

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, #6

Was the outpouring of the Spirit to last to the end of time?

Intro: In our previous studies on the outpouring of the Spirit we saw that it was common for the apostles to promise the reception of the Holy Spirit to those they baptized. We saw the presence of the gifts of the Spirit all over the Roman Empire. In our last two lessons we considered the blessings the outpouring of the Spirit brought to believers. But now we come to what does it all mean to us?

Was the outpouring of the Spirit to last to the end of time? Should we expect such an outpouring with accompanying results of revelation and confirmatory miracles? Let's consider together the evidence of the Scripture in answering this important question.

What insight could we gain from the prophecy of Joel?

Let's go back to our original starting point, the prophecy of Joel.

Did Joel prophecy a period of continuous revelation?

Did Joel prophecy a time limit on the outpouring?

Joel prophesied that the outpouring of the Spirit would occur “after this” (from his prophetic perspective).

“And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; (Joel 2:28)

However, Peter in quoting the passage gives an interpretive translation saying:

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind (Acts 2:17).

This term was commonly used in the OT, in the form of “the end of the days”, for the time when the OT prophecies would be fulfilled, i.e. God would set up the Messiah on the throne of David. This establishes the beginning point of the outpouring; but what about the ending point?

Joel prophesied that the outpouring of the Spirit would be coordinate with wonders God would display “before the great and notable day of the Lord”.

“And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors whom the Lord calls. (Joel 2:30-32)

Notice that the outpouring of the Spirit is to prepare the way for the judgment of God upon the unbelieving, both among Israel and Israel's enemies. But what is this “day of the Lord”?

a) Perhaps the first response would be the final judgment of God at the second coming of Christ. However, more careful study of the OT reveals that Joel's “day of the Lord” might

better be seen as the time of judgment that began with the destruction of Jerusalem and continued until the Roman Empire was overthrown.

b) Note the prophecy of Jesus in Lk. 21:21-28. This prophecy of Jesus, which borrows the terminology of Joel, speaks of a day of the Lord falling upon Jerusalem resulting in both the destruction of the unbelieving and the deliverance of the faithful.

c) Peter saw that judgment already on the horizon. Thus he urged the unbelieving Jews on the day of Pentecost to avoid this day of judgment to come:

d) And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40)

Thus, the prophecy of Joel might suggest the possibility that the outpouring of the Spirit was to last from the appearance of the Messiah to the time when God would judge the enemies of the kingdom, beginning with Jerusalem and continuing with the defeat of the powers of this world as they were embodied in the great Roman Empire (Cf. Dan. 2). Thus, we might deduce that the "outpouring of the Spirit" would not reach beyond the fall of the Roman Empire. It might not even last that long! But it would suggest that we could not expect "the outpouring of the Spirit" to endure until the end of time.

What insight could we gain from the method of impartation?

We see that the outpouring of the Spirit came upon the early church through the laying on the apostle's hands (and apparently, through no others.)

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17)

This then was the customary way for the Holy Spirit to be given and received in the NT era. The only exception to this rule seems to be the household of Cornelius where the outpouring of the Spirit occurred among Gentiles for the first time similarly to how it had first been given among Jews, i.e. directly by Jesus Christ from heaven! (Cf. Ac. 11:15-18). Unless one can prove another means of impartation, it would appear that the outpouring of the Spirit could not be given beyond the lifetime of the apostles themselves. This would set an outer limit of a generation from the end of the apostolic era (first century). This would suggest that there might have been some people upon whom the apostles laid their hands exercising gifts of the Spirit in the late first century and into the second century; but we

would expect a diminishing of the phenomenon at the death of the apostles that would continue until no living person had spiritual gifts.

What insight could we gain from the duration statements of Paul's letter to the Corinthians?

We see that the apostle Paul predicted the cessation of spiritual gifts when the perfect comes.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

Of course this text has been a battleground between cessationists and non-cessationists. Those believing in the continuation of spiritual gifts argue for "the perfect" being Jesus Christ; those who contend for cessation of spiritual gifts usually explain "the perfect" as the completed revelation of God.

Evidence for this view includes:

"The perfect" in this context is the opposite of "the part".

The Greek word itself means what is "complete".

Paul contrasts the condition of partial knowledge with the condition of "full manhood" and "full knowledge" that comes through the completed revelation.

Thus, Paul envisioned an end to spiritual gifts through the outpouring of the Spirit at some future time. This is undeniable.

But when?

The coming of the "perfect" would best coincide with the completion of the NT canon since it was through the written scriptures that Christ would guide His church through the ages. When God had revealed all He wanted to say to the church, He ended the miraculous work of revelation and confirmation. Paul simply wants the church to understand that spiritual gifts will not always endure but faith, hope, and love would abide. Thus, it would be self-evident to them when that time arrived. Prophets could no longer prophecy, tongue speakers could no longer speaking other languages, miracle workers would no longer possess miraculous power!

Some commentators suggest that all the NT books were completed by AD 70. Both Paul and Peter appear to have died before this event and there is some evidence to suggest that Revelation (which is often dated in the reign of Domitian) might have been written before AD 70 as well. But even if we extend the date for the completed canon to the late first century, we should also consider the need for some time for the Scriptures to be collected and shared so that they could serve as a guide for all the churches in the Roman empire. Though it is impossible to put an arbitrary date on this, it is clear that by the end of the second century the

NT Scriptures had been collected and distributed over the Roman world.

Conclusion: But this raises yet another question. How shall Christian read and apply the NT statements about the reception of the Spirit? Are we to see “another kind of reception of the Spirit” or is there another solution?