

E. The Imperative of Pentecost: Participation in the New Creation (2:37-40)

The phenomenon of tongues indicated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This eschatological event had been predicted by the prophets and reaffirmed by Jesus Himself as the great sign of the messianic age. Most importantly, the centrality of the Spirit in the messianic age punctuates the fact that it is the beginning of the new creation which will find its consummation at Jesus' return. At that time, the material creation will join the spirits of redeemed men by entering into its own renewal and perfection (Romans 8:9-23; 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:8). The Spirit who brought forth the order and fullness of the first creation is now doing so with respect to the new creation.

The outpouring of the Spirit heralds the inauguration of the new creation, but this event has its foundation in the work of the Messiah which culminated in His exaltation and enthronement at the right hand of the Majesty on High. Jesus has triumphed over the curse and ascended into the true sanctuary where He presented His atoning self-offering to His Father and assumed His throne as the everlasting Davidic Priest-King. The despised One abhorred by the nation and regarded by them as smitten by Yahweh Himself was actually stricken in order to be exalted over all: So far from rejecting Him, His Father had appointed Him to be the Servant of rulers, that by His ignominious death He should become Lord of all. The One mocked with the title, *King of the Jews*, by those lacking eyes to see was appointed to be marveled at and worshipped by the great men of the earth: "*Kings shall see and arise, princes shall also bow down; because of Yahweh who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You*" (Isaiah 49:1-7, 53:1-12).

The God of Israel had indeed made Jesus the Nazarene both Lord and Christ, and this truth had grave implications for Peter's audience. Regardless of whether any of the individuals present had personally called for Jesus' execution, they stood in theological and covenant solidarity with the nation that had formally rejected Him and demanded His death (2:22-23; cf. John 19:14-15). Now this person who only weeks earlier had so clearly seemed to be a false messiah, hanging battered and broken on a Roman cross as a pathetic caricature of a man (Matthew 27:39-43), had proven His messianic credential by pouring forth His Spirit as David's enthroned Son. However indirectly, these gathered Israelites were guilty of killing the Lord of life and Messiah of Israel. Now they stood under the gaze and regal power of this One to whom all things in heaven and earth are subjected and they were left terrified and desperate (2:37).

These men felt the immense weight of guilt and condemnation, *but Peter's response to their terrible dilemma was to call them to come to the very Messiah they had rejected*. From His throne on high, Jesus had sent His Spirit into the world, not to destroy the estranged creation, but to begin the process of its renewal and restoration. By His cross He redeemed it from the curse and reconciled it to God by bringing an end to the Creator/creature enmity (Colossians 1:19-20). Now this creational reconciliation was to bear its fruit in restored relationship between the divine Father and His image-sons, and that work belongs to the Spirit who joins them to the Father by joining them to the Son and imparting His life and likeness to them.

The presence of the Spirit indicated that the work of redemption and restoration had been completed. That testimony, in turn, established the responsibility of all men to come and be reconciled to God and enter into His new creation (cf. Isaiah 53-55 with Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:4-8, 13:38-47, 14:8-17, 17:22-31; cf. also John 3:1-21; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Thus Peter's answer to the agonized question, "*What shall we do?*" was a call to faith in the glorified Christ: His desperate hearers were to **repent** and be **baptized** (2:38).

1. The repentance Peter called for isn't a behavioral change but the appropriate inward response to the truths of the gospel. These men had just heard Peter proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah and now they were to own that truth and respond accordingly. This first meant renouncing the traditional messianic theology of their countrymen in favor of a truly scriptural understanding. But it secondly involved embracing Jesus the Nazarene as the Messiah promised by the Scriptures.
 - a. The sons of Israel had missed their Messiah because of their resolute commitment to their own righteousness. This presupposition insured their expectation of a self-styled deliverer who would affirm rather than secure their standing before God. In the end, Israel's messianic theology was framed by the confidence of personal and national righteousness determined by covenant identity and conformity; covenant sons of Abraham who were devout disciples of Moses could find no place for a Messiah who would die for their sin (ref. John 8:31ff, 9:1-34 with Luke 3:1-8).
 - b. The answer to the crowd's plight was to embrace the Messiah *in truth*, which meant embracing His righteousness and renouncing their own. By doing so, they would be delivered from their own perverse generation (2:40). This generation had self-righteously sought a sign from the One claiming to be the Christ, but the singular sign He would give to it was the one now being proclaimed by Peter (Luke 11:29; cf. Matthew 12:38-40): The great messianic sign was the Servant crucified, raised and glorified; all who rejected this sign would find themselves condemned at the last day (Matthew 12:41-42). The power of the messianic age and its kingdom had come upon Israel, and the nation's rejection would render its latter state worse than its first (Matthew 12:43-45; cf. 23:29-39).
2. The heart of repentance is the discernment of and proper response to the truth that righteousness is found only in Jesus Christ and not in oneself. But this righteousness is received, not by legal transference as a deposit to one's moral "account," but through personal union with the Righteous One: Men *become* the righteousness of God *in Him*; there is no other form or means of human righteousness.
 - a. Receiving Jesus' righteousness means being joined to Him so as to share in His life and likeness. Righteousness is *rightness*, and human rightness finds expression only in the Son of Man and those who share in his authentic humanity. Jesus is the Savior of the world, but as the *Last Adam*: He saves men by making them partakers in His own life as True Man – Man of the Spirit.
 - b. The gospel of righteousness in Christ holds out the promise of forgiveness of sin (2:38a), but it holds out the greater promise of the *indwelling Spirit* (2:38b). The gospel doesn't merely promise forgiveness and the removal of guilt (though many seek no more, desiring only deliverance from future condemnation); it promises renewal and reconciliation – the newness of life that belongs to *sons*.

The gospel doesn't ultimately concern a new conviction or a new commitment, but a *new creation*. This is why the Pentecost event which heralded the messianic age and Peter's proclamation of its gospel focused on the giving of the Spirit. Yahweh had promised His Spirit as the surety of the new creation, and Jesus had now sent Him on behalf of all men – the household of Israel as well as those who are “far off” (2:39; cf. Ephesians 2:1-22).

3. The proclamation of the gospel of Christ begins with a call to repentance but it doesn't stop there. Because righteousness in Christ involves being clothed with Christ, a new paradigm of understanding and conviction is ultimately insufficient; discerning Christ as the hope of righteousness has its necessary outcome in being joined to Him. Thus Peter's exhortation: “*Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...*”

As straightforward as it is, Peter's exhortation to be baptized has been the subject of no little controversy over the centuries. It is a lightning rod in various disputes, including the relationship between baptism and salvation, baptism and the promise/manifestation of the Spirit, and baptism and the definition of the Church. Though these issues go beyond the scope of the present treatment, some observations are worthwhile and helpful:

- a. The first observation concerns the relationship between baptism and a person's salvation, particularly as it implicates the work of the Spirit. Some find in Peter's words affirmation of the notion that baptism actually *conveys* salvation (“baptismal regeneration”). In various forms, this doctrine has been embraced by Roman Catholicism and certain Protestant sects since the Reformation. The contention from this particular passage is that Peter was making baptism part of the basis for forgiveness of sins and the reception of the gift of the Spirit: “*Repent and be baptized unto the forgiveness of sins and you shall then receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” And because forgiveness of sin and the Spirit's work of regeneration and indwelling speak to a person's salvation, it follows that Peter was grounding salvation (in some way at least) in water baptism.

Other paedobaptists (those who practice infant baptism) deny that baptism itself regenerates and saves, arguing instead that water baptism is the “sign and seal” of regeneration and saving union with Christ. Perhaps the majority of non-Catholic paedobaptists fall into this category. They interpret Peter as saying that baptism speaks as a sign and seal to the promise of the Spirit who Himself is the agent of regeneration. Baptism *signifies* union with Christ as wrought by the Spirit's regenerating and indwelling work, but it doesn't *effect* that union.

- Some such paedobaptists argue that the saving union with Christ signified by water baptism will eventually be realized in all baptized persons. Here the only important distinction from baptismal regeneration is that baptism doesn't directly convey or effect regeneration, but simply *promises* it as a sure, future outcome.
- Far more Protestant paedobaptists, however, believe that many baptized individuals are never regenerated and die under God's condemnation.

Though the second view is much more common, it is the more flawed of the two in that it fractures the inherent relationship between a *sign* and the *thing signified* by it: A sign only signifies something if the thing signified is actually realized. So in this instance, if the regeneration and union with Christ that baptism signifies are never realized in a baptized person's experience, in what sense can his baptism legitimately be said to be the sign of that regeneration/union? The problem is only exacerbated by the contention that baptism is equally the *seal* of salvation. How does baptism act to seal something that is never realized? The confusion bound up in this sort of reasoning is evident in the following citations:

“Baptism into Christ, the mediator of the covenant of grace, confers eternal life, even if its efficacy is not tied to the moment that it is administered. Like a seed that sends up its shoots, some covenant children [i.e., baptized children] may actually be regenerated later in life, and with most, that moment is impossible to discern. But as we have seen, there is no assurance of salvation – for those baptized under the new covenant any more than those circumcised under the old – apart from faith in Jesus Christ.” (Michael Horton, *A Better Way*)

“Just as God confirmed his promise to Noah by placing the bow in the cloud, just as God confirmed his promise to Abraham by an additional oath, so also God confirms, certifies, authenticates, and guarantees the promised verities of his covenant with his people by adding the confirming seal of baptism to it... All this is equally true for the baptized infant... The efficacy of these covenantal truths, moreover, is not tied necessarily to that moment when baptism is administered but is promised, exhibited, and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs to [i.e., not every baptized person], according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.” (Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*)

On the other hand, those who hold to baptism as a believer's ordinance disagree with the notion of water baptism preceding the personal appropriation of the Spirit and His saving work. The Spirit and His regenerating work come first; baptism follows as testimony of that work. For this reason, credo-baptists tend to interpret Peter as saying, *“Repent and then be baptized on the basis of the forgiveness of your sin; in this way you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* Language, grammar and context (local and New Testament) together support this reading.

- b. The second observation pertains to the relationship between baptism and the Church as the community of faith. Here paedobaptists draw upon Peter's words in defense of their conviction that baptized children are legitimate (if unsaved) members of Christ's Church. Specifically, they highlight Peter's declaration that *“the promise [of the Spirit] is for you and your children.”* Noting that this statement is connected to Peter's exhortation to be baptized, they contend that he was calling as well for the baptism of believers' children. The reasoning is that children are equally recipients of the promise of the Spirit, and that promise is signified and sealed to a person through baptism in Jesus' name.

Thus Peter's words may be paraphrased as follows: *Let each one of you – parents and children alike – be baptized, for God's promise of the Spirit (which belongs to the Church as His assembly of "called out ones") is not just for believers, but also for their children.* Whether or not they hold to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, all paedobaptists maintain that membership in the Church and its covenant is effected by the sacrament of water baptism. (In the case of Roman Catholicism, baptism is necessary for salvation, with certain exceptions such as martyrdom or circumstances which won't allow a person to be baptized.)

- c. At the heart of these differing views is the tendency of Christians to allow certain doctrinal and/or systematic presuppositions to overshadow a given passage and effectively drive its interpretation. Rather than interpreting Peter's words within their scriptural (and Lukan) context, many read them through a predetermined, non-negotiable set of premises that are unrelated to the passage itself.

In context, Peter just finished explaining to the assembled crowd that they were witnessing the fulfillment of the Scripture's promise of the Spirit, specifically as His coming testifies to Jesus' exaltation and enthronement as God's Messiah. Jesus has poured forth His Spirit from His place at the Father's right hand (2:33), and this outpouring has universal implications just as Joel prophesied centuries earlier (2:17). The God of Israel was pouring forth of His Spirit upon all mankind, but not all men without exception; the Spirit was His gift to His *bondservants* (2:18), which were to be taken from the whole human race. The Spirit who previously had dwelled *among* the sons of Israel was now going to dwell *within* individual people drawn from every nation – male and female, slave and free, old and young; as many as Yahweh would call to Himself (2:39). These, being full of His Spirit, would act as His new prophetic messengers, testifying to the world of Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 1:4-8 with 5:26-32; also John 15:26-16:15).

The universal relevance of God's work in His Son obligates all people everywhere to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 14:8-17, 17:22-31), and so it was for those Jews and proselytes standing before Peter. They, too, were to forsake their self-righteousness and embrace the Righteous One in faith, having the promise that Yahweh would grant them His Spirit. Through His presence and power they would become sharers in the Last Adam and His new creation.

For the Jews, baptism was a ritual of cleansing for the purpose of initiation, and so was required only of proselytes. Now Peter was calling for Jews themselves to undergo baptism *in the name of Jesus of Nazareth* – the very One whom Israel had spurned. Jew and Gentile alike are to repent so as to find their righteousness in Him by sharing in His life and likeness by His Spirit, and this explains why Peter joined baptism to repentance: An initiatory ritual washing, baptism testifies to participation in Jesus and His death, resurrection and exaltation – participation in the Messiah, not as a matter of doctrinal adherence, but spiritual union by His indwelling Spirit. Baptism doesn't save, but it is inseparable from the repentance and faith that do lead to life (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 3:17ff, 5:27-32, 11:18).