

Spirit Baptism

We noted earlier that there is more than one baptism, and that all four gospels tell us that while John baptised in water, Jesus would baptise in the Holy Spirit. This took place on the day of Pentecost, as Jesus had promised (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:5). A wind filled the house where the disciples were, tongues of fire descended on them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke with other tongues in the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

Some have suggested that being baptised in the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are different experiences. This may or may not be so, but the point made by the Book of Acts seems to be that the disciples were drenched and submerged in the Holy Spirit on the outside (baptism) and filled with the Holy Spirit on the inside too, and that they stayed that way, with occasional re-fillings (Acts 4:31). We will take it that this is the model for all believers.

Some believe that for the experience to be valid, there has to be speaking in tongues. The problem with this view is that it tends to overlook the tongues of fire. I have not heard of anyone receiving a tongue of fire. This being so, it seems unhelpful to be selective. Although all did speak in tongues then (v4), and many people speak in tongues today, Christians do not do well to make some people feel excluded by saying that all must speak in tongues. Those who do insist on tongues run the risk of going beyond Scripture. Who are we to shut the door to the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces (Matt 23:13)?

So if water baptism is to do with being drowned, and brought to a new birth, baptism in the Spirit may be thought of along similar lines. Believers can be drenched, submerged, even intoxicated with the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, people thought that the disciples were drunk; evidently their behaviour looked like that of drunks (Acts 2:13). However, Christians are not to be filled with wine, but with the the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18).

For many years, I was prejudiced against this kind of experience. I did not want to be swept along into crazy behaviour. Arm-waving and emotional outbursts were not for me. I regarded speaking in tongues with suspicion. I came to believe that this might be helpful to people who were somehow inadequate; it was rather like sugar icing on a cake, which while it appealed to me as a child, was something I had now grown out of.

I used to pray that I would not receive the gift of tongues, and I never did. A few years later, when doing my research in the book of Judges, I became aware that I had developed something of a gift for languages, which can also be called tongues, a fact which caught my fancy. In hindsight, I now realise that by my hostility to speaking in tongues, I was saying that a gift God had given was less than good and perfect (James 1:17). My attitude towards tongues was based on prejudice and ignorance.

I was first really challenged about tongues when I read an article about Paul Yonggi Cho in the Southwell Diocesan Newspaper. He had been asked what he thought the secret of his leadership of the largest church in the world was, and had replied that it was his habit of speaking in tongues for five hours every morning.

My reaction was that I might as well give up Christian work now, as I didn't speak in tongues at all, and I certainly could never see myself doing that.

Later, the subject came up again when I was sent on a conference about "Signs and Wonders". By now I was 18 years into my Christian life. When laying hands on the sick, we were told, if you don't know what to pray, pray in tongues. This bothered me, as from my reading of 1 Corinthians 12, not everyone does speak in tongues (v30). So a few weeks later, I went to see an older lady we had met, whose opinion I trusted. I asked her why the speaker had implied that all could

 speak in tongues, in the light of 1 Corinthians 12. She had no answer to my question. Then after a pause, she asked me, "Would you like to speak in tongues?" This was odd, because on the way to her home, I had been thinking to myself, "Wouldn't it be strange if I left her house speaking in tongues?" I now had to face up to the issue myself. I decided that I was prepared to risk it, so greatly daring, I said yes.

She first of all prayed against my 'blockage of mind' as she put it. It had never occurred to me that this might be a problem. I think the issue was that until then, my world was one in which everything had to make sense, and speaking in tongues is not an activity that makes sense to the rational mind.

Then she prayed for me to receive the gift of tongues. Two syllables came into my mind. I mentioned this. "Well say them, then", she said, and feeling a complete idiot I said them - "Cara Bou". "Say it again" she said, so I repeated these sounds over and over again, feeling most uncomfortable. There was no sense in it!

Then she revealed that she had a smattering of Arabic, having lived in Arabia for a time, and that she wondered whether the words meant "Dear Father". (I thought I knew a little Arabic - so much for my pride about languages). I felt much better about it after that; I could think of the sounds as being words of worship. I could manage that.

She encouraged me to keep saying these words over and over, and maybe the Lord would add another sound or two. I did this over the next few days, and gradually came to have half a dozen syllables. Then one evening at about 9 o'clock, I came in from a meeting. I found myself thinking that this tongues business was utterly ridiculous. Here I was, mouthing meaningless noises, very uncertain as to whether this was even the gift referred to in the New Testament. Perhaps I was losing a grip on myself, and had been led up the garden path. After all, I did not know the lady very well, and it was so different from what I had been used to. So I stood in the hall and prayed, "Lord, please show me whether this thing really is from you or not."

I went on muttering my noises. As I did so, I began to sense the presence of Jesus in a way I had never known it before, and in fact this awareness grew so intense that I was suddenly fearful that Jesus was going to step into the hall from the dining room doorway, and that I would see him face to face. I knew I couldn't handle that.

I immediately stopped speaking the tongues. I have never experienced such a degree of closeness to the Lord, before or since.

I decided, therefore, that what I was doing was valid, and I kept at it. I have since found that far from being something to grow out of, tongues was a powerful gift to grow into. As well as nurturing my relationship with the Lord, it has helped me in the areas of revelation and in praying for the sick, and in building myself up (1 Cor 14:4).

To give an example of the latter, I once wrote to a local newspaper about their enthusiastic coverage of a gathering of mediums. In my letter, I said that in my opinion, this was a highly dangerous activity, and that readers should heed the warnings of the Bible about it (Deut 18:9-13). A day or two afterwards, the reporter of the incident rang up. He spoke to me for a few minutes, suggesting how I might re-cast my letter for publication in the newspaper.

Quarter of an hour later, I became aware of a heavy sense of dread that had come over me, with a slimy feeling in my stomach. I felt most uncomfortable. I have learned from experience to think back to when such a feeling began. I realised it had come on since the telephone call. So in the name of Jesus, I rebuked whatever had got into me as a result of the conversation, and spoke in tongues for a few minutes. This soon restored me to a better state.

So in short, I would commend speaking in tongues to anybody. It may not appear to make sense, but then Scripture tells us that the sinful mind is hostile to God (Rom 8:7). While I believe that everything does make sense in the end, I also hold that we need not be limited to what we ourselves can explain with our finite minds now.

I have given this amount of space to speaking in tongues both because it is likely to be a stumbling block to some readers of this book, and because it does seem to be one of the hallmarks of baptism in the Spirit. It also might be described as one of the least difficult of all the spiritual gifts. Paul seems to imply a kind of hierarchy in the use of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:28-31). While it may be theoretically possible to work miracles, for example, without speaking in tongues, it seems more likely that a person operating in the higher gifts would also have facility in the lesser gifts as well. It could be that someone will manage the activities we will discuss in part 5 without using spiritual gifts, but I would find this unlikely. Paul encouraged his readers to covet spiritual

gifts, especially the higher ones, and not to despise the lower ones, which is what I had done. After I came into tongues, I experienced other gifts of the Spirit more than before.

Therefore, I would encourage every believer to press on until they know that they have received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist, who was filled with the Spirit from birth (Luke 1:15), Jesus, who was filled with the Spirit at his baptism (Luke 3:22), and the formerly hostile Saul of Tarsus, who received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (Acts 9:17). Christians do well to aim for the gift of tongues. There is no record that Jesus used it, but Paul spoke in tongues a great deal (1 Cor 14:18).

Jesus encouraged his hearers to ask God for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). Those who do so need not fear that they will get anything dangerous; God is our heavenly father (v2), and what father gives his son a scorpion when he asks for an egg (v12)? God gives good and perfect gifts, as we noted earlier.

When the Holy Spirit fills someone, there are two areas of change. The first is that fruits grow in the believer's life, as if he were a tree (Isa 61:3). These are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). How wonderful to have these qualities in charge of us, working outwards from inside us!

The second change, is that the believer begins to experience the spiritual gifts. Now the image is more like a Christmas tree - the gifts do not grow out of the tree; they are hung on the tree. If a believer heals someone, or has a spiritual gift of administration (1 Cor 12:28), that is no credit to him. These activities are not the result of his holy life - they are divine abilities given by God (1 Cor 12:7 & 11).

It is easy to have muddled thinking in these two areas. Some people try to make themselves lovely by controlling themselves, or seek to become peaceful by gritting their teeth in the face of whatever is upsetting them. But this is futile, as when a real test comes along, the hatred and irritation that have been bottled up fly out from somewhere deep down inside us. This process can be seen in Psalm 39:1-3. Such pretence is of no help in the long run - the outburst may even prove more harmful than if the anger or irritation had been expressed more mildly in the first place.

So too with the spiritual gifts. It is tempting for believers to think that such things flow out of their own goodness or holy personalities. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even Jesus could do nothing on his own (John 5:19). Although he was equal with God, he left all his special abilities behind when he came to earth (Phil 2:7). In all his mighty acts, he relied solely on the power of the Holy Spirit, who had filled him at baptism and enabled him to see and hear what God was doing, and turned the word into flesh by speaking it out (John

5:19, 8:28, 10:38).

This activity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a person's life was a model for future believers as well, and would enable them to do greater things even than Jesus had done (John 14:10-18). But there is no way that a believer's own goodness is the source of divine acts. Miracles are by God's gift, not by the skill of the miracle worker. Some believers will feel threatened by this chapter. It all sounds a bit risky. There are two points to be made here. Firstly, every Christian has the Holy Spirit in some measure (Rom 8:9); therefore, for a Christian to be filled with the Holy Spirit simply means to know and experience what they had already, in fuller measure. The change is one of degree, not of substance.

But secondly, yes it is risky. As with all Christian commitment, people do well to count the possible cost before embarking. In the Old Testament, the Spirit used to fall on people occasionally, and the result was nearly always a battle, in which God's people won a victory. However, battles are not for the timid. When Jesus was filled with the Spirit, "The Spirit drove him" into the desert to a forty day fast and a personal encounter with Satan himself; only afterwards did the angels come to help him (Mark 1:13). Later on, God had suffering as well as triumph in mind for Paul when he called him (Acts 9:16).

The Spirit may send followers of Jesus on a route that leads to difficulty, stress, even martyrdom. They are therefore wise to feel somewhat threatened. Believers do well to count the cost of what they ask God to do in their lives (Luke 14:31-33).

This reminds us that Christianity is not for the lukewarm. God wants people hot or cold - lukewarmness disgusts him (Rev 3:16). Jesus called for full commitment; when he said, "Follow me", the first disciples left everything and followed him. This pattern is still in place. Believers today are called to leave everything behind, including their requirement that everything makes sense, and their desire for peace and security.

In this section, we have tried to outline that baptism, far from being just a formal ceremony, has major implications for a believer. It should be a powerful, life-changing event if undertaken properly. And Jesus said it was for all disciples. In the next section of the book, in looking closely at Jesus' commands, we will find ourselves dealing with the miraculous. Jesus appears to have assumed that this becomes an everyday event in the life of the Christian, as it was in his own life. I believe that for this to happen, the material in this section needs to have been taken seriously. Whether or not it all happens at the time of water baptism is not the issue. What does matter is that it is all properly covered, and that there is no retreat from it, so that believers can stay filled with the Holy Spirit.