

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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John 20:21-23 -- Jesus' Words of Commission

by Dan Trygg

“*So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; ...’*” (20:21). Again, the declaration, “All is well” was designed to comfort and to clear away the lingering emotions that the disciples had been experiencing in their hopelessness, and now in their alarm. “...*as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*” – Jesus did not waste any time. There was a job to do. (There *still* is!) Just like the Father sent Him, now He is commissioning them (and us!).

“*And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*” (vs. 22) -- This is a very controversial passage. **Did the disciples actually receive the Holy Spirit on this occasion, or was this merely a symbolic, prophetic action** which was intended to dramatize the relationship between Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the disciples? **How one understands this verse becomes a watershed interpretation in that person's theology**, leading to other consequent interpretations, especially regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2).

For example, **many of those involved in the charismatic movement see in this passage a Biblical basis for what has been their personal experience.** They *believed* in Jesus, maybe even had a very moving conversion experience, but *knew little of the power of the Holy Spirit*, often for an extended period of years. Their spiritual lives were, at best, mediocre, ...with very little intimacy with God, or fruitfulness. Then, *at a later time*, they experienced a powerful influx of the Holy Spirit, *usually in conjunction with an experiential manifestation* of some sort, such as the gift of tongues (ala Pentecost), or being “slain in the Spirit” (falling to the ground in an almost trance-like state, unable to move). From that time on, they experience *an intimacy and immediacy with God*, an empowerment of the Spirit, and *a fruitfulness in service*, which they had not previously experienced. Hence, **like their own experience, they tend to see Jn. 20 as the time when the disciples initially received the Holy Spirit to indwell them and cause them to be born again, and then Acts 2 is a second work of the Holy Spirit, a “baptism of the Spirit”, which is an empowering for ministry.** The persuasiveness of this interpretation to those who have had such an experience is extremely powerful. It is difficult for them to see beyond their personal journey to examine carefully what the Biblical text actually says.

This is a common danger in interpreting the Bible. It is very easy to “read into” the text things that are not actually stated, because we expect things to have been a certain way, ...especially if our expectations are based upon our personal experience or our church traditions. In this case, however, **the Biblical data is clear that the disciples did not receive the Holy Spirit in that upper room on resurrection-day evening. How can we know this?**

In Acts 10 and 11, we have the account of the first Gentiles coming to Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit. No one really expected that God would accept them as Gentiles, but the Holy Spirit fell upon them while Peter was still sharing the Good News with them, and they all spoke in tongues, *just as the apostles did at Pentecost* (Acts 2:4). The text says they “were amazed, because *the gift of the Holy Spirit* had been poured out on the Gentiles also” (10:45). Peter's response was, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have *received the Holy Spirit* just as we did, can he?” (10:47). **Note that in these two statements, Peter linked Pentecost (not the upper room) with receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.** In the next chapter, as he recounted these events to the church in Jerusalem, he noted, “...the Holy Spirit fell upon them *just as He did upon us at the beginning*” (11:15). In the next two verses, he refers to this as the fulfillment of John's word that Jesus would *baptize with the Holy Spirit*, but **also links this “baptism” of the Spirit with “receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit”.**

On a parallel track, it is important to see that Luke 24 reports that on that resurrection-day evening Jesus told the disciples, “I am sending forth *the promise of My Father* upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (24:49). Luke returns to this same upper room conversation in Acts 1, giving us more details. **Jesus linked the “promise of the Father” with the “baptism with the Spirit”** in vs. 4,5. In verse 8, He mentions that **they will receive power “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”,** obviously indicating that *this had not occurred*, as yet. Then, in chapter 2, when Peter is explaining the powerful manifestations of the Holy Spirit, who had just “filled” them (2:4), he indicates that Jesus, “having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has *poured forth* this which you both see and hear” (2:33). Soon after, he invites his hearers to “Repent, and ...be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...; and you will receive *the gift of the Holy Spirit.* For the promise is for you...” (2:38,39). In other words, **Peter links the “filling of the Spirit” and the “gift of the Spirit” with “the promise of the Father” which has been “poured forth” upon the church.**

When you attempt to put all these pieces together, it becomes clear that, **although Jesus breathed on them and told them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, in the upper room, ...He went on to tell them to wait for the promise of**

the Father, the baptism of the Spirit, ...which did not occur until Pentecost. Looking back on these events, **Peter saw Pentecost, not the upper room, as the time when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.**

In addition, **Peter clearly understood this as a very definite and significant shift in how the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of people.** As Jesus had indicated in the upper room on the night of His arrest, He was going to depart from them, but He would “ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom ...you know... because He abides *with* you and will be *in* you” (Jn. 14:16,17). In the conversation that followed, Jesus repeatedly refers to the fact that this Helper, the Holy Spirit, will be sent to them, both by the Father (14:26), and by Jesus from the Father (15:26; cf. 16:7). **Jesus had said that the Spirit’s coming would introduce a new dynamic, something which would be more advantageous to them than even Jesus’ physical presence** (16:7). The author of the fourth gospel had already hinted at this new dynamic in Jn. 7:37-39. There, he refers to the Spirit, “whom those who believed in Him (i.e., Jesus) were to receive, for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” **From the words of promise, waiting and anticipation, ...to the powerful events of Pentecost, ...to Peter’s explanation of those events and his later recollection of his experience, ...the testimony is consistent: The apostles did not actually receive the Holy Spirit until Pentecost.**

Therefore, **what Jesus meant by breathing on them and commanding them to receive the Holy Spirit, was a prophetic act, NOT an actual impartation of the Spirit.** The Greek word for Spirit also means “wind, or breath”, so **the act of breathing on them, and saying, “Receive Holy Breath/Spirit”, would have dramatically portrayed the reality that the Spirit of God that was in Jesus was the same Spirit that would be given to them,** enabling the apostles to do as Jesus had done (cf. Jn. 14:12). This is even further strengthened by the fact that **John used the exact same word as is used of God breathing into Adam the breath of life in the Greek Septuagint translation of Gen. 2:7.** Clearly, John saw that *his spiritual life and ability to serve* came entirely from the life of God given to him by the indwelling Spirit.

The other sidebar to this is that **the Holy Spirit was given, once for all, poured out upon the church at Pentecost.** Peter’s conclusion is that **He is the “gift” that is available to all who believe.** Regarding all of us who are true believers, the apostle Paul says, “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, ...we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (I Cor. 12:13). **Biblically, the baptism of the Spirit happens at conversion, but there are many experiences of the Spirit that may follow in our spiritual journey.** The point is not to try to analyze this to death. That leads only to unprofitable quarreling. Let us rejoice in whatever manner the Holy Spirit chooses to work in the lives of God’s people. Let us marvel and glory in His mighty workings, as well as His quiet whisperings. **In any case, the point of Jesus’ admonition in Jn. 20:22, and again in Acts 1:8, is “...take hold of the Holy Spirit...”.** Do not *ignore* His working, do not *spurn* or *turn away from* His promptings, but **get hold of what the Spirit is doing in you, and respond to Him.**

A.J. Gordon observed: “...for God to *give* is one thing; for us to *receive* is quite another. Christ came to earth to make atonement for sin and *to give* eternal life, and *as sinners we must receive Him by faith in order to obtain forgiveness and sonship.* Similarly, the Holy Spirit came to the earth *to give* the ‘power from on high’, and *as believers we must in like manner receive Him by faith in order to be empowered for holiness and for service.*” Of course, as we saw with Cornelius, God can come upon people who *don’t* even understand. Can’t put *Him* in a box! Nevertheless, we ought to be asking and seeking to be led and filled by the Spirit (Lk. 11:13; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:16,18)

“If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” (vs. 23) -- This may seem to be a shocking statement, but it is part of Jesus’ commission to His followers. **Just as the Father had sent Jesus to forgive and retain sins, so also He has given us that same role.** Now this is not some spooky thing, as if *we*, by waving our hand over someone, or uttering some words, had the ability to forgive sins, or prevent them from being forgiven. That is a total misunderstanding of what is meant. **First, we need to see that Jesus established a precedent that God gives such authority to people.** In healing the paralytic, Jesus had spoken words of forgiveness to the man, and the Pharisees balked at what they perceived as blasphemy (“Who can forgive sins but God?” -- Mk. 2:7). Jesus *demonstrated* that He had the authority to forgive sins *by healing* the man. In Matthew’s account, “when the crowds saw *this*, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men (Matt. 9:1-8). **Secondly, it was by the power and authority of God, which were given to Jesus for this purpose, that He was able to heal and to forgive sins.** Now, by Jesus’ commission *to us*, this power and authority are given to us. **Third, we are not causing the forgiveness or retention of sin.** To those who believe in Jesus, we can say, “Your sins are forgiven” because they *have been* forgiven (Acts 2:38; Eph. 1:7). “Your faith has saved you” (Lk. 7:48-50). To those who are resistant to God, or are not looking to His grace, we can say, “You are still held in the bondage of your sins”, because that is what is the case (e.g., Act 8:20-23). Their heart is not right, or they are still trying to stand on their own merits, instead of accepting God’s provision in Christ for them. **We are simply God’s instruments to bring words of direction and clarification to what He has done for people, and what their spiritual condition actually is.**