

June 27, 2001

Dear Ben,

Thank you so much for keeping up our discussion of theology. I'm sure you agree that the great intellectual goal of Bible study is not to accumulate preaching texts but to understand biblical theology. All Bible passages are like so many jigsaw pieces that, when properly fitted to each other (theology), form a beautiful picture. You and I both want to perceive as many of the pieces as possible, and fit them together properly. You have commented on and asked questions about several matters. I will respond primarily to your first concern, which affects all the rest.

You ask how the OT Jews differ from the NT saints. The key difference, as you point out, is that they did not have the universal and permanent indwelling of the Spirit. By receiving that Spirit we are reborn as God's sons, which constitutes us as co-heirs with Messiah. We live in that Spirit; He lives in us. In Him we have become members of Messiah's body. This regeneration, adoption, indwelling—in fact, all the benefits of the heavenly Gift—are inaugurated when the victorious Lord baptizes us in the Spirit.

There are seven references by name to this baptism in the Spirit: Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13. All references but one are in the Gospels and Acts—and contrast John the Baptist's practice of baptizing in water with the Lord's later baptizing in the Spirit. Notice that the Spirit does not baptize but the Lord baptizes in the Spirit. The one reference in the Epistles emphasizes the fact that by Spirit baptism believers of all sorts become members of Messiah's one body (His eschatological assembly, the church). There are various other expressions used in the Epistles, as well as the rest of the NT, to refer to Spirit baptism and its aspects.

Take Acts 2 as an example of referring to Spirit baptism by another term. Acts 2 was certainly the first occasion of Spirit baptism; it was so identified in Acts 1:5 and 11:15-17. Yet, Peter did not call it Spirit baptism on the day it happened. Instead, he identified it by quoting God's promise in Joel: "I will **pour forth of My Spirit**" (Acts 2:17). And he concluded that Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand, has "received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [and] has **poured forth** this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The baptism is the whole experience the believers underwent when He poured forth the Spirit from heaven.

Consider John the Baptist's testimony about this matter. Anything recorded in all four Gospels and Acts must have great importance—both then and now.

"I baptize you in water...
but he who is coming after me...
will baptize you with [in] the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

We know that John was preaching only to Jews under the law. Would this baptism be for them? Would they, for example, be reborn and become members of the body of Messiah? Or was John speaking in riddles and of something that would not affect them? The most obvious answer is that John's audience had reason to anticipate that baptism.

Why were they not already baptized in the Spirit? Because it had never happened before—and could not happen before Pentecost (John 7:37-39). No one was ultimately forgiven and acceptable to receive the Spirit before Jesus' sacrifice. Notice how this is implied in Hebrews 9:15, which talks about people who committed "transgressions... under the first covenant." These must have been "OT Jews," since God gave the first covenant only to them. Among them were some of "those who have been called [to] receive the promise of [=promise which is] the eternal inheritance." They could not yet receive that promised inheritance because of their "transgressions...under the first covenant." Under that covenant there was no final forgiveness: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4; see 7:19; 9:9; etc.). While under the first covenant, they remained guilty, never truly acceptable to become God's sons. But finally "a death has taken place for the redemption of [those] transgressions" (Heb. 9:15). Messiah's sacrifice of Himself has made possible a new covenant, which grants God's Spirit to "the called" and secures the eternal inheritance for them.

We are assuming that under the new covenant the gift of the Holy Spirit and the eternal inheritance is basically the same for every believer. But is it possible that some believers have a different hope and need no Spirit baptism? No, it is not. (1) Even if there were different hopes for different groups, everyone would need new life and sonship in order to inherit eternally. (2) There is no biblical evidence for basically different hopes. For example, according to Hebrews we are all waiting for what God promised to Abraham (Heb. 6:11-20), which is the eternal kingdom (Heb. 12:28; see also James 2:5; Matt. 25:34). (3) Many OT Scriptures (such as, Ezek. 36, Is. 31) promise the equivalent of Spirit baptism. Like Nicodemus, "the teacher of Israel," we should have known from Scriptures that God would give His life-changing Spirit.

We started by asking whether OT Jews differ from NT saints. Of course they do, because "the Law made nothing perfect" but the new covenant gives "a better hope, through which we draw near to God" (Heb. 7:19). The old covenant was good but weak. It could condemn but could not achieve righteousness (Rom. 3:20; 8:3). But because of the Spirit and His work, those in Christ are righteous and become righteous (Rom. 8:1-4), God's sons destined to inherit (Rom 8:14-25). This does not mean that those who lived under the old covenant (OT Jews) are relegated to an inferior position. If among the "called," they will be resurrected under the new covenant. It is not the goal that has changed—only the means!

Yours for His glory,

John Hepp, Jr.