

Repentance, Baptism, and the Gift of the Spirit

These days we often encounter the view that repentance is just being sorry, that baptism is a symbolic outward act that adult Christians do, to indicate what has already happened internally, and that the gift of the Spirit is speaking in tongues. The first time Christian baptism was offered and received was on the day of Pentecost. It is worth measuring these wrong opinions by what happened then. The hearers responded to Peter's sermon by asking, "What shall we do?" Peter answered with the important words: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptised, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away, all whom the Lord our God calls."

Repentance is not adequately defined as regret. The hearers already had regret. Alongside sorrow for sin there needs to be faith in Jesus the Saviour. Repentance is the work of God when people receive God's forgiveness. Repentance is sorrow for sin and faith. This response is not merely required in preaching and symbolised in baptism. They had already heard Peter's preaching. They needed to respond in faith. Moreover, repentance is made possible and brought about through baptism. Modern revivalist preachers would say "Repent and register your decision for Christ!" Peter said, "Be baptised". God gives repentance. Later the Christians at Jerusalem said about the Gentiles, "Therefore God has given repentance to life even to the Gentiles!"

The baptism that Peter offered was "in the name of Jesus Christ." It brought people into His fellowship. It does not mean that the baptism was not Trinitarian. No one has Christ without the Father and the Spirit. This is an abbreviated expression. In baptism, as in the proclamation, the one name that is crucial is the name of Jesus Christ. There is only one divine name under heaven through which people are saved (Ac 4: 12), as in baptism there is one name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28: 19). God is one, His name is one, and there is therefore only one baptism (Eph 4:5). To be baptised "into (here, literally "upon") the name of Jesus Christ" means to become His. That at the same time means receiving His Spirit (1 Cor 6: 17; Rm 8:9).

The baptism in the name of Jesus Christ included both the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit, together. The single, two-fold benefit agrees exactly with the Old Testament promises of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit (Jr 31 :31-34; Ezk 36:24-27). Note the careful formulation: "Be baptised... for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Christ won the forgiveness by His sacrificial death and resurrection. Baptism is God's means of bestowing it. It is not, as Calvin supposed, that for each individual forgiveness comes before baptism.

According to this important passage, sins are not cleansed away by devout effort, so that the Spirit may be received after the candidate has somehow cleansed his heart. Instead, God promises to remove sins in the water of baptism, and at the same time grant the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself (Ac 22: 16). The cleansing from sin, like the gift of the Spirit, was God's work and gift. There is no cleansing initiation mentioned in the New Testament except what is recorded here (Ac 15:8-9, 1 Cor 6:11). There is no substitute for baptism, even for infants. A dedication ceremony without water is no substitute, and, if it is meant as a substitute form of initiation, it is an abomination.

It should be stressed that the forgiveness of sins is coupled with the gift of the Holy Spirit: "... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." There is no room for subsequent reception of the Holy Spirit in the future tense "you will receive.". When the people were baptised that day they received what they had been promised, forgiveness, and the gift of God's Spirit. The future tense of the reception of the spiritual gift was as future as the baptism with which it was connected. The gift of the Spirit here is directly joined with the forgiveness that came with baptism, and promised to it. There was no postponement of the gift of the Spirit until children should grow to adulthood. Peter also says, "For this promise is for you and for your children..."

We ought to observe the sole activity of God in this section. The verb "Let... be baptised" is passive, because God is the agent. The word "receive" stresses God as the Giver. So also Peter's words, "and for all who are far away, all whom the Lord our God calls." There are no conditions to meet, like individual wrestling and prayerful waiting, still less, attempts to approximate what might sound like speaking in tongues. There is only one condition, that God calls. There are no the preparations of human beings as conditions to fulfil. To whomever He calls He gives His Spirit as a gift.

The word "gift" here has extremely gracious associations in the New Testament. It is the same word as in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, in Christ Jesus our Lord." The word is used in the accusative case as an adverb meaning "freely" in the classic passage where Paul describes the Gospel: "They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rm 3:24). It

means “for nothing”, “unmerited”, “given as a gift”, “without a cause”, “without fulfilling any conditions.”

Peter does not tell his hearers to wait for a second Pentecost event, with wind, fire, and tongues, as the first group of 120 had experienced. Peter offers. He does not say, “Wait for it.” The word “wait” had applied only to the first group of Jesus’ disciples after He had ascended and before Pentecost. There is no more reference to waiting for the Holy Spirit. The “tarrying meetings” of the Pentecostals are quite out of order.

This passage teaches us that, since Pentecost, Christian baptism has become the point where the Spirit is received. Adults who have been converted through the preaching of the Gospel characteristically trace the beginning of their Christian life back to their baptism. Even the apostles, who had been with Jesus for about three years did so. When Peter had to defend himself against stiff criticism after the Gentile Pentecost at the house of Cornelius, he compared His own baptism at Pentecost to what happened to the Gentiles at Caesarea: *“Therefore if God has given to them the same gift as He gave us too when we became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”* (Ac 11: 17).

From that point on, baptism has been Pentecost. Peter did not invite anyone into the upper room. He did not teach anyone how to speak in tongues. The exterior forms of Pentecost, the wind, the fire, the visions, and the tongues recede. Speaking in tongues is mentioned on only two more occasions in Acts, at Caesarea and Ephesus (Ac 10:46; 19:6). The essential content remains. The content is God’s free gift of the Holy Spirit, which is offered with forgiveness, in the humble rite of baptism. Peter does not contrast baptism and the gift of the Spirit, as if one is a despised water baptism and the other is a baptism with the Spirit. There is one baptism, of water and Spirit (Joh 3:5 *“unless anyone is born of water and the Spirit”*). Later occasions, Acts ch. 8, 10, and 19 also show that baptism and the Spirit belong indissolubly together.

Peter calls it all a *“promise.”* It is all God’s doing, God’s call, the faith (worked by God) that is decisive in repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is given, through the means of grace. Here the means are Christian preaching (Ac 2:5-37) and the seal of Christian baptism (Ac 2:38-41).