

THE SEAL OF THE SPIRIT

There are three references in the New Testament to the seal of the Spirit. They each point to a particular event in the past. One is in the epistle for today: *“When you heard the message of the truth, the Good News that you were saved, and when you became believers in Him, you also were sealed in Him by the Holy Spirit, whom He promised. That Holy Spirit is now the guarantee of our inheritance until God frees us to be His people so that His glory may be praised (Eph 1:13-14).* There are instances in the New Testament where people who had already been baptised and received the gift of the Spirit were again filled with the Spirit (Ac 4:8; 4:31; 13:52). However, there are no grounds for assuming that current practices of confirmation were linked to an additional gift or sealing with the Spirit. Nor are there grounds for holding a baptism with the Spirit at a point after Christian baptism that is equated with the first speaking in tongues, as many Pentecostals assume. St Paul says in this passage that this sealing took place when the Ephesian Christians became believers. A seal or a guarantee is something that can be appealed to as proof. Although the presence of the Spirit is not something that can be demonstrated by sight, all Christians believers should be certain that they have received the guarantee that the Holy Spirit because they have been baptised. Baptism has a double relationship to the Holy Spirit. He is the agent in baptism, and He is the gift in baptism (1 Cor 12:13).

Paul assumed that all the believers to whom he was writing had received the Holy Spirit. That is contrary to the view held by many today that some Christians possess the Spirit and others do not. If a person does not have the Spirit he does not belong to Christ. It is also contrary to the teaching of Baptist and Pentecostal churches that baptism is inappropriate for children. On the first occasion when Christian baptism was offered Peter promised that all those who received it would through it receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, and he particularly included children (Ac 2:28-29). There is an important series of passages in the New Testament that refer to baptism and specifically use words like “all” and “every” (Mt 28:19; Ac 2:38-39; Rm 6:3; 1 Cor 12:13; and Gal 3:26-27). There is another series of passages that expressly link the gift of the Spirit with baptism (Ac 2:38-39; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17; 9:17-18; 19:2-6; 1 Cor 12:13; John 3:5-7).

The second passage, also in Ephesians, similarly refers to a definite point in the past of Christians: *“And do not grieve God’s Holy Spirit, by whom you were sealed for the day when you will be set free” (Eph 4:30).*

The third passage is very similar to the passage in Ephesians 1. It refers to three aspects of baptism together, being anointed with the Spirit, being sealed, and being given the Spirit. The passage reads: *“It is God who makes both us and you firm in Christ and who also anointed us and put his seal on us and gave us the Spirit as a guarantee in our hearts” (2 Cor 1:21-22).*

There are also two references in 1 John to a “chrism”, an unction, or anointing, that probably belong here also, as metaphorical references to the indwelling Spirit, who has been received in baptism: *“You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge” (1 Jn 2:20). “You received the anointing from Him, and that anointing remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But since His anointing teaches you everything – and since it is true and no lie, just as He also has taught you – remain in Him” (1 Jn 2:27).*

High Church Anglicans regard these passages in 1 John as references to confirmation as a sacrament with olive oil or chrism. G W H Lampe (*The Seal of the Spirit*, London: SPCK 1967) has shown conclusively that the seal of the Spirit must refer to baptism. Points to note are the consistent use of the past tense, the ingressive expression “became believers” in Eph 1:13, and the deliberate play on the words “Christ” (which means “anointed”) and “who...anointed” in 2 Cor 1:21. Appeals to Acts 8 by Romans Catholics, Anglicans, and Pentecostals should be dismissed, because the text itself indicates that what happened in Samaria was highly unusual. The withholding of the gift of the Spirit from the Samaritans when they were baptised had the special purpose of teaching the apostles that in future neither Samaritans nor Gentiles should be classed as second-rate people (Acts 8: 16-17; 10:44-48; 11:16-18). For the apostles witnessed with their own eyes the gift of the Spirit to Samaritans and to Gentiles.

The play on the words “Christ” and “anointed” in 2 Cor 1:21-22 shows that Paul was not simply using “Christ” as a proper name, but with the thought that Jesus was anointed as the Messiah when He received the Spirit at His baptism. We should see a connection between the English word “christen” and in our name “Christian.” There is nothing wrong with the word “christen” for “baptise” if it means, “make someone a Christian.”

The idea of a seal places the emphasis on the beginning of a believer’s walk with Christ. There is another series of passages in the New Testament that obliquely refers to a particular point in the past when the Spirit was received, when people became believers. They are a use of the Greek aorist tense with words like “believe”, “walk”, and “put on”, where the tense gives the meaning “begin to.” For example, “walk in newness of life” in the baptismal passage Rm 6:4 means “begin to walk in newness of life.” These can readily be understood as oblique references to baptism. Other examples of these are Ac 19:2; Rm 8:15 and Col 3:10.

These passages of the New Testament stress that God uses baptism as a means to offer, convey, and seal His spiritual benefits. People are joined to Jesus death, burial, and resurrection through Baptism (Rm 6:4). Christ made His bride, the church, holy and clean “with the Washing of water by the Word” (Eph 5:26). God has saved us “through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). People who have sinful natures are born again “of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). Baptism as a means through which God confers spiritual blessings is also often apparent when the word for “baptise” in the Greek New Testament is followed by the preposition that means “into.” People are baptised into the divine name, into Christ, into Christ’s death, into the Spirit, into the one body, the church, and into the forgiveness of sins. Great

things happen through baptism. The expressions “in the Christ...in whom” in Eph 1:12-13 and “into Christ” in 2 Cor 1:21, both in connection with the baptismal seal, emphasise incorporation into Christ. We are baptised into the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). From Pentecost on Christians have been incorporated into their ascended Lord through baptism, as they also are through the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 10:17).

This does not mean that baptism is magical or works automatically without faith. Faith has a double relationship to baptism. God works faith through baptism, and by faith we receive the blessings that Jesus Christ has placed in baptism. There is a series of passages that express God’s working of faith through baptism (Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:12 cf Eph 1:19-20).

The necessity of faith in and after baptism is stressed by the idea of a seal. A seal, stamped in wax on letters, was used as a sign of authenticity, or a guarantee. Slaves and cattle were branded with marks as recognisable signs of who owned them, and soldiers were given tattoos by which they could be recognised if they deserted. Prisoners were often branded. The point was that, if a soldier or a slave ran away, the brand showed him up as a deserter. Baptism can be thought of as God’s spiritual mark of ownership by which He will recognise people as His own. It is our mark of loyalty, devotion, and service. Faith must follow for a person who is baptised to continue to receive its benefits, including eternal life (Mk 16:16). The tragedy of our present age is that on the Day of Judgment God’s seal will show up many people who have been baptised, but have been deserters.

“Seal” is used metaphorically for actual baptism with water. Circumcision had been God’s physical mark in the Old Testament. Paul used the word “seal” for circumcision in Rom 4:11, and Paul referred to baptism as a metaphorical “circumcision” in Col 2:11. The Book of Revelation speaks about people who will not be harmed because they have the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4). The seal of the Spirit in baptism is the guarantee of our inheritance. We should not, as some do, try to interpret the word “mark” or “seal” of the beast in Revelation as some kind of physical or material mark. As Jesus promised that His disciples would be clothed with power from on high (Lk 24:49), so the Spirit guarantees that we shall be clothed with our heavenly dwelling (2 Cor 5:1-5). Col 2:11 and 1 Pt 3:21 discourage us from thinking about something done by hands or something as physical as washing away filth from the body. Baptism joins us to Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, and points us forward to being made fully conformable to His image. We shall be glorified with Him, sit with Him in heavenly places, and reign with Him, just as now we suffer with Him and are crucified with Him.