

# Pentecost and the Coming of the Holy Spirit

## Part 4-- The Change to the New Covenant Administration

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One of the most common questions associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost regards the differences between the Old and New Covenant. How is the outpouring at Pentecost unique, given the fact that the Old Testament saints were already indwelt by the Spirit and partakers of His gifts? Before we answer this question let us examine some of the passages that discuss the Spirit's role in Old Testament believers.

In Numbers we read of the Spirit coming upon the seventy elders. "Then the LORD came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him, and placed the same upon the seventy elders; and it happened, when the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, although they never did so again" (11:25). When Joshua learned of two men that remained in the camp whom the Spirit rested upon and caused to prophesy he asked Moses to forbid them. Note Moses' response, "Then Moses said to him, 'Are you zealous for my sake? Oh, that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them'" (11:29)! In response to Moses' prayer for spiritual support, God sends His Spirit upon the seventy elders enabling them to support Moses in the task of leadership. This ministry for leadership is immediately followed by the act of prophesying to publicly demonstrate to the people of Israel that they were specially gifted by God and thus should be obeyed. "God's Spirit evidently bestowed upon them the qualities of power and wisdom, which Paul, in writing to Timothy under the New Covenant, recognized as gifts of the Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7)."<sup>1</sup>

Moses' comments in verse 29 are particularly interesting because they implicitly recognize the inferiority of the older covenant and from our standpoint anticipate the greatness of Pentecost. Joshua, perhaps out of envy or a desire to limit the number of those who are specifically gifted by the Spirit so that Moses would remain more prominent, wants Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from exercising their new spiritual gift. Moses, however, recognizes that the people would be better off if everyone without exception was endowed with power from on high.

When the prophet Haggai spoke God's Word to Zerubbabel instructing him to be strong, he reminded him of God's special presence among the people. "According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear" (Hg. 2:5). When King David repented of his sin he prayed, "Do not take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51:11). Isaiah said the children of Israel "rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (63:10) then asked, "Where is He who put His Holy Spirit within them" (63:11)? Stephen declared to the Jews, "You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you" (Ac. 7:51). In the book of Nehemiah the Levites prayed, "You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth" (9:20). The Holy Spirit came upon and gifted the judges (Jdg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 15:14); the kings (1 Sam. 11:6; 16:33) and the prophets (Neh. 9:30; Jer. 1:8; Ezek. 2:2; 11:5; Mic. 3:8; Lk. 1:15).

That the Holy Spirit indwelt Old Testament saints is also proven by theological considerations. The Bible is very clear that on one can be saved without the regenerating power of the Spirit (Jn. 3:3-8). No one can do good works acceptable to God apart from saving faith

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<sup>1</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 189.

which is a gift from God. Pink writes, “The Spirit prompted true prayer, inspired spiritual worship, produced His fruit in the lives of believers then (see Zech. 4:6) as much as He does now. We have ‘the *same* Spirit of faith’ (II Cor. 4:13) as they had. All the spiritual good which has ever been wrought in and through men must be ascribed unto the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was given to the Old Testament saints *prospectively*, as pardon of sin was given—in view of the satisfaction which Christ was to render unto God.”<sup>2</sup>

There are passages in the Old Testament which, in context, speak of the restoration of Israel to the land and spiritual revival after the captivity in Babylon. These passages, however, do not receive their full and ultimate fulfillment until the Messianic age. “Because the palaces will be forsaken, the bustling city will be deserted. The forts and towers will become lairs forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks—until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is counted as a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness remain in the fruitful field” (Isa. 32:14-16). “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezek. 36:25-27).

Having noted that the Holy Spirit was very active in regenerating, sanctifying, empowering and indwelling Old Covenant believers, how do we account for both continuity and discontinuity between the Spirit’s work before and after Pentecost? The answer to this question is found in the superiority of the New Covenant. There are a number of ways in which the Spirit’s work in the New Covenant era is greater than that of the Old.

(1) After Pentecost there is a more effective internal working upon the heart of the Spirit. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:33). John Calvin’s analysis of this passage is very helpful. He writes, “A question may however be here moved, ‘Was the grace of regeneration wanting to the Fathers under the Law?’ But this is quite preposterous. What, then, is meant when God denies here that the Law was written on the heart before the coming of Christ? To this I answer, that the Fathers, who were formerly regenerated, obtained this favour through Christ, so that we may say, that it was as it were transferred to them from another source. The power then to penetrate into the heart was not inherent in the Law, but it was a benefit transferred to the Law from the Gospel. This is one thing. Then we know that this grace of God was rare and little known under the Law; but that under the Gospel the gifts of the Spirit have been more abundantly poured forth, and that God has dealt more bountifully with his Church.”<sup>3</sup> The moral law under the New Covenant is identical to the older covenantal law. What sets the New Covenant apart is a more abundant change of people’s inner nature (i.e., the heart) which will render them capable of a greater obedience.

(2) After Pentecost the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit would be much more abundant. The prophet Joel in describing the day of Pentecost and its aftermath said that God’s Spirit would fall directly “on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (2:28). In the Old Testament the gifts were limited to

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 24.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:131.

only a small number of people. However, in the Messianic age many people, not just priests or elders or a few prophets, would be gifted. Before the canon was completed, when the special revelatory gifts were still in operation, it may have been that every church had prophets.

(3) After Pentecost there is a greater, broader knowledge of God among the people. “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34). Because Christ fulfilled all the Old Testament ceremonial institutions and caused the Mosaic offerings to cease (Dan. 9:27; Mt. 27:51; Heb. 7:27; 8:7 ff.; 9:11 ff.), men now have direct access to God through Christ. The implications of this perfect and complete redemption are profound. Unlike the Mosaic covenant where priests and Levites mediated the knowledge of God to the people, under the New Covenant the knowledge of God will be the immediate possession of every true believer. This point, however, does not mean that we are personally inspired; nor does the prophet teach that we no longer need teachers. But rather the prophet teaches “that God would cause the truth to shine more fully under the Gospel....And, doubtless, if we consider how great was the ignorance of the ancient people, they were then only in the elements. He who is at this day the least among the faithful, has so far advanced, that he knows much more clearly what pertains chiefly to salvation than those who were then the most learned.”<sup>4</sup> Thus Jesus could say, “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt. 11:11).

The verb know (*yada*) as in “know Yahweh” likely also refers to the intimate personal knowledge and love between God and his people. Before Jesus died people had to approach God through the ceremonies. Animals had to be sacrificed and a human priesthood had to be maintained. God’s special presence was behind the veil in the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest once a year could come before the mercy seat. But after Christ completed his redemptive work, we approach the throne boldly without sinful, human, imperfect mediators. We have a greater access to God and thus a greater blessing of the Spirit. We are so greatly privileged to be saved *after* the Lord’s atoning work that we (the body of Christ) are called the temple of God (Eph. 2:21). Paul speaks of the New Covenant’s spiritual intimacy in 2 Corinthians 3:3, “you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.”

(4) After Pentecost there is a greater endowment of power for the task of discipling the nations. Jesus said to the apostles: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Before Pentecost the disciples had preached the gospel and healed the sick (Lk. 10:1-2). However, a change occurred when our Lord poured out the Holy Spirit. A universal-everlasting kingdom (Dan. 7:14), where the Messiah is given total dominion over the earth, must be accompanied by a greater power or enablement of the Spirit. “[T]he Holy Spirit came in the fulness of his grace and power in world-wide activity for the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 22:18) and that given to Christ (Psalm 2:8), in fulfillment of the world-wide redemptive design and accomplishment. There was the coming of the Son by a

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 3:136. O. Palmer Robertson writes, “[T]he presence of teachers today in the context of the new covenant does not deny the principle propounded by Jeremiah and underscored by Paul. Every believer today is his own priest and his own interpreter of Scripture. Teachers function in this interim period only to assist every believer in realizing the direct oneness they now experience with God through the provisions of the new covenant” (*The Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], 296).

distinctive mode and for a distinct undertaking. This is also the coming of the Holy Spirit by a distinctive mode and for a distinctive function....We must not forget it. This the age of Pentecost....This is why we have the gospel. It is because the utmost part of the earth has come within the scope of the Holy Spirit's activity."<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament expression of the kingdom was small and limited to a tiny nation; a nation that much of the time was rebellious and under judgment. In the new covenant era the church must herald Christ's salvation to the world. Further, unlike the old covenant expression of the church (national Israel) which ended in apostasy, the new covenant church is assured a total victory (Isa. 49:6; Mt.28:20). Given the task and the promised victory of the gospel the apostles and the church could not begin their work without divine enablement. "Accordingly they waited, and the Spirit came upon them. All was changed: boldness supplanted fear, strength came instead of weakness, ignorance gave place to wisdom, and mighty wonders were wrought through them."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Murray, "The Power of the Holy Spirit" in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:138.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Holy Spirit*, 39.