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Math 3:11-12

The Baptism with the Holy Spirit

The Great Gift to Believers of the New Covenant

(Antipas Herald 20)

There are many views about what the baptism with the Holy Spirit is. These views are often based on all kinds of strange experiences and the simplistic handling of Biblical statements. Confusion reigns!

This confusion is tragic, especially since the baptism with the Spirit lies at the heart of Christ's reign. And it is unnecessary, because God's revelation is quite clear on this subject.

The Father's promise

The Old Testament abounds with promises of a coming Messiah. On Him the Spirit would rest in abundant fullness (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1; cf. Luke 4:18-21; John 3:34).

He would also pour out the Spirit in unprecedented abundance on all His servants (Isa 29:17-24 and 32:15-20; 44:1-5; Ezek 36:24-28; 37:1-14, Joel 2:28-32)

It is obvious that the people of the Old Covenant looked forward to the fulfilment of these promises with eager anticipation. They understood rightly that this would not be a peripheral aspect of the Messianic government, but would lie at the very heart of it. When the Lord Jesus thus spoke of "*the Father's promise*" — and the apostles followed Him in this — all understood that He was speaking of the outpouring of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39; Gal 3:14; Eph 1:13).

The fulfilment of this promise took place on the Day of Pentecost. Peter had no doubt about this (Acts 2:16-21, 33-36, 39). It was the final breakthrough of the kingdom of heaven. The Son, glorified and ascended, had received "*the promise*" as reward from the Father — in order to send Him as His great gift to His New Testament church.

John the Baptist

John's preaching is of the utmost importance. He was, after all, the coming Messiah's herald, bridging the chasm between the Old and the New Testaments.

His preaching focuses exclusively on the coming King and His reign. The essence of John's message, which is repeated in all four Gospels (Math 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:2-20; John 1:19-34), can be summarised as follows: *Repent, for the coming of the King is near! He will thoroughly purify God's people. The double character of Old Testament Israel will come to an end. The unholy mixture of godly and ungodly will not be tolerated any longer. From now on God's orchard will only have fruit-bearing trees. His barns will contain only wheat, no more chaff.*

How will the King accomplish this? He will work in two ways:

On the one hand He will lift the true people of God far above the levels typically experienced in Old Testament times — *by baptising them with the Holy Spirit*.

On the other hand He will judge those who refuse to bow before His Messianic reign — *by baptising them with fire* (the fire which consumes the felled trees and chaff).

Some remarks

Although the New Testament emphasizes the saving work of the Messiah, the negative side of it — His judgement — is also fascinating and full of meaning. *We will, however, focus on the positive aspects.*

One observation, nevertheless, is necessary: When the Messianic judgment came to a terrible climax with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (70 AD), it also served the worldwide work of the Spirit. Why? Because it brought to an end the obsolete ceremonies of the Old Testament, and the stifling exclusivism of the Jews.

It is tellingly significant that John the Baptist summarizes the positive aspect of Christ's work in this way: *He will baptise with the Holy Spirit*. This is how all four gospels put it — in a nutshell.

What does it imply? *The gift and abundant workings of the Holy Spirit are at the centre of the Messianic reign and salvation!*

The Greek expression "*to baptise with the Holy Spirit*" (the preposition can be translated: *with, in, or by*) appears seven times in the New Testament.

John the Baptist uses it four times (Math 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).

The Lord Jesus quotes him once, just before His ascension: "*For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 1:5).

Peter then quotes the Lord as he explains in Jerusalem why he baptised gentiles (Cornelius' household): "*Then I remembered what the Lord had said: John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 11:16).

Lastly Paul says in 1 Cor 12:13 that the baptism with the Spirit brings about the body of Christ, in particular its unity within the diversity of all its members: "*For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*"

Baptism is a concept of abundance. It indicates an immersion into, or a flooding with something or someone — in this case the Holy Spirit. To be baptised with the Spirit, therefore, is to be flooded with Him. The Old Testament promises on the coming Spirit emphasize this abundance again and again. And in John 7:37-39 the Lord Jesus, when referring to the Spirit, speaks of "*streams of living water.*"

In a primary sense the baptism with the Holy Spirit took place on the day of Pentecost. It was the fulfilment of the promise awaited for ages. It was the final breakthrough of the Messianic reign — the beginning of the dispensation of the Spirit.

But since that remarkable day, the rippling effect of Pentecost has had a drastic effect on millions of believers. After all, we experience to this day the abundance of God's salvation in Christ as set out in the New Testament and worked in us by the Spirit — far exceeding experiences of Old Testament believers.

Thus, while Pentecost has a unique and nonrecurrent dimension, Christ's church — although in a secondary sense — still participates in the baptism with the Spirit.

*The baptism with the Holy Spirit
is Jesus Christ's abundant gift of His Spirit to the church of the New Covenant,
so that He (the Spirit) may fully work out the glorious and complete salvation
already earned by their Redeemer for each individual, as well as for the church corporately.*

Some conclusions

When John the Baptist announced that the Great King would baptise His people with the Holy Spirit, he said that Christ would *flood His New Testament church with the Spirit*.

His government would therefore be characterized by the abundant workings of the Spirit in both the qualitative and quantitative sense of the word.

This is exactly how it happened and how it continues to this day.

Millions of people from all tribes, languages, peoples and nations experience the *regenerating work* of the Spirit — they are born again, with new hearts and lives.

They experience His work of *illumination* — they understand the secrets of the New Covenant.

They experience His work of *assurance* — they know the Lord, and have an inner conviction that they belong to Him.

They experience His *sanctifying work* — they have a *zeal for Christ's honour*, and grow in *conformity to His image*.

They experience His *equipping work* — they are enabled to serve the Lord in the ways He prescribe in his Word; others according to their gifts, opportunities and calling; and in the process bear lasting fruit to the glory of the Father.

+ In John 4:10-14 the Lord Jesus promises that all who drink of the water which He gives, will never thirst. This water will be a spring which wells up to eternal life.

A few chapters later, in 7:37-39, He clarifies this even further: *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."* John then explains in v.39 that Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit — to be given to believers after His glorification.

+ This is probably what Paul refers to in 1 Cor 12:13 when he states that *"we were all given the one Spirit to drink."*

Nothing we receive from God is given except on the basis of Christ's mediatory work. But equally true, all that we receive, is realized in us by the Holy Spirit.

These two truths lie intertwined at the heart of all true Christian experience.

Firstly God gives His Son; then He gives His Holy Spirit. Without the Son, the Spirit could not have come; without the Spirit the coming of the Son would have been to no avail. The gift of the Spirit is rooted in the work of the Son; the work of the Son blossoms forth into the coming and work of the Spirit.

We must not ignore the fact that the personal presence and work of the Holy Spirit is a central characteristic of God's new Covenant in Christ.

*The baptism with the Spirit, His abundant work
is the heart of God's blessing in Christ.
The Spirit is the great gift of the New Covenant!*

In contrast to the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, Paul typifies the New Covenant as the glorious ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:8 and context).

Rom 8:23 says that believers *"have the firstfruits (Gr. *aparge*) of the Spirit."*

It refers to the day of firstfruits in the Old Testament when an offering of new grain was presented to the Lord at the beginning of the harvest (Num 28:26). This offering represented the whole harvest. Thus the Israelites acknowledged that all came from the hand of God, and that in turn they would dedicate all to Him.

By speaking of the Spirit in this way, the Bible assures us that we will ultimately receive our full inheritance in Christ — as surely as we have received the Spirit here and now. And for our present discussion it means that our full inheritance in Christ for this life is summarized as *"the firstfruits of the Spirit."*

+ In 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5 and Eph 1:14 we find the assurance that the Spirit is given to believers as *"a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come"* (Gr. *arrabōn*).

+ Another confirmation that the Holy Spirit is the great gift of the New Covenant is found in Gal 3:14. Paul writes that even the gentiles may receive the blessings God promised to Abraham, through the crucifixion of Christ, *"so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."*

It follows from the above that the promise of the Holy Spirit is part of the gospel — the good news — which is to be preached to a fallen world.

It is a common problem that people are afraid to accept Christ as Saviour and Lord, because of the fear that they will not be able to obey the demands of discipleship. To these people the assurance can and must be given that God not only accepts sinners when they come to Him, but also enables them to persevere obediently to the end.

Peter does precisely this on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38-40).

Each true New Testament believer — everyone who is truly in Christ — shares in the baptism with the Spirit, the flooding with the Spirit, the abundant workings of the Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost Peter promises the gift of the Spirit to all who would repent and be baptised — *"for all whom the Lord our God will call"* (Acts 2:38-39).

Apart from the verses already given, many Biblical statements presuppose that the gift of the Spirit is given to all true believers (Rom 5:5; 8:9-11; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 5:16ff; 1 Thess 4:7-8; 1 John 3:24; 4:13).

By now it should be clear that no single act of the Spirit in a true believer is what the Bible calls the baptism with the Spirit.

No, this expression refers to the abundance and full extent of the Spirit's work in the believer of the New Covenant.

Therefore each authentic activity of the Spirit in a Christian is an expression or manifestation of the baptism with the Spirit.

*That means that the baptism with the Spirit
is not a specific postconversion experience to be sought.
Nowhere does Scripture command this.*

Various streams in the world-wide church advocate a *post-conversion* baptism with the Spirit.

In perfectionist circles it is said to bring *complete sanctification*.

In Pentecostal and Charismatic circles the emphasis is on the *charismata and empowerment in the Lord's service*.

And yet others single out the *assurance of salvation* that it brings.

+ *The sanctifying, equipping and assuring work of the Spirit have been pointed out. But it must be emphasized that the Spirit's abundant workings cannot be limited to any single aspect of our Christian experience. No, His abundant work comes to expression over the whole spectrum thereof. If this vital truth is ignored by emphasizing only a part of the Spirit's work, it brings about a God-dishonouring and pastorally harmful impoverishment and warping of what the New Testament calls the baptism with the Spirit.*

It does not mean that believers cannot and should not have particular spiritual experiences and breakthroughs — with accompanying radical results — in the course of their Christian lives. Scripture does teach this. And history (especially the history of revivals) confirms this time and again.

+ The people who were so dramatically filled with the Spirit in Acts 4:31, were already established believers in Jerusalem. Quite possibly some of them had been present in the upper room on the day of Pentecost — which would mean that they previously had experienced something similar.

+ It does not mean that all believers are equally full of the Spirit. One of the main qualifications for the first helpers in the church of Jerusalem was the fullness of the Spirit (Acts 6:3, 5). This clearly implies that not everyone in the church was Spirit-filled to the same extent.

Nor does it mean that a particular believer is always Spirit-filled to the same degree.

+ The apostles were especially empowered by the Spirit in crisis situations. In Acts 4:8 Peter, "*filled with the Holy Spirit*", speaks to the Sanhedrin.

And in 13:9 Paul is "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" as he reprimands the sorcerer, Elymas.

In both cases the particular verbs in Greek indicate specific infillings with the Spirit with the demands of each situation in view.

+ As the fullness of the Spirit is not necessarily a permanent and unchangeable fact, Eph 5:18 commands: "*Do not get drunk on wine ... Instead be filled with the Spirit.*"

The imperative in Greek is given in a form that emphasizes ongoing action. It is therefore a call not to live under the influence of alcohol, but to live under the Spirit's control.

+ It also does not mean that we do not have to pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. After repentance and baptism new believers were prayed for (Acts 9:17; 19:6). It also happened when someone was set apart for special service (1Tim 4:13-14; 5:22; 2Tim 1:6-7).

+ The Lord Jesus explicitly commands us to continually ask the Father for the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:5-13).

+ The Heidelberg Catechism (q&a 116) states: *"God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them."*

The simplistic and narrow views on the baptism with the Spirit — so common today — bear wretched pastoral fruits. This is always the case with theological one-sidedness.

To restrict the baptism with the Spirit to a single postconversion experience, is to dilute His work, and as such does Him no honour. It also robs Jesus Christ, the Baptizer with the Spirit, of glory that is His.

+ Let us understand very clearly: No Christian life is without its experiences, but to major in them, and seek them as such, is unhealthy, even dangerous.

Because of unbiblical and unrealistic expectations it often leads to disillusionment in some and deception in others.

Many Christians in such circles, believe they are *"have-nots"* — and tend to feel inferior in the presence of the *"haves"* 1Cor 12 teaches exactly the opposite!

No, our calling and regeneration, our faith and conversion, our sanctification and perseverance, our service and fruit — everything which raises the Christian life above the typical levels of Old Testament experience — are manifestations of the Spirit's abundant work in us.

In other circles, often as an over-reaction against the above one-sidedness, the baptism with the Spirit is also limited — *to regeneration*.

+ This is also a narrowing down of the Spirit's work, and equally does violence to His glory and that of the Lord Jesus.

Lastly, many Christians tend to forget about the Holy Spirit, and to stagnate in selfcomplacency. *"I am born-again, after all — I am saved — and that is all that counts!"*

In this way the church is being stripped of the longing and desire for an ever deeper work of the Spirit — so necessary for the Christian's high and holy calling in this world, and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Whether one is baptised with the Spirit
only during or only after regeneration
is quite clearly a non-question.*

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Nico van der Walt

T: 082 848 9396

E: nico.vanderwalt@reformed.org.za

W: www.imagodei.co.za