

A CRITIQUE OF THE PHENOMENON OF HOLY SPIRIT BAPTISM IN ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

David T. Ejenobo, Ph.D

Abstract

Since 1901 when Pentecostalism gained a new impetus, the subject of Holy Spirit Baptism has been on the front burner of New Testament scholarship. This paper is a response to the ever growing interest in the phenomenon of Holy Spirit baptism. It examines in some details, the four recorded events in Acts of the Apostles which mention Holy Spirit Baptism in one form or the other. Using the textual critical method, the paper examines the content of each of the events with a view to determining what actually transpired at each point of the manifestation of Holy Spirit baptism. The paper then critically evaluates the facts as stated for us in the texts under study and concludes on the note that Christians must be more circumspect in their interpretation, understanding, and application of the phenomenon of Holy Spirit baptism.

I. The Day of Pentecost

Smith (1970) says that Luke presents “the coming of the Holy Spirit in such a dramatic manner that one could assume that the Spirit came into being on that day.” The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 begins by telling us that the disciples were all in one place. Already in Chapter 1 we were told that they gathered in this place for prayer and fellowship (Macgregor, 1954). We are told by tradition that this was actually the abode of John Mark. It would appear that this house was a kind of a meeting place for the disciples at this time.

During the life-time of Jesus, most of them had earlier left their families in order to follow Jesus. After the death of their Master, they had nowhere to go. The home of John Mark provided a safe home of meeting. It should be noted at this point that this was to be the pattern in the early days of the Church. The initial meeting places were usually the homes of some individual or family (Macgregor, 1954).

In the middle of their meeting one day, something unique happened. There was a sound like that “*of a rushing mighty wind.*” Ordinarily, one would not bother oneself with such sounds. However, to Smith (1970) “it was this sound that brought the multitudes together.” But this was accompanied by flames like tongues of fire resting on the heads of all those meeting in the house. Now this was something special. Smith (1970) puts it in a rather dramatic manner: “the people heard something and they saw something. With two senses of men involved in the experience, it would be heard to discredit the reality of some kind of supernatural occurrence.”

The combination of the *sound* and *fire* reminds us of what happened to Elijah when God took him to the mountain top soon after the events on Mt. Carmel. The sound of the earthquake was meant to signify the presence of the power of God. Unfortunately for Elijah, God was not present in the earthquake. Then there was the appearance of fire. Again, God was not in the fire. On the Day of Pentecost the sound and the fire combined to produce a unique combination in the lives of those who were experiencing it. There is no doubt therefore that the sound of the mighty wind was symbolic of the divine presence in their midst.

Then there was the presence of the tongues of fire. We could understand this to be “tongues of fire” or “tongues which appeared like fire.” Ferris (1954) refers to it as “the tongues of flames.” Macgregor (1954) is of the opinion that “the word ‘tongues’ is chosen probably to suit the

glossolalia that follows; and if the twelve only are involved, the suggestion may be that each apostle spoke one of the languages.

Smith (1970) believes that “the disciples on the day of Pentecost were endowed with a supernatural gift. They were able to speak in foreign languages.” What the author is telling us seems to be that something that was glowing like fire appeared on the head of each of the disciples present in the upper room. We should not forget that the prophecy of John the Baptist that the Messiah would baptize His followers with water and fire was always at the back of the minds of the disciples.

Soon after the sound of the mighty wind and the appearance of fire on the heads of each of the people there, they started speaking in tongues. It is this phenomenon of the speaking in tongues that marked the uniqueness of the event which happened on that day (Friedrich, 1964). It was these speaking in tongues that confirmed the presence of the Holy Spirit in the place of meeting. Luke could not describe it in a better language than to say that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance.”(2:4). In other words, according to Luke, it was the presence of the Holy Spirit that gave the disciples the power to speak in tongues. It is this interpretation that has led many Pentecostal Movements to argue that the sure sign that one has received the Holy Spirit is the ability to speak in tongues. When one considers the unique experience described for us in Acts 2, one is left with the temptation to accept this interpretation (Hewett, 2003).

On closer examination, however, we see that this need not be the case. The phrase “*as the Spirit gave them utterance*” is significant at this point. The implication of this statement is that the man who is able to speak in tongues is the man who is given the utterance by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore possible for the Holy Spirit to be in a person and he would not be able to speak in tongues as long as he has not been given the utterance by the Holy Spirit (Hoekema, 1966). This line of interpretation is confirmed by the argument of Paul in I Corinthians 12 where he was talking about gifts of the Spirit. It is the argument of Paul that the Holy Spirit reserves the right to give gifts to anybody as He deems fit. If speaking in tongues are viewed therefore as a gift of the Holy Spirit, it follows that He has the power to give it to whomsoever He wants. On the Day of Pentecost, He decided that he would give this gift to all those who were assembled in the Upper Room, as that place came to be known in Church tradition (Koeing, 1974).

Regardless of the interpretation we give to the issue of speaking in tongues, the fact of the matter is that the speaking in tongues of the day of Pentecost played a significant role in the annals of the history of the Christian religion. It marked a turning point, not only in the lives of the disciples, but in the lives of those who heard them. It was the presence of the Holy Spirit that gave the disciples the boldness needed to witness for Jesus (Parratts, 1971). Before this event, the disciples were scared of even walking the streets of Jerusalem. But soon after the event, they became a different set of people entirely.

If the truth must be said, then it has to be admitted that even today, the presence of the gift of speaking in tongues gives a different flare to the spiritual life of the person manifesting the gift. In almost all instances of those who manifest this gift, there is always the presence of a new zest for preaching that was not there before the manifestation of the gift (Stott, 1971). It equally leads to a greater mystical relationship between the person manifesting the gift and God. In other words, the person discovers a new kind of closeness with the divine power working in him/her. It is this aspect of the spiritual reality of speaking in tongues that has led a lot of interpreters to insist that without the gift of the speaking in tongues one does not have the Holy Spirit.

According to Lee (http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/201002_112_Bapt_Holy_Spirit.cfm) what Luke intends to teach Theophilus (Acts 1:1), and all who later will read his book, is that baptism in the Holy Spirit is an encounter with the Spirit of God that empowers the emerging Church for worldwide witness to the salvation provided through the crucified and risen Jesus. In other words, the promise of Jesus to the disciples in Acts 1:8 was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.

II. The Samaritan Experience

Ferris (1954) believes that “as a result of Stephen’s life and death, things in Jerusalem came to a head.” Just like Stephen, Philip was one of those who had been ordained to serve tables. Also, just like Stephen, it would appear that he abandoned his primary job as a Deacon to take upon himself the responsibility of preaching the message of the Gospel. And it would appear that he made a rather tremendous success of it. There are four things we should note about Philip’s work in Samaria

1. He went north to the city of Samaria. The Samaritans were considered as half Jews by the Jews in the Southern part of Judea. As at the time of Christ the Jews tried as much as possible to minimize contact with the Samaritans. Jesus was however conscious of the fact that there is no way one can deny that the Jewish blood still flowed through the veins of any one who calls himself a Samaritans. That is why He personally led a crusade mission to that region.
2. The work of Philip in the city of Samaria was very successful. A lot of people responded to his preaching. For the first time we are told that miracles were being performed by some of the disciples apart from the members of the Apostolate. What this tells us is that the power that came down on the day of Pentecost was now really active in the ministry of the disciples.
3. However, successful as Philip’s ministry was, it still required the presence of Peter and John in the midst of these people for them to receive the gift of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The question to be asked at this juncture is simple: *if Philip had been acting all this while under the influence of the power of the Holy Spirit, why was it not possible for him to have laid hands on these new converts and for them to have received the Holy Spirit?* We can answer this question by noting that Luke had gone to some length to explain to us how the institution of the Apostolate was considered special soon after the departure of Jesus. Macgregor (1954) actually calls it “an episcopal tour of confirmation.” Though Smith (1970) is of the opinion that Philip might have left the city of Samaria before the coming of Peter and John, it would appear that this is not completely correct. It was the Apostolate that was leading the Church in all things. They now served as the representative of Christ. Thus if the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit via the hands of any other person apart from a member of the Apostolate, then of course this would have diminished the respect the people had for the Apostolate. This was why Peter and John had to be sent to Samaria so that they could lay hands on the new converts.
4. This is the first of the series of baptism of the Holy Spirit that would occur in places other than that which took place on the Day of Pentecost. However, there are two significant differences. In the first place, the baptism in Samaria required the laying on of hands. This did not take place on the day of Pentecost. Secondly, the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Samaria was not accompanied by the manifestation of speaking in tongues. This point is of vital importance because of the argument of most Pentecostal

Movements who insist that without the manifestation of the gift of speaking in tongues, a person has not received a true baptism of the Holy Spirit. Such people have found it extremely difficult explaining the silence of Luke over the issue of speaking in tongues in Samaria.

III. The Gentile Experience

With this story we come to the high point of the mission of Peter. His encounter with Cornelius marked the beginning of the contact of the Gospel with the truly Gentile world. On this score we agree totally with Macgregor (1954) who has observed that "Luke evidently regards the conversion of Cornelius as an event of supreme importance." According to Ferris (1954) "the story is one chapter in the growth of Christianity." We must recall at this point that before the coming of Christ, the Jews did not have much regard for both the Samaritans and the Gentiles. While they regarded the Samaritans as half Jews, they saw the Gentiles as dogs. A large part of the ministry of Peter to this point had been among the Samaritans. He had gone to their Capital city to lay hands on them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. He was now moving around their cities and establishing Churches, most of which were growing in leaps and bounds.

Caesarea was a major port city along the coastal line of Palestine. The Romans had colonized this city and made it one of their out posts. A lot of Roman soldiers resided in this city. In fact, the name itself was given in honor of the Emperor of Rome (Macgregor, 1954). Thus from all intents and purposes, it was a bustling city and people of all tribes were living in the town. It was no surprise therefore that some Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism abounded in the city.

On arrival at the home of Cornelius, Peter was amazed at the preparations which the Centurion had made for his arrival. He met, not just Cornelius, but his whole household assembled together. Cornelius then went ahead to tell him why he invited him. Peter felt that he should explain to him why it was not right for him to be there in the first place. Instead of going ahead to preach the Gospel to the Gentile and his household, Peter began a windy explanation of how God dealt with the men of old, and how He was not partial in his dealings (Ferris, 1954). The Holy Spirit, sensing that Peter was going to make excuses of not presenting the Gospel to these men in a straight forward manner, decided to take things in His hands.

According to Ferris (1954) while Peter was still preaching, behold he saw the Holy Spirit coming on the entire Gentile congregation without his laying his hand on a single person! He was surprised! How could the Holy Spirit fall on these Gentiles who had no prior encounter with God through His Apostles? To worsen things, the Holy Spirit came on these Gentiles in precisely the same way He came upon the Jewish Christians on the Day of Pentecost.

The implications of this story for our study can be stated as follows:

1. The fact that God baptized the Gentiles with the Holy Spirit without requiring Peter to lay hands on them first is very significant. It meant that the gift of the Holy Spirit does not need an intermediary. In other words, one does not need the laying on of hands of any Bishop or Pastor before one can be given the gift of the Holy Spirit. According to Smith (1970) Peter was interrupted by God as He poured His Spirit on the people.
2. It is interesting to note that though God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit just as He had done for the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, there is a significant difference (Ferris 1954). Luke does not tell us that the Gentiles spoke in tongues. This is the second time Luke is telling us that some people were baptized with the Holy Spirit without the accompanying manifestation of speaking in tongues. The first was in Samaria.

3. Let us note also that this is the only instant in which converts were given the Holy Spirit without making any confession of faith in Jesus Christ. In all other cases recorded by Luke in Acts, the young convert is first asked to confess his faith in Jesus Christ, and then he is baptized with water, before hands are laid on him at which time he receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

IV. The Disciples of John the Baptist

In Acts Chapter 19, Luke tells us that when Paul got to Ephesus, he met some people who called themselves the disciples of John the Baptist. It is clear from this story that the fame and glory which accompanied the ministry of John the Baptist before Jesus Christ began His ministry did not just fade away like that (Smith, 1970). The disciples of John which we meet in Acts 19 is a testimony to the fact that a lot of the followers of John the Baptist traveled far and wide after hearing the message of the coming messiah from their master.

When Paul asked them whether they received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized, the disciples answered in the negative. The question that readily comes to mind is how could the true disciples of John the Baptist say that they had never heard about the Holy Spirit? We have every reason to doubt this statement credited to the disciples of John the Baptist here because the Gospel writers explicitly told us that John the Baptist said it right from the beginning of his message about the coming Messiah that He would baptize people both with water and the Holy Spirit (Macgregor, 1954)

Viewed from this angle therefore, some points should be noted about this story and its bearing on our study:

1. The disciples of John the Baptist whom Paul met in Ephesus were definitely not Christians. Their knowledge of the teachings of John the Baptist was not even deep enough not to talk of their knowing anything about the ministry of Jesus Christ. Ferris (1954) puts it this way: "The baptism of John has disappeared, but that for which it stood still remains. To be baptized into John meant to reach after something yet to be attained. To be baptized into Jesus meant to rejoice in something already attained." Many Pentecostal theologians have used this passage as Scriptural evidence that it is possible for one to be a Christian and yet not have the Holy Spirit. The truth in this story is that the disciples whom Paul met in Ephesus were not Christians. They had heard about John the Baptist and believed in his teachings. But they had not met the Christ about whom John was talking. There is a profound difference between the disciples of John the Baptist and the Disciples of Christ.
2. Secondly, we have to note that after two missionary journeys, this is the first time that Luke is telling us that Paul laid hands on any one and the person or people started to speak in tongues (Smith, 1970). It is rather strange to imagine that throughout his earlier journeys Paul would not have laid hands on any one or group of people. Viewed against this background, we can see that Luke had a special interest in recounting how the disciples of John the Baptist came to be welcomed into the fold of Christ.
3. This would mean that as at the time when Paul started his missionary journeys there appears to be strong disagreements or competition between the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of Christ. This rivalry started even before the death and resurrection of Jesus. Right there in the Gospel we saw that on several

occasions the disciples of Jesus were comparing themselves to the disciples of John the Baptist. By bringing in this story, Luke was trying to put across the point that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was far more superior and advanced than that of John the Baptist. In addition, it was only through the Gospel of Jesus Christ that one could receive the Holy Spirit.

V. Evaluating the Facts

It is important for us at this point, to summarize our findings on the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts of the Apostles.

1. On the day of Pentecost, nobody laid hands on any one before they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is important for us to underscore this fact with all the emphasis we can muster. The very first incidence of the speaking in tongues in Acts of the Apostles was not accompanied by the laying on of hands. Today Pentecostals insist that hands must be laid before one can speak in tongues.
2. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was accompanied by speaking in tongues. In whatever way we understand the term glossolalia used in Acts, the truth is that this speaking in tongues was not the usual speaking in normal everyday language. If the disciples were speaking in the languages known by those around, it would not have been much of a surprise to the people. Whether conservative Christians want to believe it or not, we cannot run away from the fact that the speaking in tongues in Acts 2 was a unique experience.
3. All the people in the Upper Room were Jews. This fact is important because of the pattern that is revealed in all the other instances of the baptism of the Spirit in Acts. It was first to Jews, then to Samaritans, then to Gentiles, and finally to the disciples of John the Baptist, a group that was operating apparently as a parallel and independent group to the disciples of Christ.
4. At Samaria, Peter and John had to lay hands on the people before they could receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As we have tried to show above, an element of Episcopal authority cannot be ruled out of what happened in Samaria. But the fact is that hands were laid before the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit.
5. Those who were baptized with the Holy Spirit in Samaria did not speak in tongues. So at least we have one instance in which those who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not speak in tongues. It can thus be argued that it is not in all instances that a man receives the baptism of the Spirit that he or she must speak in tongues.
6. At Samaria, the people there were mainly Samaritans. We must not forget that there is a great racial distinction between the Jews and the Samaritans. Some who emphasize this racial element see in it the reason why Peter and John had to come to lay hands on the Christians before they could receive the Spirit (Smith, 1970). The racial dominance of the Jews over the Samaritans had to be maintained.
7. At the house of Cornelius, nobody laid hands on any one before he could receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the strangest facts of baptism of the Spirit in Acts. Viewed from the racial point of view, the Jews accepted that the Samaritans were better than the Gentiles. In fact the latter were considered as dogs and unclean. And yet God baptized them in exactly the same way the Jews were baptized. Could this be a subtle theme of Luke our author to show that before God both Jews and Gentiles were equal?

8. Most of those who received the Holy Spirit spoke in tongues. The Gentiles spoke in tongues just like the Jews. It is instructive to note that speaking in tongues was not limited to any race or tribe.
9. All those in the house of Cornelius were Gentiles. We have called attention to this fact above.
10. At Ephesus, Paul had to lay hands on the disciples of John the Baptist before they could receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We must not run away from the fact that the disciples of John the Baptist form a class of its own in this instance. The reason why they were brought into the picture was mainly because of the rivalry that existed at that time between the disciples of Jesus and that of John the Baptist. The superiority of one over the other had to be established, and there is no better way of doing so than by showing that the latter group received the Holy Spirit only through the laying on of hands of a disciple of Jesus Christ.
11. At Ephesus, all those who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit spoke in tongues. Of the four occurrences of baptism of the Spirit in Acts, three of them had people speaking in tongues. This is the fact of the matter. There is clear evidence in Acts that the incidence of baptism of the Spirit was usually accompanied with speaking in tongues.
12. At Ephesus, the disciples of John were identified as a distinct group from the followers of Christ. There is no way we can twist the facts of this story to prove that these disciples were Christians. They were followers of John the Baptist and not of Christ. To conclude that all the disciples of John were Christians is the same thing as saying that all those who go to church every Sunday morning are Christians. This is the mistake most people make.

VI. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, the writer will like to make the following suggestions:

1. A group of seasoned Biblical Scholars from both the Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal bodies should be assembled to work out something that will be acceptable to the generality of Christians on the expediency of baptism of the Spirit as a valid Christian experience. Our study has revealed that there is a biblical basis for supporting the practice of Holy Spirit baptism. African Biblical Scholars should put their heads together to come up with sound Biblical-based position on this issue.
2. Speaking in tongues, according to Paul, are no doubt a gift of the Holy Spirit. Every Christian should aspire to speak in tongues. However, if for one reason or the other a Christian cannot speak in tongues, he should not be castigated or stigmatized by his fellow Christians.
3. The power and dynamism that comes upon a Christian after the experience of baptism of the Spirit is something that the church in Africa needs very badly for the spread of the church. It should therefore be encouraged. More Christians should be made to know that baptism of the Spirit is a normal Christian experience that can help them to become better Christians.
4. The church should under no circumstance treat anybody who cannot speak in tongues as an inferior Christian. This is the bane of the doctrine right now. We must move away from the air of superiority with which baptism of the Spirit is viewed by some Christians.

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