



The Promise of the Spirit

By: Anthony D. Palma

The events of the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 were the climax of a promise God made centuries before—that the institution of the new covenant was also the beginning of the age of the Spirit.

God promised through the prophet Ezekiel, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (36:26,27).

He also promised through Joel, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my Spirit” (2:28,29).

According to these prophecies, the coming of the Holy Spirit in an unusual way heralded the dawn of the new age promised by God. For four centuries prior to the birth of Christ, Israel had been without a significant prophetic voice. For all practical purposes there was no overt activity of the Holy Spirit among the people of God.

But this situation changes dramatically as we turn to the opening pages of the New Testament. Even though the Son of God could have come into this world in a variety of ways, God ordained that it was to be by the special activity of the Holy Spirit upon the virgin Mary (Matthew. 1:18,20; Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit was once again at work among God’s people! In one sense, the virginal conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit was a sign that the new covenant was being inaugurated.

It is also significant that the Holy Spirit was active just before and just after the birth of Jesus. John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15,41); the Holy Spirit came upon both Zacharias (Luke 1:67) and Simeon (Luke 2:25–27). Luke also mentions that Anna was a prophetess (Luke 2:36). The new age—the age of the Spirit—was being inaugurated!

The inauguration was not completed until the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. But between the birth of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit upon the disciples, the Holy Spirit was indeed active in the ministry of Jesus, beginning with His baptism by John in the Jordan river (Matthew 3:16). This descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, along with the activity of the Spirit through Him throughout His earthly ministry (Luke 4:18,19; Acts 2:38,39), serves as a paradigm for all believers to whom God in the Old Testament promised the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit.

To return to the prophecies of Ezekiel and Joel: The promise given through Ezekiel is that all God’s people of the new covenant shall experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They will receive a new heart and a new spirit; because of the indwelling Holy Spirit they will be able to walk uprightly.

The promise given through Joel is of a different nature. In Joel’s prophecy the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is of a dramatic nature whereby the recipients prophesy, dream, and see visions. Joel’s prophecy is similar to the wish expressed by Moses that “all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them” (Numbers 11:29).

The coming of the Holy Spirit signified the dawn of the new age. But the prophecies clearly distinguish two works of the Holy Spirit — indwelling and empowering. Biblical theologians often refer to these as the animistic and dynamic aspects of the Spirit's work. The former relates to regeneration and the consequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The latter relates to endowment with power which is often signified by some unusual phenomenon.

One significant difference between experiences of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is that Old Testament persons do not appear to have received a permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit was given to a comparative few and usually for the purpose of prophesying.

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is given to all believers. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to be a New Testament believer apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9,14–16). In addition, all New Testament believers may be empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

God's will was that all believers experience both the indwelling and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. It seems it was God's intention that these two operations of the Spirit were to be different aspects of the one work of the Spirit in connection with the new covenant.

As a matter of fact, the New Testament indicates that a person may experience both these works of the Spirit almost simultaneously, as happened with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:44–46). It is difficult to determine the precise point at which these people were regenerated. It seems that in the midst of Peter's preaching they both believed and were filled with the Holy Spirit.

These two experiences, while they may be distinguished theologically, are not necessarily separated chronologically. There is no biblical warrant for teaching that a time interval must exist between regeneration and being filled with the Holy Spirit. But it is also true that many Christians have experienced only the one basic work of the Holy Spirit—that of regeneration—by which the Holy Spirit indwells them (John 14:17).

This terminology for the second work of the Holy Spirit is varied. Pentecostals usually designate this as the baptism in the Holy Spirit. They are on firm Biblical ground in doing this. In addition to the statement of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:11), Jesus said to the disciples, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5).

Yet when Luke records the fulfillment of that promise in Acts 2:4, he says that "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." This initial experience of being "filled" with the Holy Spirit is therefore synonymous with being "baptized" in the Holy Spirit.

In other places when he speaks of this experience, Luke says that the Spirit comes or falls upon people (Acts 1:8; 8:16; 10:44; 11:15; 19:6). Sometimes he speaks of the Spirit being poured out (2:17,18; 10:45).

However one designates this second experience of the Spirit, it should never be interpreted to mean that the recipient prior to that time did not have the indwelling Spirit. A believer without the Holy Spirit is a contradiction in terms! But it is possible for a believer not to experience the additional work of the Holy Spirit often called the baptism in the Spirit.

The different terms used for the experience of the baptism in the Spirit should not be pressed literally. They are simply attempts on the part of the biblical writers to help us understand better the meaning of the experience. Expressions like "baptized," "filled," and "poured out" emphasize that this is an experience in which the believer is thoroughly dominated or controlled by the Holy Spirit. Among other things, the work of the already indwelling Holy Spirit is intensified and heightened by the experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is associated with the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16–21). Just as in the Old Testament the coming of the Spirit upon men and women resulted in their prophesying, so Joel stated that the outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh would result in prophecy.

Joel also mentioned other indications of the coming of the Spirit which do not appear to have been fulfilled on the

Day of Pentecost. However, Peter emphasized the element of prophecy, for in addition to quoting the passage from Joel, he also inserted words, “and they shall prophesy,” in the middle of the quotation from Joel (Acts 2:18). In other words, Peter was emphasizing that prophecy will accompany the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

But did the disciples on the Day of Pentecost prophesy? Luke tells us they spoke in tongues (Acts 2:4). Prior to the Day of Pentecost there is no record of anyone having spoken in tongues under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. How do we relate speaking in tongues to prophecy? This is not difficult if we remember that prophecy is speaking out under the direct impulse of the Holy Spirit. This is precisely the nature of speaking in tongues — a speaking out under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, or as Luke tells us, “as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). The obvious difference between prophecy and speaking in tongues is that prophecy is in a language at the command of the speaker, whereas speaking in tongues is in a language unknown by the speaker. Speaking in tongues is therefore a specialized form of prophesying.

This experience of being baptized in the Spirit is accompanied by speaking in tongues, or glossolalia. There are many arguments in favor of this position, which has been presented adequately by Pentecostal writers. Our purpose will be served by taking a look at just two passages.

In Acts 2:4 the subject is “all” (Greek *pantes*). A simple grammatical analysis shows that the one subject applies to both main clauses, so the clear intent is that all were filled with the Holy Spirit and all began to speak in tongues. The linguistic means was available to Luke by which he could have said all were filled with the Holy Spirit and some spoke in tongues, if that had indeed been the case. But it is clear that all who were filled also spoke in tongues.

In Acts 10 we are told the Holy Spirit “fell on all them which heard the word” (verse 44). Peter’s fellow believers who were astonished at the Gentiles receiving the outpouring of the Holy Spirit knew the outpouring had taken place only because they “heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God” (verse 46). Verse 46 is introduced by the Greek word *gar*, which is a causative conjunction often translated “because” or “for.” It was the speaking in tongues that convinced these men Cornelius and his household had indeed been filled with the Holy Spirit. The evidence in Acts certainly indicates glossolalia is a necessary accompaniment of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

The question, “Why tongues?” is often asked. A threefold answer suggests itself.

First, it is very definitely a sign of the new age God inaugurated. This becomes clear as we read Joel’s prophecy in the light of Acts 2. In a very personal sense, speaking in tongues also signifies the entrance of the believer into the new age, if we remember that the indwelling and the empowering of the Holy Spirit are really two aspects of the one work of the Spirit in the new age.

Second, speaking in tongues strongly suggests the missionary responsibility of the Church. The communication of the gospel must be verbal. Consequently the multiplicity of languages on the Day of Pentecost suggests the worldwide evangelistic responsibility of the Church (Acts 18). This, of course, does not mean the recipient has command of a foreign language with which to preach the gospel. It simply means the variety of languages which believers speak when they are filled with the Spirit is an implicit reminder of the missionary task of the Church.

Third, speaking in tongues is a means by which the believer identifies himself spiritually (1 Corinthians 14:4). Of all the manifestations or gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament, only in connection with glossolalia is it said that the person edifies himself. All other manifestations or gifts are for the edification of the Church. It seems God would not withhold from any of His children any means by which they may be edified spiritually.

This does not contradict the necessary negative response to Paul’s question, “Do all speak with tongues?” (1 Corinthians 12:30). In 1 Corinthians 12–14 Paul is emphasizing the public and corporate aspects of gifts. Not all speak in tongues in the sense that not all are called upon by God to give public utterances in tongues which must be followed by interpretations. But the private exercise of glossolalia is another matter.

Two identifiable experiences of the Spirit-regeneration and infilling. Both are included in the Old Testament promise of the Spirit. Each complements the other. In regeneration the emphasis is upon the change of heart and life. In the baptism in the Spirit the emphasis is upon empowerment for service. All believers experience the Spirit’s regenerating

work; all ought to experience His empowering.

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