

BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT: ANOTHER LOOK

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Like many of you reading this article, I grew up in what has come to be called “classic Pentecostalism.” The distinguishing characteristic theologically of most classic Pentecostal groups is the belief in the baptism in the Holy Spirit, accompanied by evidence of speaking in tongues. This theologically distinctive tenet is much more than a matter of mere intellectual affirmation. The Pentecostal tradition is a highly experiential belief system and because of this, the *experience* of what adherents often call “fire baptism” is highly sought after by members of these congregations. I am among the scores of Pentecostal believers who, as a teenager, ardently pursued this highly prized experience.

The prototype for this experience is found in the Book of Acts:

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

There are several elements in this first-century Pentecostal experience that are emphasized in classical Pentecostalism today which are regarded as essential to,

or at least typical of, a valid experience of Holy Spirit baptism today. *First*, the 120 were gathered together in one place. Spirit baptism in Pentecostal circles is something that takes place in the context of a church gathering, quite typically a Sunday or Wednesday night. While solitary experiences are acknowledged, they are certainly not regarded as the norm. *Second*, a great sound from heaven was heard, as of a mighty rushing wind. This element, along with divided tongues as of fire, signify the presence of the Holy Spirit. These are dramatic manifestations, which typically translate into an emotionally-charged atmosphere resulting in a very dramatic experience. *Finally*, the first-century experience was characterized by speaking in unknown tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. This element is the central and focal element in most of Pentecostalism's standard for a valid baptism experience. Indeed one of the major Pentecostal denominations regards speaking in tongues as the "primary and initial" evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

I recognize, of course, that with the proliferation of many Pentecostal groups and the inevitable evolution of theological understanding, the rigidity of this prototype has given way to a more flexible understanding, at least in many groups. The point I wish to make, however, is that this first-century experience has been fashioned as a *prototype*, a pattern for what a valid baptism experience should look like. This "prototype" interpretation by classic Pentecostals of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the upper room on that day sometime around 33 A.D has been most regrettable. Incredible demonstrations of fleshly zealotry are carried out under the banner of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. Even more troubling, however, is the lasting impact that the construction of this upper-room experience as a prototype has had on scores of believers who are unwittingly being charmed into seeking an *experience* rather than a genuine Holy Spirit baptism. I was one of those believers, and the disappointment resulting from that pursuit down the Pentecostal bunny trail left me an agnostic for several years, and resulted in a major impediment to a vital relationship with the Holy Spirit for many years after that.

My Story

I am sharing this story because I cannot help but believe that there are many who have had similar experiences as mine, and have been left disappointed, discouraged and possibly even desperate—or on the other hand cynical and even contemptuous. I hope this testimony and the new understanding, which has come about as a result of years of struggling with the Lord over this issue, will be an encouragement. I am in no way intending to disparage the Pentecostal experience in the sharing of this testimony. I embrace it as most precious. My intent, rather, is to challenge my Pentecostal brothers and sisters—and all who would seek a deeper walk with the Lord—to plumb the incredible depths of this experience in the Holy Spirit.

I was introduced to Pentecostalism at age nine, and it did not take me long to figure out that being baptized with the Holy Spirit was something of central importance to the group that I was now part of. Very early on, I watched as my older brother had an incredible baptism experience that not only affected the course of his life, but dramatically elevated his standing within that local body. He would go on to become a minister in that denomination for a number of years. I watched as many of my friends would have similar experiences. I wanted this. I desperately wanted it. One Sunday night, at age 16, I decided that I was going to have it. I went forward to the altar where I “tarried” for some length of time without anything happening (which meant that I wasn’t speaking in tongues, and therefore hadn’t been baptized because I hadn’t experienced the “primary and initial” evidence for this experience). I then remembered what I heard a preacher once said. He counseled that *our* job is to simply give the Holy Spirit control of our mouth, and that the way to do that is to simply start speaking syllables, and then the Spirit would take over. And so I began to speak. I recognized that what I was speaking were syllables that I had heard an elderly gentleman speak nearly every Sunday in our church when he would give a “message in tongues.” The phrasing was always the same (though, ironically, the interpretation varied), and I had unconsciously committed these glossalalic syllables to memory. Despite my

recognition of what I was doing, I continued, honestly believing that the Spirit would give utterance as the preacher had said. Finally, after about five minutes, I realized that this divine utterance was not taking place, and I ceased my efforts. I can still recall getting up from my kneeling position at the altar that night and being surrounded by the few people left in the building (it was after 11 pm by that time). They were congratulating me on being filled with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I knew that I had just been repeating the phrases of that elderly gentleman that I had heard so many times before—and I told my mother this on the car ride home.

I was not totally prepared for the shift that would take place in my standing within that local congregation. I was now regularly asked to publicly pray at critical times during the church service, such as praying over prayer requests or over the offering. I was asked to give my testimony on any number of occasions. For the first time, I was asked to speak at our young people's meetings, and if I remember correctly, even asked to preach on one occasion. I was very well aware that the reason for this is that everyone believed that I now had this magical experience of being filled with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The problem was that I knew very well what had happened that Sunday night. I was, at first, left feeling quite guilty. My feeble attempts to convince my mother of what had taken place apparently was not communicated with the pastor or others, and I did not have the courage to set them straight. I later became cynical about the entire thing. By the time I got to college I was rapidly on my way to becoming an agnostic—a position that I would maintain throughout my undergraduate years. I would eventually come to a position of faith again, but not without first rejecting my Pentecostal experience entirely as nothing but a show of emotionalism. As unlikely as it may seem, it was a Presbyterian pastor's wife who challenged me not to be so quick to reject my spiritual roots. Her challenge to me was the beginning of a journey that would take me back to revisit that Sunday night experience many times as I have tried to make sense of it. That journey has led me to a new and (I believe) a much more powerful understanding of the nature of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The Upper Room Experience as a Shadow and a Type

I have suggested that classic Pentecostalism has fashioned the upper room experience in first-century Jerusalem a *prototype* for the baptism experience today. That is to say, it is regarded as the original experience upon which subsequent experiences are to be modeled after and by which they are to be evaluated. I want to suggest, however, that this momentous event is not to be understood as a prototype, but rather as *a shadow and a type*. There is a profound difference between a prototype and a shadow and a type. Whereas a prototype is something to be replicated, at least in its essential elements, a shadow and a type is understood to be a symbol and a harbinger of a greater spiritual reality which is to come. Shadows and types are commonly used throughout scripture to foreshadow greater spiritual realities yet to come. The journey of the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, which comprises the Old Testament books of Exodus through Joshua is itself a powerful shadow and type of our own spiritual journey.¹ Jesus suggested that His own ministry while on earth was a shadow and type of greater things to come when he said, “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father*” (John 14:12). The last supper that Jesus shared with His disciples was also a shadow and type, the taking of the elements representing our identification with Him in His death prefiguring our own death to the flesh.

In the same way, the experience of the 120 in the upper room foreshadowed a much more profound spiritual work that was in store for those who would go on to greater depths in Christ. The question that we want to address throughout the remainder of this article is just what is it that this first-century baptism experience is foreshadowing for us?

¹ See *From Egypt to the Promised Land* on www.wordforthebride.net for an extensive treatment of how God was heralding the spiritual journey of those set on obedience to Him through this experience of the Old Testament Israelites.

Sound as a Mighty Rushing Wind

Wind in scripture is typically used to refer to the Spirit of God. Indeed, the Greek word for Spirit, as in Holy Spirit (or in the King James, Holy Ghost) is *pneuma*, from which we get our word “pneumatic” referring to that which operates by air, such as pneumatic tires or pneumatic tools. This idea is also present in the Old Testament as the Hebrew word *ruwach*—which might be translated “wind” or “blast”—is used to describe the moving of God on the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2). It was the “wind” of God that brought the very world into being. This is translated as the “Spirit” of God in most translations.

The sound as a mighty rushing wind, therefore, can mean nothing other than the very Spirit of God. This was a *life-giving* force that would forever change these men and women. It changed Peter from a fearful denier of Christ in the presence of a young girl to a bold proclaimer of his Master in the presence of ruling authorities. It transformed Stephen into a willing martyr for his Lord. This was not a mere emotional experience at an altar. It was the energizing force that would impregnate these early disciples with the very Spirit of God and drive their subsequent interactions as humans infused with Divine Life, Ways and Truth.

This may very well have been a highly charged emotional experience in that upper room for these 120 individuals. We don’t know, as the Bible is silent on this issue. We do know, however, that it was transformative. This is the same transformative power that accompanies God’s Spirit whenever He moves upon the hearts of men. This may take place at an emotional altar call. It may also take place in the solitude of our own home, struggling with a personal issue in our lives which serves as the opening for His powerful Breath of Life. We may not even be fully conscious that anything has taken place at any given time. However, as it is transacted within us, this mighty work is but the earnest of a progressive saturation of His Spirit that takes place as He applies His refining fires to our lives.

Tongues of Fire

The Acts account indicates that tongues of fire rested upon each of the 120 that were gathered in the upper room. Fire almost always represents refining or

purification in scripture. Meat sacrifices made by the Israelites in the Old Testament were always made as a burnt offering with fire. Burning with fire, even of unblemished animals, was the purification rite. Numerous times in the Old Testament account, most notably the city of Sodom perhaps, God rained down fire on the wicked, an act of purging and purification. The New Testament also speaks repeatedly of fire as a refining agent. Paul states, for example,

Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

More directly pertinent to the question at hand, John the Baptist announces the coming of the Christ as one who comes bring a baptism of fire:

John answered, saying unto them all, 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 Ghost 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 (Luke 3:16-17).

John the Baptist was clearly heralding not just the coming of Jesus, but the Holy Ghost baptism which Jesus would bring. Moreover, in this prophetic utterance, John the Baptist was suggesting something about the nature of this baptism. It was a baptism by fire, a baptism whose purpose was to purge, to burn the chaff with “fire unquenchable.” The chaff, my fellow sojourner, is all that is within us that is not of the Spirit of God.

The “tongues of fire,” then, is a prophetic foreshadowing of the purging and refining process that God must do in us. This is not a one-time event that takes place at an emotionally-charged altar event. Such an occasion, if indeed it takes place at all in this manner, is but a dramatic introduction to a deep and profound

baptism experience that will progressively take place over the remainder of one's lifetime. This baptism will be exhilarating at times. It will more often be painful as God burns the chaff out of our lives with His unquenchable fire. This baptism by fire will continue until He can see His golden face perfectly reflected in us.

Speaking with Other Tongues

We come now to that element of the upper-room experience that is considered most central to the proposed prototype of classic Pentecostalism. The scriptural account simply states that they "*began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*" Nothing is said of the nature of these tongues, except that later in the same passage (v. 6) it indicates that there were Jews of many nations who "*heard them speak in his own language.*" This has been taken to mean by many Pentecostal groups that these utterances were actually cultural languages. During the very early years of the Pentecostal Movement, spirit-baptized believers were sent out as missionaries throughout the world taking with them the confidence that they would be able to converse fluently with native-speaking people groups because their spirit language resembled Chinese, or Japanese, or Spanish, or... Indeed, there were occasions when members of these native-speaking groups were present when the Spirit gave such utterances and verified that they were speaking their language. Others have contested this understanding, insisting that this spirit-language is a *heavenly language*, understood in the courts of heaven and shared with the body of Christ as the Holy Spirit gives the interpretation through another member of the body.

I would contend that neither of these understandings captures the essence of this element of the upper-room experience. Please understand that I greatly value the experience of speaking in tongues, as this has become a regular part of my own prayer life. Nevertheless, there is a far more profound meaning to this early experience. This meaning can only be grasped as we understand this experience as a shadow and a type of greater spiritual realities to come.

The scriptural basis for this understanding is revealed in what takes place following the upper-room experience:

Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? (Acts 2:6-12)

The 120 were speaking in languages that men and women from all walks of life understood! They had a fresh message that was ultimately intended to be heard and understood by all of creation. When God speaks, He speaks in a language understandable by those to whom He is speaking. He spoke the language of ancient Hebrew to the Israelites. He spoke through Paul to the Corinthians and others in their native language of ancient Greek. And now, He was speaking to a multitude of people gathered in Jerusalem, each in their own language!

Moreover, the “*other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance*” extends far beyond the ability to speak another cultural language, or even glossalalic syllables that are of no known earthly language. The “*other tongues*” experience of the 120 was portending a supernatural ability to “*speak the language*” of cultures and subcultures in all of the metaphors and idioms that might be unique to that cultural group. Indeed, Jesus used expressions and word pictures that were commonly understood by His hearers. The good news of the Kingdom is increasingly being taken far beyond the church walls and being brought to the marketplace—to the streets, the shopping malls, neighborhood parks, and even to alcoholics in bars and drug addicts in shooting galleries. It is also being shared with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and humanistic atheists within the various cultures in which they find themselves. The message of the Kingdom is being

spoken forth in all of these cultures and subcultures with language, metaphors and idioms that speak precisely to *them*.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit entails nothing less than a supernatural infusion of His power and grace to speak that word of Life in ways and expressions that will penetrate the heart of the hearer, just as it penetrated the hearts of those hearers on the streets of first-century Jerusalem. Language and cultural study will almost certainly be involved in these endeavors, as missionaries preparing for ministry abroad now do. Yet studying the language and learning cultural nuances are not sufficient to effectively impart this revolutionary message. Nothing less than the force of the Holy Spirit emanating from within those who are sharing this gospel message and anointing the ears of the hearers will accomplish the glorious end of drawing all men (and women) to Christ.

A Fresh Baptism

Holy Spirit baptism is so much more than a powerful emotional experience at an altar rail. It is an on-going life-changing transformation equipping one to be a carrier of the Kingdom of God itself. This is not a one-time experience, but a daily walk in the Spirit that progressively purges and strips away all that which is not Christ within us. As this takes place, we increasingly find ourselves being “dead” to Old Adam, the carnal man with all of its ungodly expressions. This stripping and purging is what is represented in the tongues of fire upon the 120 in the upper room. As this takes place we come to a growing awareness within ourselves of our own unworthiness while at the same time a lessening of the sin-consciousness within us. This is so because as we become decreased we are ever more sensitized to the Christ (Anointing) within which knows no sin! He now becomes our righteousness. Our identity is no longer “just a sinner saved by grace,” but rather “a child of God being made into a king and a priest.” An emotional experience accompanied by physical manifestations such as speaking in tongues may or may not be a portal into such a baptism by fire, but let us not equate it with the thing itself.

The fire came that eventful day was accompanied by the sound as of a mighty and powerful rushing wind. This fire of God’s refining, as painful as it is as we go

through it, is empowering, because as the fire is applied, Christ is growing within us. We are given power over the enemy which would assail us from within and without. We must not be discouraged, however, when we do not immediately experience this overcoming power. This baptism is progressive in nature and our lives become ever more victorious as the flame does its work. His Spirit within us becomes ever more transcendent. Our steps are increasingly directed by Him, even when those steps are leading in a direction that others may deem inappropriate. We find ourselves being guided less by the expectations of others, and more by that still small voice that resonates so deeply within.

This increased sensitivity to the Holy Spirit will inevitably lead to our speaking in “unknown tongues.” I am not speaking here of glossalalic syllables, but rather we will find ourselves speaking words of Life to others in ways and with a fluency that we could not have imagined. These words will come at *Kairos* moments, often when we least expect it. I will never forget an encounter with a man who was struggling with a sexual addiction. I had just moved to Arkansas and was part of a fellowship that had sponsored a week-long event in this area. The pastor had asked me to join him and several others in praying for this man who was visiting from Georgia. This pastor fancied himself and his wife as “deliverance ministers,” and after asking the man to share some of the details of his addiction, they began marching around him and, in a loud voice, casting out demons “in the name of Jesus.” My spirit was grieved within me. The Lord had miraculously delivered me from a sexual addiction some ten years earlier and I knew in my spirit that what was taking place here was nothing less than abuse of this man. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly even to me, I rushed forward to this man who was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, knelt before him and began weeping. All that I could do was to tell him through tears that I knew his struggle, but that God loved him unconditionally, even in the midst of the desperate struggle that he was in. A holy hush fell upon that room. I knew that my words did not sit well with the “deliverance ministers,” but I knew then and I know now that this was the Word of the Lord for that man at that time. My natural man could never have spoken these words through these tears. I was new to this fellowship and my natural inclination would have been to come into line with the deliverance praying—

which I now recognize as a charade, though I did not then. My obedience to the Lord in this way was only by the power of the Holy Spirit to speak this “unknown tongue.” (Incidentally, we left that fellowship a short time later as we were observing other questionable practices.)

Closing Thoughts

I am not in any way questioning the authenticity of anyone’s experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. I do, however, contend that the upper room experience is *not* to be regarded as a prototype—a model to be imitated or even approximated in the details of that experience. This first-century event is, rather, a *shadow and type* of the spiritual realities that God has in store for those who would go on to an obedient walk with Him. I rejoice with those who have had an experience that they can point to as the time when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. This is, from any account that I have heard, an experience that bonds a believer to the Lord in a way they have never known before. I have not had such an experience—at least not one that looks like classic Pentecostalism says that it is supposed to look like. I have, however, had many bonding experiences, when the Lord has spoken a transformative Word directly into my spirit. These experiences, individually and collectively, have had the effect of so firmly joining me to the Lord that no adversity, no purging or refining fire, no amount of discouragement could possibly cause me to abandon this precious walk. Our Lord provides these experiences so as to “gird us up” for the real baptism by fire that He has for all those whom he is making into His own image.

You, like me, may never have had an experience that you have identified as the “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” If you are like me, especially if you have had any extensive involvement in classic Pentecostalism, you have probably questioned your own walk. When the times of testing have come, when your carnal nature has been ruthlessly exposed, when discouragement has come knocking on your door, you have probably longed for an experience that you believe to be the baptism in the Spirit so that you can overcome all of these fiery darts as one might flick a pesky mosquito off their arm. Be of good cheer! You are, in fact, *experiencing* the baptism of the Holy Spirit at these very times! If you think about

it, you will almost certainly recall moments and encounters with God in your life that have bonded you closely with Him. These moments serve for you the very purpose that the highly emotional baptism experience that many people have at the altar serve for them. They are precious mile markers along the narrow road.