

The promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2

Aleck Crawford

This article offers some comments on the interpretation of the promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38,39 as given by Brother Don Harrison in his letter published under the heading, "Opposing erroneous teaching about the work of the Spirit today" (Aug. 2006, p. 291).

I WOULD LIKE to comment on the letter by Brother Harrison (as above), since I contend that it contains a number of factual errors on this important doctrinal subject, and also assumptions that cannot be proved. It therefore presents a distorted view of the operation and scope of the Holy Spirit in the first-century ecclesia. In Brother Harrison's favour we would remind readers of his first two paragraphs, where he states that, as a former evangelical, he rejected the unScriptural evangelical ideas being promoted by Brother Bill Davison (which Brother John Allfree was opposing in the booklet¹ that was the subject of the review that prompted Brother Harrison's letter), because he recognised the evangelical church's claims as a form of self-deception.

The inspired Apostle Paul emphasises in Ephesians 4:3-6 the *unity* of our faith, and writes, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God . . .". When, for example, we speak of "one baptism", we know we must eliminate apostate ideas about godparents, holy water, sprinkling, confirmation, baptism for the dead and 'it's not essential', and present the Biblical facts regarding total immersion into the name of the Lord Jesus after belief of the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Likewise, when Paul speaks of "one Spirit" we must eliminate all incorrect statements or ideas that blur the cognitive vision or cause people to come to wrong conclusions, or worse.

Did the promise of the Holy Spirit in Joel 2 take effect with the birth of John the Baptist?

We start with the following idea from the letter:

"However, I came to the conclusion some time ago that we as a community make the same mistake as the evangelicals in reading the words of Peter in Acts 2, when, on the Day of Pentecost, he quoted Joel 2:28-32, as meaning that the outpouring of the Spirit began just then. With this in mind I . . . suggested [in an article published earlier] that this passage really took effect with the birth of John Baptist".

Peter clearly states that what occurred at Pentecost in Acts 2 was "that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (v. 16). Neither Peter nor anyone else in the Bible referred what Joel said (quoted in Acts 2:17-21) to the birth of John the Baptist thirty-three years earlier. If these words of Joel applied to John the Baptist then Peter would have needed to say that what happened at Pentecost was the second fulfilment, or something like that; but he does not.

The letter continues:

"I would suggest that we might get the subject into sharper focus if we put Joel 2:28-32 side by side with Isaiah 40. John Baptist is the 'voice' which was to cry in the wilderness, and the 'all flesh' (Isa. 40:5; Joel 2:28) is the same in both cases. Isaiah 40 and Joel 2 begin at the same time, and both introduce the greatest event in the purpose of the Almighty, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to accomplish the salvation of mankind. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh, all flesh saw the salvation of God in Christ".

The words of John the Baptist eliminate this proposal, for he clearly says, "I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: *he shall baptize you with the Holy [Spirit] and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable*" (Lk. 3:16,17). So it was

1. Now online at <http://www.thechristadelphians.org/html/books/HSABT/index.html>.

not John's preaching or John's birth that brought the pouring out of the Spirit "upon all flesh". He did not pour out any Spirit, by his own admission quoted above. Some of John Baptist's disciples many years later did not even know whether there was any Holy Spirit given (Acts 19:1-6).

When did Jesus pour out the Spirit?

Jesus did not in fact pour out the Spirit "upon all flesh" until much later, not until after his ministry was completed. In John 7:39 John gives an important precondition for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit: "But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy [Spirit] was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified". Therefore, the Holy Spirit that those in the first century (to define the correct historical context) who believed on him should receive would be after Jesus was *glorified*, and not before, so certainly not at the birth of John the Baptist, nor during his ministry. Nor is the event in John 20:22,23 what Joel spoke of, since Thomas missed out (v. 24), and it was not what Joel prophesied because it was only the ability to announce to an individual whether his sins had been forgiven or not.²

Another major precondition is in Luke 24, where "the eleven . . . and them that were with them" were "gathered together" and were told by Jesus, "behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" (vv. 33,49). This is very similar in time and message to the incident recorded in Acts 1:

" . . . and, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy [Spirit] not many days hence . . . But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy [Spirit] is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (vv. 4-9).

A few days later, as verse 5 promised, when the 120 followers of Jesus (v. 15) "were all with one accord in one place" on the day of Pentecost "they were all filled with the Holy [Spirit] and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (2:1-4).

Peter then launched into a speech to convict those assembled that they needed to do something because Christ had been exalted and glorified and had received and shed forth the Holy Spirit: "Therefore being by the right hand of God *exalted*, and having *received* of the Father the promise of the Holy [Spirit], he hath *shed forth this*, which ye now see and hear . . . Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (vv. 33,36). Naturally we would expect the apostles to have taken the lead, Peter in particular.

Was the gift of the Holy Spirit the knowledge of salvation?

Let us now look at the following suggestion by Brother Harrison:

"The point I have particularly in mind is the statement by Peter, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). I suggest that this 'gift' was that of which Zacharias spoke in Luke 1:77; the visitation of the Holy Spirit was intended to 'give knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins'. And it was this promise of salvation that was assured in Joel 2: 'whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom. 10:13, citing Joel 2:32). If 'eternal life' is 'the gift of God' (Rom. 6:23), so too is the 'knowledge of salvation'".

This suggestion ignores the following points:

- 1 Acts 2:16-18 clearly indicates the ability to prophesy being poured upon a group.
- 2 There is an obvious contextual connection of Acts 2:16 with the "tongues" of verse 4, that is, the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages "the wonderful works of God" (v. 11).
- 3 In referring to "this, which ye now see and hear" (v. 33), Peter was clearly saying that this major phenomenon was that spoken of by the prophet Joel. What they *saw* were tongues of fire, and what they could *hear* was the speaking of many foreign languages by those who had just been filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking "as the Spirit gave them utterance" (v. 4).

2. Most translations have the meaning of John 20:22 very wrong. See older NASBs and NASB margin, "have previously been forgiven", and Nestle's *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, Bagster, page iii, 1968.

- 4 The Greek word *dōrea*, translated “gift” in Acts 2:38, always refers to the miraculous Spirit gifts throughout Acts; see 8:20, 10:45 and 11:17. To suggest that, because the Greek word *charismata* is not used in Acts 2:38, *dōrea* must refer to salvation or immortality is an invalid conclusion, because neither the word *charisma* nor its plural appear in Acts at all.
- 5 Further to the previous point, if the gift was the knowledge of salvation or immortality, why is there a judgement still to come?

If the work of Zacharias or John Baptist had given all flesh the knowledge of salvation, why was it that these people had to ask, “what shall we do?” (v. 37).

Were the Spirit gifts given to a large number of people?

Next Brother Harrison questions the idea that the promise of Acts 2:38 refers to the Spirit gifts, as follows:

“What was promised to those 3,000 who repented must have been promised likewise to the 5,000 of Acts 4:4. Did they each receive one of the Spirit gifts listed in the epistles? If they did then it would have been a phenomenon indeed for 8,000 people to be suddenly endowed with something like the gift of tongues or similar, and an outpouring on that scale just could not escape mention in the New Testament. But there is nothing recorded. With a few exceptions, we read only such things as ‘Many wonders and signs were done by the apostles’ (2:43)”.

Far from there being “nothing recorded” about any widespread distribution of the Spirit gifts, the evidence is that the possession of a miraculous gift of the Spirit was almost entirely the rule in the early first-century ecclesia, not the exception,³ as the following passages show:

“And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy [Spirit]. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God” (Acts 10:45,46);

“And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy [Spirit] came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve” (19:6,7);

“And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem” (21:4);

“Having then gifts differing according to the

grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching” (Rom. 12:6,7);

“... that in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye come behind in no gift” (1 Cor. 1:5-7);

“But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (12:11, NASB);

“But covet earnestly the best gifts” (v. 31);

“Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? . . . He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (Gal. 3:3,5);

“But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ . . . And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:7,11,12);

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10).

Indeed, the gifts were so widespread that the gift of discerning of spirits was needed to determine the true possessor from the false claimant, and to test them (1 Thess. 5:19-21; Rev. 2:2, etc.).⁴

Now we look at a further claim by Brother Harrison:

-
3. Exceptions would be where the apostles had not visited believers after their baptism to impart the gift to them, and those baptized after the Scriptures were completed.
 4. Brother John Allfree’s booklet (the subject of the review that brought forth Brother Harrison’s letter) recommends on page 38 as additional reading three extensive expositions on the subject of the Spirit. The first of these, the excellent book published by the Testimony, *Spirit in the New Testament*, by Brethren E. Whittaker and R. Carr, clearly demonstrates the widespread scope of the gifts of the Spirit in the first-century ecclesias. The second, my own book, *The Spirit—A General Exposition of New Testament Usage*, is available online at <http://www.christadelphia.org/books/spirit/index.html> and at http://www.thechristadelphians.org/htm/books/the_spirit/index.html.

"And, knowing human nature, if 8,000 people had been given miraculous powers, would not the apostles have had the problem of how to deal with a number of others who 'repented' simply in the hope of being able to perform some kind of miracle? Surely to promise a Spirit gift on the occasion of baptism would have sent out the wrong message".

The example of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8 answers this objection. Although he wanted the power of the apostles *carte blanche* to hand on the gifts, the principle is clear: he wanted the gifts for the wrong reason. God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and also the apostles, who had all the gifts, knew who were fakes and who wanted the gifts for the wrong reason. Thus Peter knew how to deal with Simon, possibly by the gift of discerning of spirits or the gift of knowledge. Simon's request was refused. Since the "Holy [Spirit]" (v. 18) or "gift of God" (v. 20) was given by the "laying on of the apostles' hands" (v. 18) he was told he had "neither part nor lot in this matter". So receipt of the Holy Spirit gifts was not automatic at baptism. Obviously the believers at Samaria had to wait to receive the gift for some time until Peter and John got the message and made the journey there.⁵

Conclusion

Let us not fall into the trap of inventing new theories because we simply have failed to read

all the relevant scriptures and come to a Biblical conclusion. Certainly the gifts poured out on the multitude in Acts 2 were only temporary and partial in nature, and the greater purpose was to enable some of the apostles to write the Scriptures and convince both Jews and Gentiles of the glory of the exalted Lord so that they could have their sins forgiven and the hope of eternal life.

But, in acknowledging this, let us not forget that the gift of the Holy Spirit promised in Acts 2:38 was miraculous in nature (v. 33) and limited in time (v. 39). This is also what Joel prophesied, as we see in Acts 2:17,18, although it would not have been possible to have seen the gift of tongues in that prophecy *per se* unless Peter had made his inspired commentary. In the above analysis we have seen indisputably in a number of later scriptures that what Peter promised, and what believers got, by the laying on of the apostles' hands was the same thing: a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, not knowledge of salvation.

-
5. Apart from Pentecost (Acts 2), when Joel 2 had its incipient fulfilment, the 'Pentecost' of the Gentiles (10:44-46) and the example of Paul (9:17), this was the method of bestowing the Spirit gifts. See my exposition on Acts 9:17 on page 109 of the book referred to in [footnote 4](#).

Did Jesus deliberately contrive to fulfil prophecy?

Answers to a serious charge

Malcolm Edwards

Some anti-Christian writers, particularly Jewish ones, have asserted that Jesus was just a clever Jew who deliberately sought to fulfil Old Testament prophecy to support his deluded claim to be the Messiah. How would we go about answering this charge?

THE FIRST POINT to make in response to this charge is that there is no proof whatsoever for it. We could reply, therefore, that the results speak for themselves, for who could deny the tremendous impact that Christianity has

had upon the world as a result of the appearing and teaching of Jesus? But let us answer the charge within the context of the allegation.

In the first place, the assertion presupposes that the Jews of the time of Jesus were not alert to such a ploy on the part of false Messiahs. Both Scripture and history record that many false claimants to Messiahship came and went, yet in the case of Jesus of Nazareth his enemies made no such accusation against him. Furthermore, when we analyse the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled there are few that could have been of his