

In What Way Did the Holy Spirit Come at Pentecost?

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Introduction

In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus foretells one of the most monumental events in redemptive history when he said to His disciples: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth,” (John 14:16-17a). The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, was coming down from the Father by the specific request of the Son. Not only this, but Jesus even goes as far as saying that it was to the disciples’ advantage that He would leave them at the ascension, so that the Holy Spirit could come to them (John 16:7).

This promise finds its fulfillment shortly after Jesus is resurrected and ascended on the day of Pentecost, where we observe the Holy Spirit falling down on the disciples in a mighty rushing wind with tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4). The result was nothing short of the most powerful revival in redemptive history. The disciples, led by a newly emboldened and supernaturally inspired Apostle Peter, began preaching in the public square and three thousand people in Jerusalem were converted and baptized in one day. And just like that, the New Testament Church was born.

But how was it that the Holy Spirit came during this Pentecostal outpouring? Was the Holy Spirit absent in the life of believers before this point? If He had already been among God’s people, then in what way did He come that was different now? On an individual level, we know that He resides in the hearts of

believers upon their regeneration, making every individual Christian a living and breathing temple of the Holy Spirit, continually sanctifying them and making them holier and holier. This is what theologians often call the “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit.¹ But did the Holy Spirit not indwell believers in the Old Testament?

Some theologians would answer by affirming that the Holy Spirit indeed did not permanently indwell the hearts of believers until the coming of the Spirit at the day of Pentecost. This seems to be a plausible explanation at first, but I contend that this position creates more theological issues than it solves and misses the heart of what really happened in the fulfillment of Jesus’ words to His disciples. I contend that the Holy Spirit’s coming in a new way on the Day of Pentecost was not to begin a new ministry of regenerating and indwelling believers, but rather to pour Himself out spiritual gifts onto all believers for empowerment in Christian ministry. We see a similar ministry of empowerment and gifting in theocratic anointing and the rushing and filling of the Holy Spirit upon individuals in the Old Testament such as prophets, priests and kings for the edification of Israel, but it was at Pentecost where this specific ministry was democratized across the entirety of God’s people for the edification of the Church.²

The Holy Spirit’s Indwelling Ministry Before Pentecost

The presence and role of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is often unfortunately grossly understated. Other than His role in the creation narrative as the Spirit of God that “hovered over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2), the active role of the Holy

¹Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 2: The Doctrines of Man, Sin and the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 330.

²Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 124.

Spirit seems to be given a lot less limelight than it does in the New Testament.

Because of this, some theologians have then drawn the conclusion that the Holy Spirit must not have been actively indwelling believers in the Old Covenant until the day that He came down on Pentecost. This view was especially popular among early dispensationalists.³ One such dispensationalist theologian who held this position was Dr. Merrill Tenney who described that even the disciples were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit until the events of Pentecost, saying that they were merely, “under his influence [but] later, he would indwell them.”⁴

The basis of Tenney’s conclusion comes not only from his theological presuppositions of vast discontinuity between the dispensations he sees between the Old and New Testaments, but also from his interpretation of John 16:17, which says, “even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” He draws on the fact that Jesus seems to be implying that the Holy Spirit was “*with*” the disciples before, but will be “*in*” them afterward.

On the surface, this seems to be a plausible interpretation of that isolated verse. The problem lies in the fact that it is completely contingent on reading the Greek word “*para*” (translated as “with”) as an external dwelling in juxtaposition with the future “*en*” (translated “in”) being an internal dwelling. The issue here is that in verse twenty-three of the same discourse, the future involvement of the Holy Spirit as a conduit of fellowship of Father and Son with the disciples is described

³ Robert V. McCabe, “Were Old Testament Believers Indwelt by the Spirit?” *Detroit Baptist Theological Journal* 9 (2004): 215.

⁴ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 2: The Doctrines of Man, Sin and the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 275

as also being “*para*” or “with” them. The distinction between “*para*” and “*en*” is not as pronounced as Tenney would make it seem then, as they are used functionally interchangeably in the same passage. In fact, the word “*en*” could be just as easily translated “among” or “in union with,” making this isolated phrase not sufficient evidence in itself that the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit was limited to the post-Pentecost era entirely, especially in light of testimony of the rest of Scripture on the subject and the various theological problems that would ensue upon taking such a position.⁵

Theologically speaking, if the Holy Spirit were only to indwell believers in the post-Pentecost era, then we would have no one could have been saved in the Old Testament. We see this evidently plain in passages like John 3:5-6 where Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This being “born again” is described by the Apostle Paul as “regeneration” in Titus 3:5-6.

One might object and say that just because Old Testament believers were regenerated by the Holy Spirit, that does not necessarily mean that they were indwelt by Him. To this, we can cross reference Jesus and Paul’s teaching about regeneration with what the Old Testament says of it in Ezekiel 25:25-26: “And I will give you a new heart, and *a new spirit I will put within you*. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (italics added for emphasis). This clearly shows that the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit comes by way of that same Holy Spirit dwelling within those believers whom He gives a new heart.

⁵ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) “ἐν”

Now one might say that this was merely prophesying of when the Holy Spirit would do this *later* in the New Covenant, but we clearly see references of this same reality in the lives and hearts of believers in the Old Testament as well. For example, the same promises of regeneration, particularly concerning having the law of God being written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-34), are not limited to New Testament believers but are already descriptions of true believers in the Old Testament as well, including Psalm 37:31 where the righteous person is described as such: “The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip.” We see here that the effects of New Covenant regeneration in indwelling of the Holy Spirit were already in operation before they were purchased by the blood of Jesus at Calvary.

Just Old Testament saints’ justification was contingent on a faith looking forward to the cross (as opposed to ours looking back to it), their regeneration and indwelling by the Spirit was also on the basis on their faith looking forward to the cross. The New Covenant prophecies of regeneration and indwelling were not present collectively among all Israelites in the Old Testament, for not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (Rom. 9:6). But these New Covenant effects on the heart were certainly present individually among all true believers.

We also learn from the New Testament that the continual reality of progressive sanctification only comes from the power of the God working *within* the hearts of believers: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13, italics added for emphasis). This begs the question, if Old Testament saints did not have God within them to will and to work for His good pleasure, then what within empowered them to live for God? Was it their innate goodness unencumbered by the effects of a fallen nature and original sin? This obviously can’t be the case. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit of God dwelling within them, just as it is with us who believe *this* side of the cross.

The Holy Spirit's Ministry of Filling and Rushing Before Pentecost

So, if the Holy Spirit had always indwelt believers in the Old and New Testament age, it stands to reason that the way He came down at Pentecost was rather to empower the Church with spiritual gifts. To see the fuller scope of God's plan to do this at that point in redemptive history, it is worthwhile to see what capacity He had done this before Pentecost.

The idea of the Spirit of God coming upon or filling a person for the purpose of using them for the edification of God's people is not limited to the scope of the New Testament. The Bible uses terminology like the Spirit "filling" or "rushing upon" individuals in the Old and New Testament for specific purposes throughout redemptive history. We see this Exodus 31:3 when the workers of the tabernacle were "fill[ed] with the Spirit of God" for craftsmanship in its building. We see the Spirit "rushing upon" several judges in pre-monarchial Israel for supernatural power to deliver God's people from their oppressors (Judges 6:34, 14:6). We also see Him "rushing upon" king David to empower him to serve as he is anointed king in Israel (1 Samuel 16:13). This particular "rushing" of the Holy Spirit is what many theologians call theocratic anointing, which enabled old testament figures such as prophets, priests and kings to leadership and administrative functions in the theocratic kingdom of Old Testament Israel.⁶ This was the sense of the Holy Spirit's operation in David's life that he was referring to in Psalm 51:11 when he asked God to "not take your Holy Spirit from me," indicating the potential non-permanent nature of the "rushing" or "filling" of the Spirit, as opposed to the permanent indwelling of the Spirit.

⁶ Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2013), 81.

The common denominator in all of these instances where the Holy Spirit wither “rushed upon” or “fills” a person in the Old Testament is that the purpose is for the edification of God’s people. Similar to how the emboldening power and the spiritual gifts that were poured out on the Church at Pentecost, the main function of these outpourings was for the building up of the body of God’s people. In the New Testament, this is applied to the local church, but these outpourings and fillings are applied to the theocratic nation of Israel in the old Covenant before the Church Age began. This outpouring/filling then is not seen as synonymous with the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but rather as a temporary function by which the Holy Spirit uses an individual as a vessel to edify God’s people in that particular circumstance, whether for wisdom, leadership in warfare, priestly service or even the gift of prophecy.

In fact, it seems that this operation of exhibiting genuine manifestations of the Holy Spirit is at times completely independent from whether or not the individual filled with the Spirit at the time is in fact a true believer and indwelled permanently by the Spirit at all. I say this because there are several instances before Pentecost even happens where apparent non-believers have the Spirit of God poured out upon them for edification of Israel or exhibit genuine spiritual gifts like prophesying and other mighty works.

For instance, the Holy Spirit “rushes upon” the apostate king Saul in 1 Samuel 10:10 causing him to prophesy. Other than this, Balaam, the pagan prophet hired by the Balak to curse Israel, was acted upon by the Spirit of God unwittingly to prophesy blessing over Israel. It even says in Numbers 24:2 that “the Spirit of God came upon him.” And if that weren’t enough, Jesus Himself even testified that there will be false converts who *genuinely* exercised these same manifestations of the Spirit, saying in Matthew 7:22-23 (italics added for emphasis):

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not *prophesy* in your name, and *cast out demons* in

your name, and *do many mighty works* in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

This same dynamic of someone who is “filled with” the Holy Spirit in this way or has the Spirit “rushed upon” them and not necessarily having been born again and indwelt permanently by the Spirit also explains how John the Baptist could be “filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb” before he was ever able to make a profession of saving faith (Luke 1:15). Notice, the function that this “filling” of the Spirit seems to have served even here was revelatory as well, being that John would soon thereafter testify of the Lord to his mother by leaping in her womb in the presence of the yet-born Savior, causing Elizabeth to do likewise (Luke 1:39-45).

The Democratization of the Holy Spirit’s Filling and Rushing at Pentecost

All that is to say that the “filling of” and “rushing upon” by the Holy Spirit is presented clearly as a distinct ministry from the permanent indwelling of the Spirit before the day of Pentecost. God had sovereignly chosen to pour out His Spirit upon certain individuals for the purpose of edifying His people in a way that was different than regenerating and indwelling them. What I am proposing is that what changed at Pentecost was that this ministry went from being exhibited through certain individuals to edify Israel in the Old Covenant, to being democratized to all believers to edify the Church in the New Covenant.

This view has clear Biblical support *implicitly* in Old Testament foreshadowing as well as *explicitly* in Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the New Testament. First off, we see an extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the entirety of a group of 70 elders in Moses’ age who then exhibited this ministry of the Spirit through the gift of prophecy:

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.”

Subsequently, Moses’ young protégé Joshua heard of the prophesying and seemed to tell Moses of the events thinking he would disapprove. But Moses had a very different reaction in verse 29 which says, “But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!’” Here in Moses’ great desire that “all the Lord’s people” could prophesy, we see a foreshadowing of what would come upon the Church in the New Testament after Pentecost. I say this because in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, he says of the entirety of the Lord’s people there: “For *you can all prophesy* one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged,” (1 Cor. 14:31). The gift of prophecy seems to have went from being poured out onto select individuals to being democratized to the entirety of the Church.

And apart from seeing this implicitly within a foreshadowing in Moses’ day and fulfillment in Paul’s, we see explicit evidence of this being God’s plan concerning this ministry of the Holy Spirit in Joel’s prophecy and its subsequent fulfillment on the day of Pentecost. It is in Joel 2:28-29 where the prophet speaks on behalf of God saying:

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

Leslie Allen, in his contribution to *The New Bible Commentary* on this passage, links this passage directly to the aforementioned passage in Numbers saying:

“The promise takes up Moses’ wish in Nu. 11:29, ‘that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!’ Earlier in the ministry of Joel the whole nation had been out of step with Yahweh. Only one person, the prophet Joel, had seen the situation through God’s eyes; with God’s voice he had spoken of both judgment and hope. Now a whole nation of Joels is envisaged. Every sector of its society, young and old, male and female, slave and free (*cf.* Gal. 3:28), would share a prophet’s understanding of God (*cf.* 1 Cor. 13:9–12).”⁷

But an even more compelling commentary on this passage would be the divinely inspired one that the Apostle Peter gives on the day of Pentecost, quoting the passage and saying that the events that transpired that day were the fulfillment of this Old Testament promise (Acts 2:16-21). The role of the Holy Spirit’s pouring Himself out onto the entirety of the people of God has shifted from being isolated to specific individuals for situational purposes of edification for God’s people in the Old Covenant theocracy, to being democratized to every believer in the last days, regardless of their class, age, socioeconomic status or gender.

Conclusion

The question of how the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost is one that is infrequently asked, in my experience. And when it is asked, the answer is almost always a muddled conflation

⁷ Leslie C. Allen, “Joel,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 789.

between the Spirit's ministry of permanent indwelling and His ministry of dispersing spiritual gifts to His people. On the surface, it may seem like a splitting of hairs and an overly nuanced pneumatology to make such a great distinction between these two ways in which the Holy Spirit ministers to His people, but the implications of getting this wrong create theological inconsistencies and contradictions that can be real stumbling blocks.

If the Holy Spirit had not been regenerating and permanently indwelling the hearts of believers until He came at Pentecost, then what the rest of Scripture teaches about soteriology would leave us to believe that no one could have been saved until the first century AD when He came to do so. If the Holy Spirit did not come into saints' hearts to regenerate them in the Old Testament, then no one could be born again and ever see the kingdom of God. And if He did not stay in their hearts as a permanent indwelling, then no one in the Old Testament could be sanctified.

The Biblical witness to this issue clearly testifies to the fact that the Holy Spirit did in fact regenerate and sanctify believers in a ministry of indwelling even before the day of Pentecost arrived. What changed at Pentecost was not that the Holy Spirit began to indwell believers, but that He began to *empower* all believers in a special way that had only been previously seen in particular circumstances in particular individuals in the Old Testament for kingly, priestly, and prophetic purposes to edify Israel.

In a New Covenant age where we are all now members of "a royal priesthood" as Peter would go on to call the entirety of the Church in 1 Peter 2:9, Pentecost serves as the inauguration of the Holy Spirit's pouring out spiritual gifts for the edification of Christ's body to the entire Church. The great desire of Moses in Numbers 11 that all the people of God would exhibit the same spiritual anointing that he himself had was a foreshadow to what Joel would prophesy of the New Covenant in Joel 2. That prophecy was announced as fulfilled by Peter in Acts chapter

two, and confirmed with Paul's teaching of this anointing availability to all in his epistle to the Corinthians. In all of this, we can trace a purposeful plan that God had to pour out His Spirit in a way that most glorified Himself throughout different stages of redemptive history.

So, what occurred at Pentecost was not the start of the Holy Spirit's indwelling believers, but rather the Holy Spirit being made manifest through spiritual gifts as the war spoils of Christ's victory on the cross. "Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.'" We have gone from captives to a royal priesthood, and with that priesthood, an anointing that empowers us for edifying our Savior's body, the Church.

Sources

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