

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit

(Another Look)

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit is recognized by Pentecostals as an experience that Christ offers after their salvation. However, many outside Pentecostal circles have been taught that this experience became obsolete after the original disciples passed away, or after the Canon of inspired Scriptures was closed; and some have even been led to believe this experience (glossolalia) is demonic in origin – a charge that I would caution all to re-think. Tongues are specifically mentioned in three chapters in the book of Acts – the history book of the Early Church. Their operation in the church itself is discussed in 1 Corinthians 12-14. So, to render this subject unimportant or unnecessary is to violate the proper interpretation of Scripture. My purpose in this article is to perhaps bring understanding into aberrant, imbalanced teaching (See Acts 2:1-4; Acts 10:43-48; Acts 19:1-7).

Strangely enough, I would like to begin my discussion of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit with a colorful Old Testament story recorded in Genesis 11:1-9.

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.’

The story of the Tower of Babel intrigued me as a child. The fairy tale, “Jack and the Beanstalk” paled in comparison to a tower that reached into the heavens. This ziggurat, built 700 years after Noah’s flood, was an incredible feat. The Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, in his “Antiquities of the Jews” (c. 94 CE), mentions the Tower of Babel. He writes that it was Nimrod who had the tower built and that Nimrod was a self-serving tyrant who tried to turn people away from the one true God. The first Biblical mention of Nimrod

is in the “Table of Nations” (Genesis 10). He is described as the son of Cush, grandson of Ham, and great-grandson of Noah; and as a *“mighty one in the earth”* and a *“mighty hunter before the Lord.”*

This massive undertaking spawned great unity, which tragically was fueled by rebellion. Even unity led by an ungodly motivator gets things done! Unity is a powerful force for good and bad. God warned in Genesis 11:6, *“...That nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”*

But let’s back up a little bit. When Noah and his family left the Ark, God instructed them to be *“fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth”* (Genesis 9:1). Unfortunately, they soon gathered at Babel, and under the leadership of rebellious Nimrod built a tower *“lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”* (Genesis 11:4). Babylon is the most famous city from ancient Mesopotamia whose ruins lie in modern-day Iraq 59 miles southwest of Baghdad. The name is thought to derive from the Akkadian language of the time and meant, “Gate of the Gods.”

The tower became an astrological worship center to exalt the creation rather than the Creator. To halt their idolatry, God dispersed them throughout the earth. He separated their common language into many, for as long as they all spoke the same language no endeavor was beyond their capability (Genesis 11:6).

Genesis 10 often is referred to as the “Table of Nations,” for it documents 70 nations/language groups migrating to fill the earth, prodded on by their lack of ability to communicate with the others.

Archaeology has confirmed these basic details, identifying major locations and people groups, although some have been obscured or lost in time. Similarly, linguists have discovered that the number of separate language groups is of the same order of magnitude as the 70 listed in the Bible. Again, some have combined with others or faded into extinction, but the story has the ring of truth about it.

Ever since then, human history has been marked by the conquest of uninhabited lands and by wars between tribes who spoke different languages. Throughout the Scriptures and humankind, history supports the idea that men have been at odds with God and one another. Sin has taken a devastating toll upon mankind. World-wide bridge-building was necessary.

Then as you know, Jesus came to build a bridge from earth back to heaven, so that humankind could be reconciled to God. He became sin’s sacrifice so that the human condition could be reversed.

So, what God did at Babel (modern day Iraq) in approximately 2,000 B.C, He reversed in the city of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in approximately 29

A.D. We read in Acts 2:1-4, *“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”*

I realize this information is quite academic in content, but I needed to give you this background information to help you understand the “big picture.” I hope you’ll keep reading.

While Babel and Pentecost both point toward “other languages,” we many times over-emphasize “speaking in tongues” or “speaking in other languages” at the expense of what God REALLY PURPOSED when He sent the Spirit at Pentecost.

I absolutely believe in the Baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. Perhaps at this time it would be correct to say that the word “tongues” by its unusual implications puts people on the edge of their seat. Many who misunderstand the Spirit Baptism struggle with the phrase, “Speaking in tongues.” This might be one of the first hurdles to jump when talking about this blessed experience.

At any rate, I think that for clarity we need to revisit God’s original intention. The key verse of Acts (1:8) relates the major benefit of this precious infilling: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, **and to the end of the earth.**”*

And this is where many in the Faith part company. First, we need to come to a clear understanding that tongues are not a gift to puff us up or to make us spiritually elite; and second, we need to understand what Jesus meant when He used the term, “witnesses,” which will be saved for a later discussion.

The builders of the Tower of Babel said in essence, “Look at us!” Many today who expound speaking in tongues and spiritual gifts in general are sadly saying the same thing: “Look at us!” Babel spoke of arrogance; however, Pentecost spoke of humility! I personally believe there has been an over-emphasis on speaking in tongues at the expense of the Baptism’s original purpose. Anything that brings suspicion or division needs to be at least re-visited. It goes without saying that if the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues in a given service bring confusion and/or division, then something needs to be re-visited!

Let me illustrate by visiting a shoe store! But first consider the following comments and based on your current understanding of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit respond to each by circling either “yes” or “no.”

Yes or No

1. Speaking in tongues is the only evidence you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. (Y/N)
2. Speaking in tongues is necessary for you to get to heaven. (Y/N)
3. Speaking in tongues sets you above other Christians. (Y/N)
4. Speaking in tongues gives you power over sin. (Y/N)
5. Speaking in tongues can be initiated at your will. (Y/N)
6. Speaking in tongues gives you a private prayer language. (Y/N)
7. Speaking in tongues should be part of today's public worship experiences. (Y/N)
8. Speaking in tongues creates a greater intimacy with Jesus. (Y/N)
9. Speaking in tongues is the purpose of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. (Y/N)

Those who embrace the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit in today's church often repeat one or more of the above assertions regarding the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Just so you know, I don't agree with six of the above statements (1-5 and 9).

I still of course, believe in this wonderful gift of grace; and I still believe it's available to all searching hearts and for those who earnestly ask for it, but I also believe that speaking in tongues has been over-emphasized at the expense of the fruit of the Holy Spirit and at times produced self-proclaimed, spiritually superior believers, who misunderstand God's original intention for tongues on the Day of Pentecost. Now that I've got your attention and perhaps put you into a defensive mode, let's visit the previously mentioned shoe store.

You walk in and the sales lady greets you. “How may I help you?” she asks. And you reply, “I would like to buy a pair of tongues.” Naturally, she is taken back and asks, “What did you just say?”

You reply, “I would like to buy a pair of tongues.” Thinking you’re seeking attention, she says while walking away, “Not funny!”

Perhaps my illustration is exaggerated, but this is exactly how many treat their experience. To them, it’s all about speaking in tongues. That’s why I believe many in today’s church shy away from this gift. The presentation needs some re-defining! I’m on a quest to clear up general misunderstandings that some well-meaning Pentecostals embrace.

As you remember, construction on the Tower of Babel was shut down when God confused the languages of the workers. Then at Pentecost, God reversed what He did at the Tower of Babel. At Pentecost, He poured out His Spirit. At Babel, the people did not have the Spirit of God, but operated under a demonic spirit.

The people of Babel tried to make a name for themselves. They were not doing God’s will or bringing glory to His Name. Their intention was to conquer tribal groups, thus bringing them under Nimrod’s barbaric authority. The consequence was that God prohibited them from moving upward by confusing their language. They could not work with each other, so they were scattered.

Still today, if where we place the emphasis of our Spirit Baptism is speaking in tongues, we will constantly be misunderstood and unable to communicate clearly with those who otherwise love the Lord and desire all that He has for them. Walls are built, instead of bridges! We will continually face hindrances while trying to build God’s kingdom. The result of confusion is division. God did the opposite of this at Pentecost. One-hundred-twenty people in an upper room understood God’s intention and cooperated to build God’s “temple,” the Church. Nimrod’s work crews, on the other hand, set out to build a temple dedicated to their glory! When people “get on the same page,” things – for good or evil –begin to happen!

At Pentecost, tongues were not seen as the means to an end, but a sign that God was inaugurating a new era for world evangelism. Acts 1:8 reveals God’s intended purpose for what would happen on the Day of Pentecost and thereafter: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

Luke, the writer of Acts, makes it clear that Pentecost would provide two end results: power and witnessing. Tongues were evident, but not elevated above these end results. It seems odd that we choose to highlight tongues and

downplay the wind and fire. All three images are employed in Scripture to describe some aspect of the Spirit's work.

Babel dispersed the nations. Pentecost gathered the nations! The Holy Spirit would empower His people to go *"into all the world and preach the Gospel"* (Matthew 28:19). And as a result, world evangelism would be possible as God's people spread out across the nations, proclaiming God's love and acceptance of all people groups. Cultural and ethnic barriers would be shattered as the message spread about God's reconciliation through Christ. People everywhere would be reunited and re-purposed for God's end time move of grace and mercy.

Tongues should not be what gets the press, or what is showcased in lights. I understand why tongues do capture attention; however, after the Day of Pentecost, it appears to me that the power gifts were highlighted over verbal gifts of the Spirit. The resulting power of Pentecost assured that nations would be turned upside-down and this Gospel of the kingdom would be propelled around the world! Babel builders were dispersed because of their ill-fated unity that led to rebellion. Kingdom builders are gathered because of the indwelling Spirit's unifying love for lost mankind. Confused languages at Babel were what God used to disperse ungodly construction crews. Tongues (recognized languages) at Pentecost were a sign that a new day had dawned for world evangelism.

A certain design of shoe is worthless without tongues and a pair of tongues by itself is useless. It's the same regarding the Spirit Baptism. When we elevate speaking in tongues to a higher level than God intended, we render ourselves misunderstood and can even be a source of confusion in the body of Christ. We need to be known for our fruit, not the gifts we manifest.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:18-20, *"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults."*

Even Paul understood that a Pentecostal Baptism defined by tongues and not seen as an experience to promote unity, receive power and propel world evangelism, is destined to be misunderstood and confusing.

Next, let's discuss who or what the word "witness" refers to in Acts 1:8.

"And you will be witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). Power to witness is the overriding theme of the book of Acts. Tongues, wind and fire were present to inaugurate the Spirit's new move in the earth. Why we single out tongues and disregard the other two manifestations leaves theologians baffled; for as you know, most Pentecostal groups teach that tongues were the initial physical evidence that the 120 in the Upper Room had indeed been baptized in the Holy Spirit. If this is completely true, then those who receive the Spirit Baptism today should also

ardently expect wind and fire. Proper biblical interpretation requires it. In this work, I choose to use the word, “common” over the word “normative.” In other words, rather than tongues being the sole or only evidence that someone has received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, let’s say that tongues are a common experience. This precludes the fact that only three chapters in the book of Acts refer to tongues being manifested when the Holy Spirit was being poured out – Acts 2, 10 and 19. This wonderful history book of the Early Church goes on to illustrate that other signs and wonders accompany the Spirit-filled life.

Let’s read Acts 2:4 again: *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* It goes without saying that tongues should be considered a common evidence that someone is filled with the Spirit. However, let’s expand our thinking here and elaborate on the word “witness” as it is used in Acts 1:8.

God’s primary reason, it appears, for the infilling of the Holy Spirit is to propel world evangelism. We certainly need all the power we can get! The task at best is overwhelming.

Did you notice that Luke writes, *“You will BE witnesses...”* He didn’t say, “You will do witnessing,” although it is important that we tell others about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. The emphasis here is on “being” not “doing.” God places a high priority on the character of Jesus Christ being formed in our inner self. We are human “beings”, not human “doings.” We are not saved by what we do (good works); but because we are saved, what we do and where we go is driven by the life of Christ inside us. Bearing spiritual fruit is the on-going goal of every Christ follower.

At Babel, rebellious hearts were driven to out-manuever other nations, led by the tyrant Nimrod. Believers in Christ are driven by the power of the Spirit to effect life change in the hearts of “whosoever will.” **Who we are drives what we do.** Early Christians were literally driven to “go into all the world” because of the compelling nature of Jesus Christ that resided within them.

Speaking in tongues was not what necessarily defined these Spirit-filled believers. They were defined by the power of the Spirit that catapulted them into the far corners of the earth. Tongues were not what identified them; it was their Spirit-led living that captured the hearts of listeners. Again, the emphasis was not tongues but their lifestyles.

It is noteworthy that God dispersed the construction crews at Babel by changing their languages, but the pre-determiner was the fact that Nimrod’s aggressive leadership was demonically inspired and counter-productive to world unity.

Now, let's turn our attention to Acts 2:4b, "*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues **as the Spirit enabled them.***" No one knows for sure what these 120 followers of Christ did while in an upper room in Jerusalem. Plausible ideas abound based on other passages in the book of Acts that describe corporate gatherings of early believers. Surely it is safe to say they "prayed and praised!"

Anything else would be only speculative. At any rate, the Bible makes it clear that all 120 believers (men and women) spoke in tongues as the "*Spirit enabled them.*" And I might add, (only) as the Spirit enabled. Today's Pentecostals often overlook this very important detail when it comes to the Spirit-Baptism. For years, I have watched as "seekers" were invited to church altars to receive this wonderful gift of grace. I believe we often leave out the "tarrying" aspect of this experience. Perhaps we produce too many drive-through tongue-talkers, who leave our altars empty, or at least questioning the validity of their experience.

There can be no doubt that only born-again individuals qualify to receive the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. In John 20:22, Jesus says something to His disciples behind closed doors – post resurrection – that precedes the events on the Day of Pentecost by approximately 50 days. In an inaugurator's fashion John writes, "*And He breathed on them (the disciples) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'*"

All who accept the finished and complete work of Jesus Christ on the Cross, all who place their faith in His shed blood and ask for the forgiveness of their sins, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We call this salvation! The disciples of Jesus received the Holy Spirit and were born-again. I still believe the Spirit Baptism given to 120 waiting and surrendered disciples of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost is a separate and subsequent experience – one that should be earnestly sought.

Now, back to the phrase "*as the Spirit enabled them.*" The Bible makes it clear that languages heard from onlookers were actual languages spoken in parts of the world. "*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own native language...*" (Acts 2:5-7). This fact sets the course for what I'm about to say: Speaking in tongues is not engaging in non-sensical gibberish. Our very methodical God makes it clear that tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost were not the words of mere human ingenuity, but in fact, known languages that were Spirit inspired and spoken.

In many Pentecostal circles today, seekers are encouraged to come forward in services for all to hear and observe. In my opinion, tongues are often elevated

above the power and witnessing aspects of the Spirit Baptism. Acts 1:8 comes before Acts 2:4 for a good reason! Again, the **primary reason** for the Baptism is to receive additional **power to be** witnesses. Those who desire the Spirit's infilling should be encouraged to seek Jesus, not tongues. Human ingenuity itself is capable of producing sounds; however, if the Holy Spirit is not the energizing power at work, then seekers may very well embrace a "counterfeit experience." And if the individual is not caught up in a spirit of praise and adoration to Jesus, then whatever happens may not be Spirit enabled.

I feel strongly that all believers in Christ should ardently be taught to wait for the gift the Father promises – the Baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). But they should also be taught to seek Jesus, not the gift. Is it any wonder when those outside our Pentecostal persuasion often criticize us for always emphasizing speaking in tongues over the power and life-changing reality of our walk with Christ? Speaking in tongues is either directly or indirectly referred to in the book of Acts only five times; however, the power of the Spirit is constantly alluded to. Jesus, the Baptizer in the Holy Spirit, empowers His Church to do signs and wonders. Later, we are told that the early Christians were easily recognizable by the love they had for one another.

What's my point? Do not let speaking in tongues be your defining moment. Seek Jesus and receive the power He offers to be a witness and to minister in His Name.

I was born again in 1970 and baptized in the Holy Spirit one year later. Because I do not accept most things at face value, I wanted to be sure that I received the "real deal." Speaking in tongues was hard for me to easily accept. And seeking the Baptism with onlookers "waiting for unfamiliar sounds" was out of the question! I wasn't going to appear theatrical for anyone! Here's what happened: I was at youth camp and the speaker encouraged us to seek the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Well meaning individuals assisted me in my quest. One said, "Just start speaking and let the Holy Spirit take over from there." Another individual began lightly tapping my mouth, as if to say, "Roger, start your engines!" It was ludicrous!

Later, when the camp tabernacle emptied and the lights lowered, I literally laid on the floor and said, "Lord, if the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is real, I want it." I remember being so hungry for the Lord's power in my life. I came to Jesus with an attitude of complete surrender. My heart was full of praise to Him for saving me and as I praised Him in English, it suddenly occurred to me that my words had become unintelligible. I was speaking in a language that was bypassing my personal ability and intelligence. "*Out of my belly was flowing rivers of living water*" (John 7:38). Heaven came down and kissed me and for two hours I sweetly praised the Lord in a language that was not mine!

I have never doubted the authenticity of this wonderful experience. But as I look back over 40 plus years of pastoral ministry, I have observed that many in my churches have felt condemned, judged and even inferior because they did not speak in tongues. This ought not to be! That's why I say, "Jesus is the Baptizer in the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to fill you with His Spirit. Learn to praise Him audibly. I recommend that you get alone with the Lord. Private settings with Jesus are the best! And when you do, don't seek tongues—seek Him!

I have pastored five Pentecostal congregations and the same statistics held true in each: Two-thirds of the people did not speak in tongues – only one-third. This was my sought out and proven statistic. Many of those who did not speak in tongues displayed Christian graces that far surpassed the others. I'm not ready to say they weren't "Spirit-filled." Let me say it again: Tongues are not an end in themselves. Many inside and outside of recognized Pentecostal churches speak in tongues. Many do not. To say that tongues is the ONLY evidence that someone is filled with the Spirit of God eliminates most of the Christian community. I believe we need to re-think our dogmatic approach to the whole Spirit Baptism teaching. To call people forward to encourage tongue speaking can be a precursor to frustration and even unbelief. To tell someone, "You are not filled because tongues did not manifest." To coax people to open their mouth and to start speaking whatever comes to mind. To encourage anything that the Spirit is not sponsoring or enabling is counterfeit. IT MUST BE BY THE SPIRIT'S ENABLING!

That's why I seldom, if ever, invite people to come forward in mass to seek the Spirit Baptism. Not everyone in a given service is ready to pursue this wonderful gift of grace! This experience is not a "show to be observed," but a privately offered endowment of power that takes you into a life of greater service and intimacy with Jesus. And when tongues manifest, they must be "Spirit enabled," not man induced. Some years ago, I heard a well-meaning but misdirected man give this advice at the altar to a seeker: "You will get your tongues later. Don't worry about it." My friend, tongues are not a commodity to be purchased or manufactured, but one God-given sign that the Spirit is filling you to "be His witness" and to empower you. Remember however, there are eight other gifts of the Holy Spirit that God can use you in – gifts that build up the body of Jesus Christ. It seems obvious to me that only those who speak in tongues can operate in the gift of tongues, which is a separate issue not covered in this book (See 1 Corinthians 12-14).

This article was written from perhaps a different angle than what you're used to hearing. Let me say it again: The Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a wonderful experience and Jesus wants YOU to walk in the fulness of His Spirit. However, seek Him, not tongues. He's the Baptizer in the Holy Spirit. Surrender your life, your mind, your praise to Him and invite Him to fill you with His Spirit. And when you wake up in the morning, expect the fulness of His Spirit to

manifest somehow, somewhere in your day. And if you speak in tongues, give Him the highest praise. And if you never speak in tongues, refuse to sell yourself short on the many other graces and gifts available to those who live fully surrendered lives to Jesus Christ. There are no “second class” Christians!