

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST

ASCENSION

THE PROMISE OF THE BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

“for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit”.

(Acts 1: 5)

During the forty days that our Lord was still on earth after His resurrection and before His ascension, He spoke to His disciples about many things. For example, He opened to them the Scriptures, so that they would understand the reasons for His suffering, death, and resurrection. He also spoke to them about the kingdom of heaven, what it meant and how it would come.

During these same days, as we can find in this passage, He prepared them for the day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He did this already on the first day of His resurrection, when He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” and we find the same element again in our text: “before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Before we deal with the ascension itself, it is important to reflect on Christ’s teaching which preceded the ascension.

Our Lord refers to what John the Baptist had said some years before, “I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1: 8).

It is quite clear that in these texts the baptism with the Holy Spirit is in a sense contrasted with the baptism with water. The question is: how are we to understand this contrast? And also, how are the two, the baptism with water and the baptism with the Holy Spirit, related?

This is an important issue today, especially in our discussions with assorted Pentecostal groups, but also generally with charismatic Baptist movements. What is this “baptism with the Holy Spirit”?

WATER VERSUS SPIRIT?

When you contrast these two very strongly, as Pentecostal groups are inclined to do, you get this kind of approach: the baptism with water (or “water-baptism”) is only an outward and formal happening which doesn’t mean very much. It is called “the first blessing,” but it is really of a lower order. The baptism with the Holy Spirit (or “Spirit-baptism”) is the real thing, the inward evidence of being a child of God. It is called “the second blessing”, and it is of a much higher order.

Therefore, Pentecostals will ask you: have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit? And they mean: have you consciously experienced the descending of the Holy Spirit into your heart, an experience accompanied by various spiritual manifestations like speaking in tongues and seeing visions? If you say “no,” you are considered to be a Christian of inferior rank, if you are a Christian at all! For the water-baptism cannot measure up to the Spirit-baptism. And you will understand, in this scheme of thinking baptizing an infant really has little or no meaning at all. Pentecostals will also make it a condition for attending the Lord’s Supper whether or not you have received Spirit-baptism.

So Spirit-baptism becomes the end and purpose of religious experience. And when we are confronted with this kind of reasoning, we are not always properly equipped to deal with it. Sometimes some of our people, who perhaps are not too happy in the church or with their own lives, meet Pentecostal people, who seem so bubbly in faith and are so vocal about Jesus. They then learn that they must undergo

“Spirit-baptism,” something which the established church represses. So they suddenly find “the missing ingredient” and are won over to the Pentecostal way. They may tell you later that they’ve found the missing link. The church only baptized with water, but now they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Is this how we must understand the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, and contrast the two? What is the meaning of this expression “being baptized with the Holy Spirit”?

PREPARATION FOR PENTECOST

The expression “Spirit-baptism” may have become a common dogmatical term through the theology of the Pentecostal movement, but is that term understood properly within its context or is it isolated from its context, and given a meaning which it originally did not have? This is an important question for all of us.

What do we see the Lord Jesus doing here in this text? Well, He is preparing His disciples for the day of Pentecost. He does not say in general: you must be baptized with the Holy Spirit, but He says: before many days – and that means very soon and at a *specific* time – you *shall* be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And then follows in Acts 2 the day on which Christ’s promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit is fulfilled.

So from a *particular promise*, directed to specific people, at a given time, we should not make an unspecified *general command*, directed to all people, all the time. At least, we should not do it in the sense in which the Pentecostal theologians like to do it. The context simply does not allow it. It’s like lifting a text, or rather a phrase, out of the Bible “you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit,” turning that promise into a question (have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?), pasting it on the wall, and conveniently forgetting the setting in which it belongs. Such texts start to lead a life of their own, and no longer function in a responsible Scriptural sense.

COMMAND OR PROMISE?

The Lord Jesus in our text does not give a command (you must be baptized with the Holy Spirit) but He repeats a promise: in a few days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And that promise was indeed fulfilled on the day, the exact and precise day, of Pentecost. This must be our starting-point when we try to understand these words.

Now the question may legitimately be asked whether this promise of being baptized with the Holy Spirit is in the Bible restricted to a one-time event at Pentecost, or whether this kind of baptism also takes place today. If we try to explain the issue in this manner then we do not isolate the text *from* the Bible, but we are examining it within the various contexts wherein it appears *in* the Bible.

Then you should note that the expression “being baptized with the Holy Spirit” is used in the Bible only – as also here in Acts 1 – in five specific passages,

and in each one the significance of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ is compared and contrasted. The other five are: Matthew 3: 11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3: 16, John 1:33, and Acts 11: 16.

There are many other texts which speak about the work of the Holy Spirit and how we are to receive Him, but the expression “*baptism* with the Holy Spirit” is used only in those six passages. And here indeed a contrast is being made between the work of John the Baptist and of Jesus Christ. And the inference in each text is the same: that the work of Jesus Christ is greater than that of John the Baptist, because He builds on and completes the work of John. Jesus does what John the Baptist could not do: He has cleansed His church by His blood and has poured out over His church the Holy Spirit.

THE TIME IS NEAR

With this understanding we go to the text in Acts 1. In verse 4 we read that Jesus tells His disciples to stay in Jerusalem, and to wait there for the promise of the Father, which, He said, “you heard from Me.” Christ had spoken to His disciples before about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He had done so in the prophecies of old, think of Joel 2. John the Baptist had spoken of the fulfillment of this promise in his preaching at the Jordan. Christ again spoke of the coming Holy Spirit just before His death, at the Lord’s Supper, when He promised His disciples the Comforter, the Counsellor (John 14-16). He did so again immediately after His resurrection, when He appeared to them (John 20:22).

So the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit had been clearly given and had been amply repeated. Now the time had come for this promise to be fulfilled. Stay in Jerusalem, says the Lord, for the time is drawing near.

And then comes the reference in our text to John the Baptist: “for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Now comes the moment about which John the Baptist spoke in his day: the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The Lord does not so much contrast water-baptism with Spirit-baptism as He points out the great progress which has been made since John the Baptist, namely the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ can do what John could not do, namely, grant in fullness the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

What was the meaning of the water baptism administered by John the Baptist? We read in Mark 1: 4 that it was “the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John the Baptist announced the coming of the Messiah, and called Israel to repent, and so to prepare for the Messiah. They had to repent in order to be washed from their sins through the work of the coming Messiah. And only when they were thus washed, as signified in water-baptism, by the blood of the Lamb of God, would they receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit, that is, the renewal through the Spirit of God. In this way, through the redeeming and renewing work of Jesus Christ, they would be saved from the wrath to come.

JOHN AND JESUS

Now John could only proclaim the necessity of, and preach the promise of, redemption and renewal, as signified in the baptism with water. Only Jesus would *bring about* that redemption and renewal. John had already admitted this when he said, “After me comes He who is mightier than I. . . .” I am only a herald who proclaims and promises, but He is coming who will bring it all about. When He comes, He will cleanse you with His own blood, and He will renew you through the power of His Spirit. Yes, said John, I have baptized you with water – and water is a clear sign and a sure seal – but after me comes He who will, by baptizing you with the Holy Spirit, give you the matter that is signified and sealed in my baptism with water.

Therefore, now that Christ has shed His blood on Golgotha, He also may announce the day that His Spirit will be poured out. For the outpouring of the blood has opened the way for the outpouring of the Spirit.

So the expression “being baptized with the Holy Spirit,” understood in its precise biblical context, specifically denotes the promised event that occurred on the day of Pentecost, an event and a day that cannot and need not be repeated.

REPEATED?

Now someone will say: but this “baptism with the Holy Spirit” *was* repeated, in Acts 11, where we read about Peter’s account of the Holy Spirit falling upon the gentile believers in Cornelius’ house. As you remember, Peter went to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and preached the word there, and as he was speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard, and they spoke in tongues, and then Peter says, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have?”

And when Peter must later explain his actions to his fellow apostles in Jerusalem – that he allowed Gentiles to be baptized with water – he explains it with a reference to the manifestation of the Spirit (11: 16), “And I remembered the word of the Lord how He said, John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Peter is saying: how could I refuse these converted heathen the baptism with water, when they clearly received the baptism with the Holy Spirit! If they received the greater gift (the Spirit), how could I refuse the lesser sign (the water)?

Does this passage in Acts 11 demonstrate that the baptism with the Holy Spirit was not a one-time event at Pentecost, but can be repeated, in any event was repeated, and therefore could possibly be repeated today? No, it doesn’t. For again, we must consider the context. What happened in the house of Cornelius is a very specific, ground-breaking event, namely the beginning of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Christian Church. The apostles had not (yet) ventured into preaching the Gospel to non-Jews, to the uncircumcised. This would prove to be a major step, not without controversy. Peter himself had to be prepared for it by a special vision, the one of the sheet with the unclean animals, to learn that what God

has declared clean or cleansed (think again of washing and baptism) Peter may not call “common” or unclean. Three times this vision occurred, and then three men stood at Peter’s door, asking him to come to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile.

CONFIRMED

Peter understood the vision, for he says to Cornelius (10:34): “Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality.” And when he then preaches the Gospel to these Gentiles, the Holy Spirit falls upon them, and they begin to show the gifts of the Spirit. Notice how here “Spirit-baptism” even precedes “water-baptism,” if I may use those terms, to demonstrate that this is indeed a new initiative of God.

And when Peter later is called to account by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (note how it says in 11: 2 that he was criticized by the circumcision party), he refers to what happened at Pentecost. Peter says: I know that this is a new development, but, brothers, it was just like what happened at Pentecost. Remember how the Lord Himself promised that we would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit”? The same thing happened to the Gentiles, and how could I then refuse them the baptism with water? Peter says: God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us, when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The point here is not that Pentecost is repeated, but that it is mightily confirmed! The effect of Pentecost is extended, according to the prophesies of old, also to non-Jewish believers. They, too, may share visibly in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and therefore they have the right to the sacrament of baptism as well.

So Acts 11 does not tell us that this “baptism with the holy Spirit” is constantly repeated. It tells us that at this pivotal point in the history of the New Testament Church, namely the beginning of the mission to the heathens, the church is reminded of the great promise of Christ. That promise, fulfilled at Pentecost, is that all who believe in Him will share in the gifts of the Spirit and belong to that Church over which the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost.

A NEW SITUATION

So we must conclude that the term “being baptized with the Holy Spirit” refers to the event that took place at Pentecost, and also that a new situation has come about, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the believers. It is a reality in which the entire Christian Church of the latter days may share: the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for all, Jew and Gentile, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There are two phases, Acts 2 and Acts 10, the mission to the Jews and the mission to the Gentiles, and both find their root in that one baptism with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

When you look at it this way, you leave those texts within their biblical setting and you explain Scripture with Scripture. Then we also understand that we today do not require a special “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” Nowhere in the New Testament do you read of this requirement in these terms.

We do read everywhere that we must constantly draw on that great spiritual gift of the outpouring which took place that day! The Spirit came to the Church to stay there, to work there, in all the members, and we must now live through and in the Spirit, who has come. Pentecost means the indwelling of the Spirit, and that is the new element of Acts 2, confirmed in Acts 11. That is the repeated emphasis of New Testament teaching. Do not repeat Pentecost, but draw on that great reality, every day, all your life. As the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, so He is given to all members, to each individually, and we may all, together and as individuals, live by that Spirit, whom Christ gave to His Church on that day as a fruit of His work of atonement and resurrection.

NO FALSE DILEMMA

Therefore we do not make any false dilemma between “water-baptism” and “Spirit-baptism,” as if water-baptism is relatively unimportant. For the one is inseparably connected to the other! It is remarkable that the Lord Jesus did not abolish the baptism with water in favour of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In the line of Pentecostal thinking, He should have said: water-baptism belongs to the time of John the Baptist, but we’re past that stage now, only Spirit-baptism is important today! No, He said, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The reality is now Pentecost, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the sign is still Holy Baptism, the baptism with water.

And the baptism with water is not of a “lesser” order at all. For what do we confess with respect to this baptism and the Holy Spirit? The Form for Baptism says it clearly: when we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us, and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely the cleansing of our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish in the assembly of God’s elect in life eternal.

THE LASTING INDWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The water of baptism still – even more clearly now than in John’s days – speaks to us of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, in which we share with all God’s covenant children. And as we must come to live out of our baptism, so we must come to live through the Spirit! It’s not a “second” blessing, it is all part of that one blessing which we have in the salvation in Christ Jesus.

Pentecost – described as the baptism with the Holy Spirit – was a one-time event. I will return to this point later, when dealing with Acts 2. But we note already now that its power and effects are received and felt by every generation anew. Once baptized, the church will feel it always. While the outpouring of the Spirit took place on one historic day, the omnipotent and unrestricted presence and power of the Spirit are felt by us every day. So we can speak indeed – with

Scripture – also today of being filled by the Spirit, guided by the Spirit, comforted by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit. As long as we do not isolate this from the saving work of Christ and elevate it to something “extra,” an added requirement for salvation, we are on solid biblical ground.

If we have to accede any point to Pentecostal theology, it may be this: that we must learn, not to repeat Pentecost and its miraculous signs, even though acknowledging that the Spirit is able to do so, but to live more out of the blessed reality of Pentecost, signified also to us in our baptism, that the Spirit is here with us, to stay. That He “dwells within our hearts” (Hymn 36) and that we may yield to Him, learn from Him, receive from Him, day by day, gifts unimagined and inexpressible. The outpouring, as historical event, is not repeated, but “the life-giving Spirit,” obtained for us by Christ, as the Form for the Lord’s Supper so beautifully says, does certainly impart to us day by day what we have in Christ.

In that sense we should not restrict the word “outpouring” to a one-time event, for the Spirit constantly pours out over us the gifts of Christ. The more we see this, the more we may live in it and reflect it in our lives.

The baptism with water today signifies to us and our children that we through faith in Christ are connected to Him as members of His body, and *therefore* also receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that our faith is made fruitful and productive. For these gifts we may pray and with these gifts we are filled and must work to the glory of God and the edification of our neighbour.

In that sense, we are with the church “baptized with the Holy Spirit,” immersed in Him, and overflowing through Him. This is part of what we have in Christ Jesus, our Lord, so that we can sing, in the fullest sense of the word,

Blest be the LORD, who on our way
Provides for us, and day by day
Upholds us by His power (Psalm 68: 8)