the Holy Spirit is to consider the degree of His bestowal upon men. Preliminarily, however, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit is a person, the third member of the Godhead or Deity (2 Cor. 13:14; Rom. 1:20). The language used to express his activity among men is accommodative, that is, we are told what the Holy Spirit does for someone when he is acting upon them and operating through them. Now, let us look at the operation of the Holy Spirit from the standpoint of the greatest degree of impartation to the lesser. First, John the Baptist said of Jesus, “For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him” (Jn. 3:34). Note that Jesus received the Holy Spirit beyond measure. Second, the apostles were promised the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14-16). He would empower them to preach the gospel of Christ and through them perform miracles to confirm their words as authoritatively coming from God (Mk. 16:20; Acts 1:9; Heb. 2:3-4). John the Baptist mentioned this initially in Matthew 3:11, Jesus promised it in John 14-16, and it came to pass in Acts 2:1-4. The baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit was promised only to the apostles (Mt. 26:20). Third, the “like gift” was bestowed upon the household of Cornelius in Acts 10. The similarity of the operation of the Holy Spirit on the household of Cornelius is in the manner of bestowal, that is, directly from heaven. The stated purpose for his coming upon them was to convince the Jews that the gentiles were acceptable candidates for the gospel of Christ (Acts 11:14-18). The gentiles did not receive the same gift or measure of the Holy Spirit as the apostles but the “like gift.” Fourth, the miraculous measure wherein the Holy Spirit imparted one of the nine miraculous gifts unto the recipient (1 Cor. 12:8-11). The text under consideration in this question (Acts 8:12-19) provides the proof that these miraculous gifts were imparted by the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the apostles’ hands. That is why Peter and John came down from Jerusalem. In Romans 1:11, Paul made clear that he would have to be present at Rome in order for the Christians there to receive a miraculous gift

from the imposition of his hands. This is how Timothy received such gifts (2 Tim. 1:6). Fifth, the ordinary or non-miraculous measure. The age of miracles has passed (1 Cor. 13:8-10; Jas. 1:25). The non-miraculous measure refers to the relationship with the Holy Spirit, as well as the other members of the Godhead, an obedient believer enjoys upon his baptism. Notice, such a one is baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19). He becomes a member of the family of God, the church of Christ (Eph. 3:15; Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:16). He becomes a partaker of the divine nature through the great and precious promises of the Bible (2 Pet. 1:4).

In Acts 8:15-16, reception of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans, the anticipation of his falling upon them, refers to the apostles laying their hands upon them and through that connection with authoritative, inspired supervision from the apostles the Holy Spirit would impart at his choosing one of the nine miraculous gifts to the designated recipient (1 Cor. 12:11). Their prayer in verse fifteen indicated their knowledge of what was about to happen and constituted a request for the Holy Spirit to favor the Samaritans with miraculous gifts. Remember the New Testament had not yet been written, and these miraculous gifts were necessary for the infancy stage of the church of Christ. Once the New Testament was completed and the apostles had died, the partial miraculous gifts were no longer needed and gave way to the superior blessing of the completed record of God's will, the Bible.

Today, the Holy Spirit continues to operate, but not miraculously. He teaches, convinces, comforts, strengthens, and guides through the word he has brought into existence (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Within the Christian He dwells after the same manner or in the same way as do the Father and the Son, that is, representatively through the word of God. As Paul wrote, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Eph. 3:17).

---

<sup>1</sup>Daren Willcock from London, England, is the person who wrote to me when I was the preacher for the Getwell Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee with these questions about the Holy Spirit.