

WHAT IS “THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”?

ACTS 2:38

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Good, able, scholarly, sincere brethren through the years have held—and many presently hold—that the Holy Spirit “dwells” in the Christian only figuratively; that is, He does not actually and personally dwell in us, but only “representatively.” Most who thus believe hold that He indwells us only through the agency of His Word. There is little doubt that this view has become the prevailing one among faithful brethren over the past several decades. Those who subscribe to this view of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling generally attribute the meaning of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38 to **a gift which the Holy Spirit gives** to Christians. Further, those who thus believe entertain varied opinions of that which constitutes this “gift.”

However, good, able scholarly, sincere brethren through the years have held—and many presently hold—that the Holy Spirit Himself **actually** dwells in the Christian, rather than only doing so through some agent (e.g., His Word, His “influence,” et al.). Those who subscribe to this view believe that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38 is **the Holy Spirit Himself as a gift** to all who receive remission of sins upon their obedience to the Gospel plan of salvation. If the well-respected late Moses E. Lard can be trusted as an accurate observer of the brotherhood in 1866, not “one man in a hundred” held any other view of this subject at that time.¹ Of course, counting noses then or now says nothing of the rightness or wrongness of any given doctrine, but I suppose these observations are at least interesting to those who study these issues.

I espouse this latter view, as I have since first having any remembrance of studying it seriously. I have studied and restudied it many times over the years, even as I did once more in preparation for this MS. As in every previous reexamination, I have come away with an inability to interpret and explain various passages consistently while holding to any other view of the matter.

Assuming that we all agree that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Christian (so plainly and repeatedly stated that we need not cite the passages), there must be some point at which the Spirit takes up His abode. I believe Acts 2:38 and corroborating passages identify that point. If they do not indicate when the Spirit begins to dwell in us (regardless of one’s view on the “how”), then I confess I have been unable to discover when He does so.

Most brethren by far have for generations, regardless of their convictions on this subject, avowed that one’s understanding of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* and the manner of His indwelling should not be issues over which we draw lines of fellowship (assuming, of course, that no

claims of post-apostolic miraculous powers are involved in postulated gift). Many of my intimate and esteemed friends believe differently from what I believe on this subject, but I continue to esteem them highly and count them dear. However, a word of caution seems appropriate just here: At times when some write and/or speak on these matters, they address the opposing view in a ridiculing, condescending, and/or caustic or dogmatic manner as if it **were** a fellowship issue. They leave the impression that those who disagree with them are some sort of extremists, either borderline liberals on the one hand or radicals on the other, depending on which view one holds. A brother wrote me the following in 1995 upon learning of my convictions concerning *the gift of the Holy Spirit* and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

It was a great surprise, even a shock to me when I learned...that you held this position.... Of all of our years of knowing each other I had never heard you refer to the subject in school, nor in articles, sermons, or lectures. I guess we take a lot for granted in our friends.... I will certainly not knowingly misrepresent you, but will defend you as best I can under the circumstances.ⁱⁱ

Such statements as the above promote neither an open-minded study of an issue nor unity among brethren. If we really believe this issue should not divide faithful brethren, we should speak and act so as not to cause disruptions in respectful and cordial relations when discussing it. The late Franklin Camp's statement from the introduction to his study of the Holy Spirit is appropriate here. Although I disagree with his conclusions concerning the meaning of *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, I want to register my complete concurrence with his following statement:

Let me say to all that may read this book that as long as we agree that the Holy Spirit convicts, leads, directs, and edifies only through the Word, whatever other differences there may be on the subject ought not to have the least effect on the question of our fellowship.ⁱⁱⁱ

My aim is to set forth the case for my conviction that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38 refers to the Holy Spirit Himself. While it is not my principal task to review and/or refute other views (readily available in various books), it will be necessary at least briefly to touch on them in the course of this study. Calling attention to some things the "gift" is **not** may help us to understand what it **is**.

Acts 2:38—The Principal Passage

The principal passage of our study is the very familiar statement in Acts 2:38: "And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." While I make no pretensions at Greek scholarship, I can read and understand at least some of what the scholars say. *Of the Holy Spirit* is a genitive case form, of which there are more than a dozen types and subtypes,^{iv} all of which must depend upon immediate and/or remote context for their implications. The claim by some that it is grammatically impossible for this phrase in Acts 2:38

to mean “the Holy Spirit as a gift” is simply unfounded. Thayer,^v Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich,^{vi} Kittel,^{vii} Robertson,^{viii} Nicoll,^{ix} Vine,^x and numerous other notable linguistic authorities not only declare that this meaning is **possible**, but that the Holy Spirit **is** the gift, not the giver. Moreover, the Bible itself proves that this grammatical construction can mean the Holy Spirit is the gift, as Wayne Jackson observed: “That *the gift of the Holy Spirit* can be the Spirit Himself is demonstrated by a comparison of Acts 10:45 with 10:47, even though the respective contexts reveal that different endowments of the Spirit are under consideration in Acts 2 and 10.”^{xi} To say the very least, it is both grammatically and Biblically **possible** for this phrase to mean “the Holy Spirit as a gift.”

The Bible has always been its own best commentary. Every time I preach on the subject of “baptism,” I use this hermeneutical principle to define a phrase that appears earlier in Acts 2:38—*for the remission of sins* (KJV). In their fever to remove baptism from the plan of salvation, most denominationalists make the absurd quibble that *for* in Peter’s statement means “because of.” This assertion places baptism after salvation’s reception and removes its conditional relationship to salvation. While there is more than one way to demonstrate the fallacy of this avowal, one effective way is to lay this phrase by the side of the very same phrase in another passage and determine, if possible, its meaning there.

The comparison passage is Matthew 26:28, in which the Lord said: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (KJV). *For the remission of sins* is identical in the translation and in the Greek as well (except the definite article appears in Acts 2:38 before *sins*, which fact has no bearing on the parallelism). Correct hermeneutics and exegesis demand that this phrase must mean the same thing in both passages. It surely cannot have **opposite** meanings in the two contexts. If anti-baptism teachers are correct in saying that baptism is **because** men have already received remission of sins, consistency forces them to allege likewise that Jesus shed His blood **because** men had already received remission of their sins before He shed it, a position so ridiculous as not even to need refutation (see Heb. 9:22, et al.). The only meaning the Lord’s words can possibly have is that *for remission of sins* means “in order to receive remission of sins.” This Scriptural conclusion applies to the same phrase in Acts 2:38, demanding the same meaning for it. Thus baptism is **in order to receive** remission of sins. (The ASV correctly denotes the direction of the action by its rendering, *unto the remission of your sins*, thus removing any basis for this quibble related to the preposition *for*.)

The phrase, *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, also appears in only one other New Testament passage, cited earlier: “And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed, as many as

came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 10:45). Was this a gift the Holy Spirit gave Cornelius and those in his house? Manifestly not, and Luke leaves no room for doubt. As Peter spoke, **the Holy Spirit** fell on his listeners (v. 44). Surely no one is prepared to argue that that which “fell” (v. 44) was different from that which was “poured out” in (v. 45). Luke further described the occasion by saying the people had “received the Holy Spirit” (v. 47). Unquestionably, *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in this context can only refer to Him Who fell on and was poured out upon them and Whom they received—identified clearly by Luke as **the Holy Spirit Himself**, not a gift given by the Holy Spirit. The late Roy Lanier, Sr., well said:

So if the expression, *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, here means the Holy Spirit is the gift, and if the expression occurs in only one other verse, if we allow the Bible to explain itself, we must conclude that this is the meaning of the expression in the only other place it occurs.^{xii}

The phrase, *for the remission of sins*, relates to two respective antecedents in Matthew 26:28 and in Acts 2:38 (the shedding of Jesus’ blood in the former and repentance and baptism in the latter). However, these differences do not negate the identical meaning of these identical grammatical constructions. Likewise, although *the gift of the Holy Spirit* relates to two different manifestations of the Spirit in the respective cases described in Acts 2:38 and Acts 10:45, this fact does not negate the identical meaning of the identical grammatical constructions in both of these cases. What the phrase means in one place, it means in both. I conclude that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38 refers to the Holy Spirit Who was given, just as it clearly does in Acts 10:45.

Complementary Passages

The New Testament teaches in several passages that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Christian (Rom. 8:9–11; 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph. 2:21–22; 2 Tim. 1:14; et al.). My purpose in mentioning this fact and citing these passages is not to discuss them or to argue the case that He does actually dwell in the Christian. I mention the indwelling doctrine because of its relation to “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Since the Holy Spirit takes up His abode and dwells in the Christian (as numerous New Testament passages affirm), when does He do so? Acts 2:38 is only one of various passages that answers this question. Here, the stated time or point is when one has received remission of sins upon believing in Christ, repenting of his sins, and being baptized (vv. 37–38a). Now consider some corroborating passages:

Acts 5:32: “And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him.” This passage clearly states both that (1) the Holy Spirit is the gift God gives and (2) He gives the Holy Spirit (no room to quibble about a gift **from** the Holy Spirit here) to those who obey Him. Some try to confine this gift to the apostles and their

baptism in the Spirit on Pentecost, but such cannot be done without putting the language on a torture rack. Peter and the apostles (v. 29) are the “we” who were the witnesses (along with the Holy Spirit). The “them that obey him” in the last part of the verse—to whom God has given the Holy Spirit—are clearly distinguished from the “we are witnesses” (the apostles). *Them* refers to those **besides, apart from**, the apostles who obey God. The details of this obedience are found in Acts 2:38, where those who obeyed God in repentance and baptism were given the Holy Spirit. Here, likewise, God gives the Holy Spirit to those who are obedient. Acts 5:32 is therefore a commentary on the meaning of Acts 2:38 relating to *the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

1 Corinthians 6:19: “Or know ye not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have from God? and ye are not your own....” Paul was addressing children of God (“unto the church of God which is at Corinth” [1:2]). This passage is an absolutely unambiguous affirmation that the Holy Spirit dwells in Christians—specifically in their mortal bodies. I wish to emphasize here that this passage also clearly affirms the **source** of the indwelling Spirit—“which ye have from God.” If we allow words to have their ordinary meanings, Paul here states that God **gave** us the Spirit Who dwells in us as His children.

Galatians 4:6: “And because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” This passage declares that God sent the Spirit of Christ (another term for the Holy Spirit [Rom. 8:9; Phi. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:11]) into some hearts. The hearts belong to those who are God’s sons, and He sends the Spirit into their hearts **because** they are such. There is no implication of inspiration in the averment that the Spirit cries “Abba, Father” in our hearts, as Darrell Conley aptly noted:

In the parallel passage in Romans, Paul expresses the same thought this way: “The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). The testimony of the Spirit of God through His Word declares what God requires to become His child. Our spirit bears witness to whether or not we have been obedient to those requirements. The two together bear witness to the fact that we are (or are not) children of God.^{xiii}

From Galatians 4:6 I conclude that (1) God sends the Holy Spirit (2) into the hearts of His children (3) because they are (i.e., when they become) His children.

Now, consider the following parallels:

- Acts 2:38: One receives the **gift** of the Holy Spirit upon **repentance and baptism**
- Acts 5:32: God **gives** the Holy Spirit to those who **obey** Him
- 1 Corinthians 6:19: God **gives** the Holy Spirit to dwell in **Christians**
- Galatians 4:6: God **sends** the Holy Spirit into the hearts of His **sons**^{xiv}

Two Fundamental Laws of Hermeneutics

The rules of Biblical interpretation, technically called “Biblical hermeneutics,” are not found in a neat list somewhere in the Bible. They rather represent the distillation of principles at which earnest Bible scholars have arrived over the centuries. Almost any standard book on hermeneutics contains and discusses these rules that have been hammered out over time and through controversy. Some of these rules are exemplified by the inspired writers themselves (e.g., the prohibitive nature of the silence of Scripture as seen in Heb. 7:14; 8:4). Even if one were not aware of books on this subject, he would not study his Bible very long (or very profitably, at least) without employing (whether consciously or unconsciously) certain reliable and consistent principles of interpretation.

I have already employed one hermeneutical rule in the course of this study. I did so when I used Matthew 26:28 to clarify the meaning of *for remission of sins* in Acts 2:38, and when I used Acts 10:45 to clarify the meaning of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38. W. Robert Palmer simply states this rule as follows: “One passage will often explain another passage.”^{xv} D.R. Dungan’s description is: “Help may be had...by examining the statements of other writers on the same subject, who are of equal authority.”^{xvi} I now suggest two additional hermeneutical principles that are germane to interpreting the meaning of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* correctly in Acts 2:38.

Literal Language Comes First, Figurative Language Second

When all of the suggested meanings of *ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38 are sorted out, only two basic positions remain: Some take the clause as literal language while others assert that it is figurative language. A fundamental rule, universally advocated by reputable Biblical hermeneuticists as far as I know, advises Bible students to assume that the language in any passage is to be understood literally, unless a prevailing reason or reasons indicate it may be figurative. Dungan states and comments on this rule as follows:

All words are to be understood in their literal sense, unless the evident meaning of the context forbids.—Figures are the exception, literal language the rule; hence we are not to regard anything as figurative until we feel compelled to do so by the evident import of the passage.^{xvii}

Palmer’s statement of this dictum says:

Simply stated, let us consider every passage as literal with the following exceptions: 1. When it involves an impossibility or an absurdity.... 2. When it involves a contradiction or inconsistency. 3. When it involves an immoral conclusion. 4. When it is otherwise implied by the context. 5. When it is otherwise stated. 6. When it is more apt to be figurative for...sheer common sense.^{xviii}

Moses E. Lard's succinct version of the principle states: "A word, whenever met with, is to be taken in its common current sense, unless the subject-matter, the context, or a qualifying epithet forbids it. This rule is universal and imperative."^{xx} Clinton Lockhart identifies his "Rule XXXI" as "Preference for the literal," and writes simply: "Since the literal is the most usual signification of a word, and therefore occurs much more frequently than the figurative, any term will be regarded as literal until there is good reason for a different understanding."^{xx} Numerous other hermeneutics books echo this rule consistently.^{xxi}

Let us now apply this principle of hermeneutics to Acts 2:38. Are there any prevailing factors to suggest that Peter was speaking figuratively? Are sinners to repent only **figuratively** (doubtless, this idea would appeal to many)? Are we to understand baptism in this verse to be a mere **metaphor** (as many denominationalists insist it is in their determination to delete it from the plan of salvation), or must the sinner be **actually** immersed in water? Does one **literally** receive remission of his sins upon repentance and baptism, or is this just a **figure of speech** that stands for something else? I insist that all three of these items are strictly **literal**. Now, if the first three of the four elements in Acts 2:38 are universally accepted among the Lord's people in their literal, ordinary usage and meanings, I am unable to see by what valid rule one can assume that Peter suddenly switches to figurative language for the fourth element—*ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

Suppose one is a relatively new Christian and is therefore ignorant of various hypotheses concerning the meaning of *ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* in Acts 2:38. What prevailing reason would cause him to assume or even suspect that this is figurative language, and what would he understand this clause to mean? Further, when he reads in Acts 5:32 of the apostles' speaking of **God's gift of the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him**, will it not be most natural for him to understand this statement in literal terms? His study will eventually bring him to 1 Corinthians 6:19, and he will read that his body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is in him, and **God is the One Who placed Him there**. He will then come upon Galatians 4:6 and learn that **God sent** the Holy Spirit into his heart **because he is a Christian**. We should not be surprised if this student accepts these statements in their usual and customary meanings. Truly, we should be surprised if he did not.

What is there in any of these passages (and several others relating more specifically to the Spirit's indwelling) that, when taken in their usual, literal sense, creates any contradiction, absurdity, impossibility, or inconsistency? I can find no "qualifying epithet" in any of them to negate their literalness. What is there in any of them that even hints that they are metaphorical or figurative? I suggest nothing at all.

In spite of the foregoing considerations, as indicated in our introduction, the most popular view brethren hold of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* is that this phrase is a figurative expression. Jackson correctly observed: “Other good brethren hold that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* is merely a metaphorical expression suggesting that only the Spirit’s influence, by means of the inspired Word, indwells the Christian.”^{xxii} This view is closely allied with a figurative view of the Spirit’s **indwelling**, as Lanier points out:

Others say that the phrase dwells in you [Rom. 8:9, et al., DM] must be taken as a figure of speech, and means that the Spirit dwells in a person only as that person is influenced, motivated, by the teaching of Christ revealed by the Spirit. This is called the “representative indwelling” of the Spirit.^{xxiii}

Just here we will do well to consider an important caution about identifying passages as figurative **without due cause**. After his statement (as quoted earlier), “figures are the exception, literal language the rule,” Dungan continued:

And even here great caution should be observed. We are very apt to regard contexts as teaching some theory which we have in our minds. And having so determined, anything to the contrary will be regarded as a mistaken interpretation; hence, if the literal meaning of the words shall be found to oppose our speculations, we are ready to give to the words in question some figurative import that will better agree with our preconceived opinions. Let us be sure that the meaning of the author has demanded that the language be regarded in a figurative sense, and that it is not our theory which has made the necessity.^{xxiv}

When taken at face value (i.e., in literal terms), Acts 2:38 teaches that everyone who repents and is baptized receives the Holy Spirit as a gift. Acts 5:32 corroborates this fact by saying that God gives His spirit to those who obey Him. Further, according to 1 Corinthians 6:19 and Galatians 4:6, the God-given, God-sent Spirit takes up His abode and dwells in us because we are sons of God. The “gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 2:38 is as much a literal promise of God as is remission of sins for every believing, penitent sinner who is baptized.

Definitions May Be Substituted for Words

One of the earliest rules of hermeneutics I learned as a student at Freed-Hardeman College half a century ago was that the definition of a Biblical term, **properly** defined, can be substituted for the term itself, and it will make perfect sense. We were taught the reliable “rule of thumb”: “Things (i.e., words, phrases, objects) that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.” Therefore, if our use of a substitute term renders a passage nonsensical, creates a contradiction or absurdity, or produces a misfit, the substitute is thereby proved incorrect. This principle was drilled into all of the preacher students in just about every Bible and Bible-related course. It has served faithful brethren well in both writing and preaching, especially on the polemic platform. Dungan lists it as Rule 7 under Section 50, “Rules by which the meaning of

words shall be ascertained,” and states the rule as follows: “The proper definition of a word may be used in the place of the word.” He then continues with the following amplification:

If the trial be made in this way, and the definition is wrong, the sense of the passage will be so destroyed as to make it apparent. It need only to be stated that the true meaning of a word will give the same sense that the word would give; hence, to remove the word and replace it with the definition, is easily done, and is a valuable method.^{xxv}

In his section on “The Meaning of Words,” Palmer advises:

Here is a simple test that can be made. If there is any doubt as to which meaning to use, substitute the various definitions in place of the word itself. The one shade that seems to fit the passage best will often come to light by this practice. This helps immeasurably. As a matter of fact, this proves most useful even when there is but one meaning to a word. Put the definition of a word right in its place in any given verse. Watch it become more alive.^{xxvi}

Let us now apply this rule to Acts 2:38. Brethren who believe *the gift of the Holy Spirit* refers to a gift the Holy Spirit **gives** (instead of the Holy Spirit Himself) explain this gift in various ways. The most prevalent of these are “salvation,” “eternal life,” “miraculous gifts,” and “the Word of God.”

Salvation Substituted: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive **salvation**.” Without doubt, salvation from the guilt of our sins is a gift which we can Scripturally attribute to the Holy Spirit, but is that what Peter meant by *the gift of the Holy Spirit*? Had he not already indicated their reception of salvation in this very sense in the phrase, *remission of sins*, which was theirs upon their penitence and baptism?

Of this hypothesis, Wayne Jackson sagely observed:

But this theory appears to gloss the very language of the verse. It seems very clear to this writer that “the gift of the Holy Spirit” is something different from and in consequence of the reception of the forgiveness of sins. Note the dual use of the conjunction and in this context: “Repent ye, and be baptized...unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” If baptism is different from repentance, should not a similar recognition be given to the distinction between salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit? Moreover, other passages also suggest that the reception of the Holy Spirit is a blessing given in consequence of salvation [he then quotes Gal. 4:6].^{xxvii}

If Peter referred to salvation as the Holy Spirit’s gift, he would, in effect, have said, “Repent ye, and be baptized...unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive remission of sins.” *Salvation* in this context creates a strange (and exceedingly unnatural) redundancy for *the gift of the Holy Spirit*.

Eternal Life Substituted: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive **eternal life**.” As with *salvation*, eternal life is most certainly a gift, and we do no violence to Scripture when we attribute this gift to the Holy Spirit. However, this hypothesis pushes the reception of the gift to

the end of a faithful life. As the late Gus Nichols observed: “This is another theory which logically means that we do not have the Holy Spirit in this life at all, for the Bible plainly teaches that ‘eternal life’ is ‘in the world to come.’” He then correctly pointed out that numerous passages teach that God has given the Holy Spirit to His children and He dwells in them “here and now” in this life [for which he cites Acts 2:38; 5:32; Rom. 8:8–11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 1 The. 4:8; Gal. 4:6; Jude 19].^{xxviii} Surely, the very wording of Peter’s statement indicates an immediate reception of the gift, which *eternal life* does not fit.

Miraculous Gifts Substituted: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive **miraculous gifts.**” That is, those who repented and were baptized would be given the power to perform signs and work miracles, as the apostles did. I will subsequently document the fact that evidence is totally lacking of any besides the apostles possessing miraculous powers for a considerable time after Pentecost. For this theory to have any plausibility, therefore, one would have to suggest that the giving of this gift was delayed to some indefinite, post-Pentecost time. Does the fact that Peter said, “ye **shall** receive” imply some distant time for reception of the gift, as some assert? Terry Hightower’s comment indicates that this suggestion is untenable:

Some hold that the future tense promise of “ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38, emph. TMH) was not in but after baptism and is thus the reception of supernatural powers (i.e., miracles given by apostles’ hands, Acts 8:17) perhaps months or even years later. However, parallel verses which include the phrase, thou shalt be saved (e.g., Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9; emph. TMH) show this “indefinite time” to be incorrect.^{xxix}

Admittedly, **some** who obeyed the Gospel in Jerusalem **eventually** received miraculous powers when the apostles laid their hands on them (Acts 6:6–8; 8:6–7). Some of these **may** have even been converted on Pentecost (e.g., the seven men, 6:6–8), but granting this to be so, they did not receive miraculous powers **then**. This explanation of *the gift of the Holy Spirit* suffers on several counts:

First, Peter’s language implies that “the gift of the Holy Spirit” would be given as universally as “the remission of sins.” Jackson’s comment on this hypothesis is germane: “If such a view is correct, it would seem that a reasonable approach to the passage [Acts 2:38, DM] would suggest that all who were baptized that day (cf. 2:41) received not only forgiveness of sins, but also supernatural gifts, so that literally hundreds of disciples were performing miracles subsequently in the city of Jerusalem.”^{xxx} As I earlier indicated, I will demonstrate later that this was not the case at all.

If this gift consisted of miraculous powers—administered only through the apostles’ hands—then certain extremely implausible circumstances follow, some of which Lanier summarized:

Three thousand people obeyed the commands; therefore, that many received the power to work miracles. Are we ready for such a conclusion: But soon the number came to be five thousand males (Acts 4:4). Then believers were the more added to the Lord (5:14), and the number of the disciples multiplied exceedingly (6:7). If we multiply five thousand males by the least number possible, we have ten thousand. Then there were women obeying the gospel... (6:1). Did apostles lay hands on all these women and give them the power to work miracles? ...When the church at Jerusalem heard that Antioch had received the word, they sent Barnabas to exhort and encourage them. I wonder why apostles were not sent to lay hands on them that they might receive the promise of Acts 2:38. If the promise of Acts 2:38 was miraculous power, and all who obeyed the commands of that verse received miraculous power by apostles' hands, these twelve men were required to go to every person who obeyed the gospel regardless of where he lived.... This would have been a physical impossibility; nothing less than miraculous transportation could have made it possible.... And then I wonder who laid hands on the Ethiopian eunuch.... The eunuch went on to Ethiopia without the gift of the Holy Spirit...according to this theory.^{xxxii}

Second, evidence is completely nonexistent that any saints besides the apostles possessed any miraculous powers for some time after Pentecost. Nichols correctly wrote: "There is not a word said on Pentecost, nor for two or three years afterward, about the apostles' laying hands on any to bestow upon them the miraculous gift of the Spirit. (Acts 6:6 is the first recorded instance.)"^{xxxiii} Further, there is not one word during that same time span of any miracles being wrought by anyone **besides** the apostles. Jackson further notes:

There is absolutely no indication, from Acts 2 through chapter 5, that anyone other than the apostles possessed miraculous gifts. Note the following: "and fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles" (Acts 2:43). The miracle performed by Peter and John in Acts 3 seems to have been an unusual event; the Jewish leaders commented: "...for that indeed a notable miracle hath been wrought through them, is manifest to all that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16). There is no hint that multitudes of Christians were duplicating such signs in the city. Again: "And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people, and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. But of the rest durst no man join himself to them; howbeit the people magnified them..." (Acts 5:12-13). The religious awe with which the multitudes held the apostles suggests they were doing signs not characteristic of the saints generally. It is only when one comes to Acts 6:6ff. verses that mention is made of the imposition of the apostles' hands, and the subsequent exercise of miraculous gifts by others (cf. Acts 6:8, emph. DM).^{xxxiii}

Third, if the "gift of the Holy Spirit" was miraculous gifts, rather than the "ordinary" indwelling manifestation of the Spirit, promised to and declared for all Christians, we must assume that the "saints" at Rome did not really belong to Christ at the time Paul wrote to them. He stated that they were "in the Spirit, **if so be** that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. But if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, **he is none of his**" (Rom. 8:9, emph. DM). As far as history (inspired and uninspired) is concerned, no apostle had been to Rome at the time Paul wrote his letter to them. This fact is further implied in that he said he longed to visit them **in order to impart** to them "some spiritual gift," which only an apostle could impart **in person** (i.e., by laying

his hands on them)(1:11). Yet, the apostle addressed them as “beloved of God, called to be saints” (v. 7). Obviously, he thought they **already** had the Holy Spirit dwelling in them and that they belonged to Christ at the time he wrote them and thus **before he got there**. His description of them (“called to be saints”) tells us that they had obeyed the same commands Peter issued on Pentecost, upon which he promised they would receive both remission of sins **and** the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). If *the gift of the Holy Spirit* is not a reference to the indwelling Spirit, when did the Romans receive the Spirit? Were the Romans without “the gift of the Holy Spirit” until Paul arrived to lay hands on them? Did they not have the “Spirit of Christ” and did they thus not belong to Christ before Paul arrived in Rome, in spite of the fact that he described them as “beloved of God, called to be saints”?

Fourth, although the promise of the “gift of the Holy Spirit” was as universal as the reception of “remission of sins,” where is the evidence that every saint in the first century received miraculous powers (even if one grants that the apostles could somehow get to all of them)? As earlier observed, there is no evidence that any of the thousands converted in Jerusalem for two or three years after Pentecost received or exercised such powers. Moreover, the first ones who received these powers numbered **only seven** out of the several thousands who were disciples by that time, leaving the impression that this conferring of power was exceptional and unusual rather than universal and ordinary among the saints (Acts 6:5–8). (Interestingly, these seven men had to be “full of the Holy Spirit” already in some sense, **before** their appointment for the necessary work and **before** the apostles laid hands on them to give them miraculous powers [v. 3].)

Philip, one of the seven, went to Samaria, preached Christ, performed signs, and baptized “both men and women” (Acts 8:5–7, 12). Peter and John soon came and laid their hands on these new saints, upon which they received miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–19). Did the Samaritans not have the Holy Spirit in any sense until the apostles arrived? Again, when Philip converted the Ethiopian, how did he **ever** receive “the gift of the Holy Spirit” if it consisted of miraculous powers? And what of the converts of those thousands who, upon the persecution led by Saul, were scattered from Jerusalem and then “went about preaching the word” (8:1–4)? Those who fled Jerusalem “traveled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch” (11:19), and someone (apparently other than an apostle, as noted earlier) had established the church in Rome. While the Jerusalem saints scattered, Luke plainly stated that the apostles did not, but **remained in Jerusalem** (8:1). Granting for argument’s sake that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* refers to miraculous powers, how did these converts in far-flung areas receive the promise of Acts 2:38 before an apostle visited them? It is quite likely that many first-

century brethren never saw an apostle their entire lives and thus never received this promised gift—if it consisted of miraculous powers.

Fifth, if *the gift of the Holy Spirit* refers to miraculous powers, what are we to do with the latter part of Acts 2:38 today? Those who identify *the gift of the Holy Spirit with miraculous powers* seem to be left with only three options, neither of which I can accept. Option **one** is that the “gift” does not apply to all who obey the Gospel for all time. (The power to impart such gifts ended with the death of the last apostle, near the end of the first century. The manifestation of the gifts ceased when the last saint died upon whom an apostle had conferred miraculous powers, perhaps in the early part of the second century.) Yet, Peter’s language implies that the reception of the “gift” is as universal and as enduring as is “the remission of sins.” Option **two** is that the “gift” is the universal bestowal of miraculous powers upon those who obeyed the Gospel only during the lifetime of the apostles (or as some say until A.D. 70). However, this interpretation does not comport with the words of Peter’s promise, which imply that it extends in time as long as repentance, baptism, and remission of sins extend. Further, as already noted, evidence is lacking that every Christian even in the first century received miraculous gifts. Option **three** is that the miraculous gifts are promised to every Christian through all time, just as every baptized, penitent believer receives remission of sins from Pentecost until the coming of the Lord. This option denies the Biblical fact that all miraculous activity ceased, as noted above, when the last apostle died and when the last disciple upon which an apostle had laid hands died. It also contradicts reality—even the godliest saints who have lived since that time have not possessed and do not possess miraculous abilities.

In discussing this question, Nichols, after asking if he should quote all of Acts 2:38 to sinners today, wrote:

Or, should I water it down, and say, “Repent, and be baptized...for the remission of sins, and ye shall not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost—for he has not been on earth since the days of the apostles, nineteen hundred years ago”???? Would I be honest to quote Acts 2:38 to sinners today, without explaining that (according to this theory) some part of this answer to sinners in the first gospel sermon is not good now?^{xxxiv}

Lanier also asked some incisive questions about this same problem:

And what about people today who repent and are baptized for the remission of sins? There are no apostles on earth today to lay hands on them and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, which the theory says is the promise of Acts 2:38. We must obey the commands of that verse, but we cannot enjoy the promise of that verse. Can someone tell me why the commands of the verse are binding, but the promise of the same verse is no longer valid?^{xxxv}

Can brethren who believe *the gift of the Holy Spirit* consists of miraculous gifts consistently quote all of this verse today? If they do quote all of it, are they not obligated to explain that the latter part of it no longer applies?

Word of God Substituted: A large number of beloved brethren aver that *the gift of the Holy Spirit* is a metaphorical expression that refers to the influence of the Holy Spirit through His Word. My initial response to this averment is to ask again, on the basis of the hermeneutical principle earlier discussed (i.e., “literal first, figurative second”), what are the prevailing factors suggesting that Peter was speaking figuratively? Is there any element in the verse or the verses in the immediate context that point in that direction? I am reasonably sure that brethren almost universally accept the earlier constituents of Acts 2:38 as straightforward, literal terminology. This being so, I am unable to discover any valid criterion for assuming that its final element—*ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*—is suddenly non-literal, that is, figurative.

Further, when one applies the hermeneutical rule of “substitution,” using *the Word of God* as a substitute for *the gift of the Holy Spirit*, he creates, rather than solves, theological problems. Consider now the reading of Acts 2:38 with the substituted phrase: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the Word of God.” Nichols commented on this very point:

If the gift of the “word” is the same as “the gift of the Holy Ghost” promised by Peter (Acts 2:38), why did he not say what he meant? Why did he not say, “And ye shall receive the gift of the holy word?”—No, he did not say this, for they received the word (v. 41) before baptism, before the remission sins, and before the reception of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; Jam. 1:21).^{xxxvi}

Surely, we would know without being told that those to whom Peter addressed Acts 2:38 had **already** received the Word of God. After all, Peter had been preaching the Word for some time to those assembled (vv. 14–36), to which they responded with conviction and faith (v. 37). However, Luke did not leave even so obvious a fact to our inference. He stated explicitly that **before** the three thousand were baptized in obedience to verse 38, they had **already** received the Word: “They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls” (v. 41).

The late James D. Bales correctly observed:

The reception of the Spirit promised in Acts 2:38 is not equivalent to and limited to the reception of the word. For Peter did not say, nor does the context imply, that they were to repent and be baptized...unto the remission of sins and that they would receive the word of God. They received the word of God before they were baptized. This does not mean that they would not continue to receive the word after baptism, for those who had been taught and baptized were to be taught some more (Mat. 28:19–20). It does mean that their initial reception of the word came before baptism and resulted in baptism.... But the gift of the Spirit promised in Acts 2:38 came after the baptism in water and thus after the reception of the word. Thus Peter did not say receive the word and be baptized and you will receive the gift of the word [emph. DM].^{xxxvii}

Lanier amplified this point somewhat:

While studying Acts 2:38, we may as well notice that the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit is said to follow one's baptism; that is, the promise of the Holy Spirit was to all believers who would repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins. The Holy Spirit is not given to people to enable them to repent; nor is he given to sinners to enable them to believe and receive the word of God. Paul said the Holy Spirit is given to people because they are children of God (Gal. 4:6)... Since this is the order established by scripture, we conclude that the Holy Spirit is not received when one receives the word. In verse 41 we read, "They then that received his word were baptized," so baptism stands between receiving the word and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit [emph. DM].^{xxxviii}

Jackson similarly reasons as follows, with which I agree:

The "Word Only" view seems to fall under the weight of the context of Acts 2 as a whole. For example in Acts 2:41 Luke records: "They then that received his word were baptized...." Peter's auditors on the day of Pentecost "gladly received his word" (v. 41, KJV), hence, the influence of the Spirit through that Word, before their baptism. This is evidenced by their question, "What shall we do?" (v. 37), as well as an implied penitent disposition. Yet the promised gift of the Spirit was given after baptism. Since the Spirit operated on the Pentecostians through the Word prior to their baptism, just what did they receive as a "gift" after their baptism?^{xxxix}

As Bales hinted above, if *the gift of the Holy Spirit* consists of receiving the Word of God, this reception logically then is the **limit** of his reception of the Spirit, a conclusion, however, as Lanier has noted, that cannot be reconciled with the Biblical order of occurrences:

Next, according the Luke, people first received the word and then were baptized (Acts 2:41). If when we receive the word we receive the Holy Spirit, we have all the Spirit we are ever going to get before we are baptized. But Peter promised people they would receive the Spirit following their baptism (Acts 2:38). Again, one must receive in faith the word before he can obey it, for God gives the Holy Spirit to them that obey Him (Acts 5:32). If when one receives the word he has received the Holy Spirit, it would follow that one receives all the Spirit he is ever going to receive before he obeys the Lord in repentance and baptism. Next, one must receive the word and be baptized before he can become a child of God. But Paul says God gives us the Spirit of His son, the Holy Spirit, because we are sons (Gal. 4:6). If God gives the Spirit because we are sons, it follows that we must become sons before He gives us the Spirit. We must receive and obey the word in order to become sons, but we must become sons in order to receive the Holy Spirit [emph. DM].^{xi}

Hightower likewise stated:

To paraphrase Thomas B. Warren, this (i.e., "Word only") theory involves the following proposition: If one receives the Holy spirit only by receiving the Word of God and in no other way, then one receives the Holy spirit only when he receives the Word of God and at no other time.^{xli}

I emphasize: If receiving *the gift of the Holy Spirit* consists of receiving the Word of God, then it must follow that one receives the Holy Spirit **before** he becomes a child of God, for there is certainly no way for one to become such without **first receiving the Word**. Yet, as earlier

emphasized, the Bible teaches that one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit **in consequence of becoming** a child of God (Acts 2:38; 5:32; Gal. 4:6). Nichols thus argued:

The gift of the Holy Ghost was not promised in Acts 2:38 to sinners and unsaved persons before baptism, and before remission of sins....

But they received the word, in Acts 2, before they were baptized, and before they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. It says, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). Note: (1) They "received" the word before baptism (v. 41). (2) They were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit after baptism and remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

Since the sinner is unsaved before he is baptized (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16), but "gladly received the word" before baptism, therefore, the sinner receives the Word, and that before he is saved—while he is a sinner—while he is a child of the devil—and before he is baptized, before he receives remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). O yes, the record says, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). If the "gift of the Holy Spirit" promised here is in the word like the medicine in a capsule, as is true of the teaching and converting power of the Spirit, then the sinner, unsaved person, actually a child of the devil, receives the "gift of the Holy Ghost" before baptism, and before remission of sins, by receiving the Word gladly before these things (Acts 2:41, 38–39).^{xlii}

Hightower reasons as follows on this point:

Note: (1) since "Word only" advocates hold that one receives the Holy Spirit when he receives the Word of God, and (2) since one receives the Word of God before he is baptized (Acts 2:41), and (3) since one remains a child of the devil until he is baptized into Christ (John 3:3–5; Rom. 6:3–5; Gal. 3:26–27), (4) it follows that such advocates would logically have to accept the false position that it is possible for a child of the devil to receive the Holy Spirit in the same sense in which He is received by the child of God.^{xliii}

It is evident from the foregoing material that there is more to receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit than merely hearing/receiving the Word of God. To receive "the Word of God" cannot possibly be equivalent to receiving "the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Conclusion

I have set forth what I consider to be some of the major Scriptural and logical evidence favoring a literal understanding of Peter's words in every phrase of Acts 2:38, including the promise that penitent baptized believers will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift. However, as strong as I am in my convictions in this regard, I will not be dogmatic about my understanding and advocacy of these matters. In the very nature of the case, as finite creatures we cannot fathom all of the mysteries of the infinite God in His three persons. I deem the words of the inimitable, late Gus Nichols to be worthy and appropriate ones with which to conclude:

There are many reasons why one's position as to how the Holy Spirit dwells in us should never be made a test of fellowship. The only reason which needs to be stated now is that to all who obey the gospel from the heart, the promise will be fulfilled as God planned it, whether or not we understand "how" the Spirit dwells in us.^{xliv}

Endnotes

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- ⁱ As quoted by Roy H. Lanier, Sr., “What Is the Gift of the Holy Spirit of Acts 2:38—The Personal Indwelling,” *What Do You Know About the Holy Spirit?* (Hurst, TX: Winkler Pub., 1980), p. 187.
- ⁱⁱ From a personal letter in my files, dated June 12, 1995.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Franklin Camp, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Redemption* (Birmingham, AL: Roberts and Son, 1974), p. x.
- ^{iv} H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Co., 1955), pp. 75–81.
- ^v Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: American Book Co., 1889), pp. 161, 521.
- ^{vi} Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, rev. and aug. ed., 1952), p. 209.
- ^{vii} Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980 rep.), 2:167.
- ^{viii} A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (New York, NY: R.R. Smith, Inc., 1930), 3:36.
- ^{ix} R.J. Knowling, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980 rep.), 2:91.
- ^x W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, ed. Merrill F. Unger and William White, Jr. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub, 1996), 2:264.
- ^{xi} Wayne Jackson, “What Is the ‘Gift of the Holy Spirit’ in Acts 2:38?” Christian Courier archives, www.christiancourier.com/feature/2003_11.htm.
- ^{xii} Lanier, p. 188.
- ^{xiii} Darrell Conley, “God Sent Forth His Son,” *Studies in Galatians*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1986), 152.
- ^{xiv} Additional passages that may also bear upon “the Holy Spirit as a gift” include John 7:37–39 and 1 The. 4:8.
- ^{xv} W. Robert Palmer, *How to Understand the Bible* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Pub. Co., 1965), p. 52.
- ^{xvi} D.R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Pub. Co., n.d.), pp. 181–182.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- ^{xviii} Palmer, pp. 89–90.
- ^{xix} As quoted by Terry M. Hightower, “The Holy Spirit Dwells in the Christian Literally and Personally,” *Studies in Romans*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Pub., Inc., 1996), p. 385.
- ^{xx} Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Pub. Co., rev. 1915), p. 157.
- ^{xxi} For documentation of several of these, see Hightower, pp. 379–83.
- ^{xxii} Jackson, *ibid.*
- ^{xxiii} Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *The Timeless Trinity for the Ceaseless Centuries* (Denver, CO: Roy H. Lanier, Sr., 1974), p. 355.
- ^{xxiv} Dungan, *ibid.*
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, pp. 188–189.
- ^{xxvi} Palmer, pp. 99–100.
- ^{xxvii} Jackson, *ibid.*
- ^{xxviii} Gus Nichols, *Lectures on the Holy Spirit* (Plainview, TX: Nichols Bros. Pub. Co., 1967), p. 174.
- ^{xxix} Hightower, p. 378.
- ^{xxx} Jackson, *ibid.*
- ^{xxxi} Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *20 Years of the Problem Page* (Abilene, TX: Quality Pub., 1984), 2:50–51.
- ^{xxxii} Nichols, p. 161.

^{xxxiii} Jackson, *ibid.*

^{xxxiv} Nichols, p. 164.

^{xxxv} Lanier, *20 Years...*, p. 51.

^{xxxvi} Nichols, p. 168.

^{xxxvii} James D. Bales, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian* (Shreveport, LA: Gussie Lambert Pub., 1966), pp. 7–8.

^{xxxviii} Lanier, *Timeless Trinity*, pp. 359.

^{xxxix} Jackson, *ibid.*

^{xl} Lanier, *20 Years...*, p.57.

^{xli} Hightower, p. 397.

^{xlii} Nichols, pp. 170–71.

^{xliii} Hightower, p. 397.

^{xliv} Nichols, pp. 155–56.

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