

Joel's Remarkable Promise of the Outpouring of the Spirit, #9
What is the "gift of the Holy Spirit" in Ac. 2:38?

Intro: In my studies on the outpouring of the Spirit I sought to establish that NT believers upon their obedience to the gospel received through the laying on of the apostles' hands a miraculous gift. This act was called "receiving the Spirit" and "sealed the believer" (i.e. identified the believer as belonging to God) and thus served as "an earnest" of his inheritance as God's child. It also equipped the saint to participate in the worship and work of the church by either a gift of revelation or confirmation. Though there may have been exceptions, it seems that this was the more common experience for Christians of the first century to whom the apostle had access.

Most of us have been influenced more to the idea that the reception of spiritual gifts in the first century was uncommon and for only a few of the disciples; and that there is another "gift of the Holy Spirit" that all Christians receive. The primary basis for this concept is the statement of Peter in Ac. 2:38.

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

Tonight I want to show how Ac. 2:38 is not a promise of a non-miraculous indwelling of the Spirit in all Christians for all time, but is in harmony with the earlier stated conception. In short, I believe that Ac. 2:38 fits perfectly into the concept I have been teaching about the experience of the early disciples and that it is simply a promise of the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit resulting in spiritual gifts given to those who obeyed the gospel.

The background promise of Jesus

Jesus promised that those who believed the teaching of the apostles would have "signs following". Note carefully the promise of Mk. 16:16-20. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. "And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:15-18)

Notice that the command of Jesus is given to the apostles. They are commanded to go preach to every creature. They are told what will happen to those who hear their message. Those disbelieve will be condemned.

Those who believe will 1) be saved; and 2) have signs following them!

Thus, would Peter have expected that those he baptized “have signs following them”? Of course, that is what Jesus had said would happen.

Jesus had promised that the outpouring of the Spirit was coming soon. “And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

The events of Acts 2

The day of Pentecost was significant for the early church because it was the day the Holy Spirit was sent from Christ to His church!

Peter affirmed to the Jews that the spiritual gifts (tongues) they had witnessed were the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy!

but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: (Acts 2:16)

The outpouring of the Spirit was proof that Jesus was alive and at the right hand of God.

“Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

Peter had two reasons for promising the outpouring of the Spirit to his hearers!

The words of Joel

Remember that Joel had promised a widespread outpouring of the Spirit, one that would include all sexes, all ages, and people of all social standing.

‘And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams; Even upon My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

The words of Jesus

These signs shall follow them who believe...

Since Jesus had said “signs” would follow believers it was not unnatural for Peter to promise such under the Spirit’s guidance!

The appropriation of the language of Joel’s prophecy

Notice that in the promise of Ac. 2:38 Peter alludes to Joel’s prophecy in a number of ways. Note these parallels between Joel’s prophecy and Peter’s words in Ac. 2.

Notice in the context that “the gift of the Holy Spirit” in Ac. 2:38 is called “**the promise**” in Ac. 2:39. What promise had Peter in this context been speaking about? God’s promise through Joel of the outpouring of the Spirit.

Joel said: “You sons and daughters will prophecy”

Peter says, “The promise if to you and your children”
Joel said that the promise of the Spirit would be for the survivors
“whom the Lord calls”.
Peter says, “even as many as the Lord our God shall call”.
Joel speaks of this outpouring as coordinate with signs and wonders
“before the great and notable day of the Lord” that would fall on both
Israel and the nations around them.
Peter says, “save yourselves from this perverse generation.”

So in view of these parallel statements and concepts it is more likely that Peter is alluding to the language of Joel’s prophecy and appropriating that language and applying it to the current situation.

The consistency of Luke’s language in describing the experience of the outpouring

Someone may suggest that “gift of the Holy Spirit” in Ac. 2:38 cannot mean “spiritual gifts”. However notice these points:

The expression in Ac. 2:38 “gift of the Spirit” can either be something the Spirit gives or the Spirit Himself as the gift”. Thus, “gift of the Spirit” can simply be a longer way of saying, “you shall receive the Spirit as a gift”.

Luke uses the identical expression to describe the reception of spiritual gifts by the household of Cornelius.

And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:45-47)

Luke uses four expressions to describe the same experience:

Speaking in tongues

Received the Holy Spirit

The gift of the Holy Spirit

Poured out (Outpouring of the Spirit)

Notice further that “receiving the Spirit” is the common way to describe the reception of spiritual gifts.

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)

Note that “receiving the Spirit” is not the same thing as “receiving the word”. The former followed the latter.

If Ac. 2:38 suggests that every Christian “receives the Spirit” immediately upon being baptized, Luke did not seem to know it. He

says that the Samaritans had been baptized but had not yet “received the Spirit” and says nothing about any other kind of Spirit reception. When Paul came to Ephesus and found disciples there believing in Jesus Christ, he reasonably presumed that they had obeyed the gospel. As an apostle he had the power to lay hands upon them so that they might “receive the Spirit”. Thus, he asks the question:
and he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” (Acts 19:2)
But what exactly did Paul mean by “did you receiving the Spirit when you believed”. Luke clearly tells us:
And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. (Acts 19:6)

Conclusion: And so based on all these factors it seems best to treat Ac. 2:38 like the other texts that speak about “receiving the Spirit”. To say that the Christian does not “receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” as did those on the day of the Pentecost is not to affirm that the blessings of the Holy Spirit are still unavailable to us. Last week we noticed that:

Spirit-powered miracles can now produce faith.

Spirit-revealed sermons can now convict sinners & tell them how to be saved.

Spirit-revealed truth can lead the 21st century disciples.

We can acknowledge the manifest miraculous elements of the Spirit’s coming as a necessary part of His work in establishing the NT church while affirming the continuing work of the Spirit through the message given and confirmed in the 1st century.