

# Receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit

According to Acts 2:38, a person must be to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; *“and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Some have claimed that if a person goes into the water with the conviction that Jesus will forgive their sins at baptism (immersion), then they will “automatically” receive the gift of the Holy Spirit from God. By using the term “automatically”, it is maintained that the person so baptized doesn’t have to have an expectation of receiving the Holy Spirit, or even have any knowledge about the Holy Spirit, as he comes up out of the water in order for God’s Spirit to indwell him. Some have even gone so far as to claim they received the Spirit “retro-actively” after being taught from the Bible following their immersion.

Acts 2:38 standing alone, without its Bible context or other pertinent Scripture passages, could possibly yield such an understanding. But when the context and other related Scriptures are studied, it is clear that one receives the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit only through faith, knowledge, and full expectancy during the act of immersion in water. Under the terms of the New Testament(NT), God never gives the indwelling Holy Spirit without the recipient’s full knowledge and participation.

At this point we must note the vital importance of God’s Spirit indwelling an individual relative to salvation in Christ. Romans 8:9 clearly states: *“However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”* Romans 8:14-16 and Galatians 4:5-6 go on to show that the indwelling Holy Spirit proves our adoption as sons and daughters of God. Ephesians 1:13-14 defines the indwelling Spirit as how we are sealed in Christ; the Spirit Himself constituting the *“pledge of our inheritance.”*

The following Scripture passages reveal that the Holy Spirit must indeed come into a person’s body as he comes up from the water of Christian immersion. However; the Holy Spirit can only be received at immersion through the recipient’s adequate knowledge, scriptural faith, and active participation.

## 1) The Context of Acts 2:38 (vs. 36-41)

*"...Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'*

*And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.' And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'*

*So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls."*  
(Acts 2:36-41)

In verse 39 Peter completes his initial statement by saying "*the promise*" of Acts 2:38 is for all people until Jesus returns. "*The promise*" is a key NT phrase which is specifically defined in Galatians 3:14 as "*the Spirit*," which "*we would receive...through faith*."

Then in Acts 2:40 we are told Peter continued to solemnly testify and exhort the people to "*be saved from this perverse generation!*" The power for the Christian to overcome the world around him comes from the indwelling Spirit, as evidenced in such Scripture passages as Romans 8:2,4,12-13, II Corinthians 6:16-7:1, Galatians 5:16-25, Ephesians 3:16,21, II Thessalonians 2:13, and I John 4:4. Although not recorded verbatim in Acts 2, it is probable that Peter shared more on receiving the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit with his audience before the 3000 of verse 41 were immersed.

Therefore the context of Acts 2:38 reveals that more information on receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit was dispensed by Peter's preaching prior to anyone being immersed. Acts 2:39-40 indicates the general theme of Peter's message included the receiving of the indwelling Spirit at immersion: "*For the promise [the indwelling Spirit] is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.*' And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying,

*'Be saved from this perverse generation!'* [by the power of the Spirit].” Because the specifics are not totally enumerated in this text, other relevant NT Scripture texts must be examined to arrive at the full directive of Acts 2:38 for us today.

## 2) Jesus' Immersion

### a. Matthew 3:13-17 and Mark 1:9-11

*“Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted Him.*

*And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”*  
(Matthew 3:13-17)

*“And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased.’”*  
(Mark 1:9-11)

In both of these passages we receive what might be termed the “outside” perspective on Jesus' immersion. This perspective is similar to what a person would see while standing on the bank of the Jordan River, observing John and Jesus.

Matthew 3:16 states: *“After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him.”* Mark 1:10 reads basically the same: *“Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens*

*opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending on Him.*” Note that in both accounts, as Jesus came up out of the water the Holy Spirit came upon Him, in visible form *“like a dove.”*

No one except Jesus received the Holy Spirit from John’s baptism, which was a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Mark 1:4). In this way Jesus pre-viewed and exemplified NT water immersion as yielding the Holy Spirit, as well as the forgiveness of sins. This coincides with the initial statement of the New Testament’s terms of salvation by Peter in Acts 2:38.

b. Luke 3:21-22

*“Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, “Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased”*  
(Luke 3:21-22)

Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism gives us the “insider’s” perspective. We are informed that Jesus was praying during his immersion: note that *“while He [Jesus] was praying... the Holy Spirit descended upon Him.”* If we put all three accounts of Jesus’ immersion together from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we understand that as Jesus came up out of the water He was praying to God. The Holy Spirit came down to Jesus from Heaven as He came *“up out of the water,”* and His Father in Heaven audibly responded to His Son.

Later in Luke’s Gospel account, Jesus taught His followers that the Father would *“give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him”* (Luke 11:13). Obviously Jesus exemplified this in His own immersion (water baptism). Although we are not specifically told what Jesus was praying about as He came up out of the water, the results speak for themselves. It is only reasonable to conclude that Jesus was asking the Father for the Holy Spirit, especially in light of Luke 11:13.

We must also note here the significance of the Father’s response to Jesus as He gave Him the Holy Spirit in all three gospel accounts: *“You are my beloved Son, in You I am well*

*pleased.*” This corresponds to the Holy Spirit being described as the “Spirit of adoption” for us under the NT. Romans 8:15-16 puts it this way: “...*you have received a Spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our Spirit that we are children of God.*” Speaking of God’s adoption process, Paul writes in Galatians 4:6 “*God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’*” In the realm of faith, unheard by physical ears, the Father still proclaims: “You are my beloved son, in you I am well-pleased” when anyone is immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Certainly Jesus had knowledge of and expected the gift of the Holy Spirit from His Father at His immersion. It is plain to see this was His primary reason for persuading John to immerse Him. Jesus did not need the forgiveness of sin John’s baptism offered, so He told John “*Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*” (Matthew 3:15). The power of the Holy Spirit is the only way anyone, including Jesus Himself, could fulfill all righteousness (see Hebrews 9:14)! It is logical to conclude that Jesus asked for the Holy Spirit while He was praying, according to Luke 3:22-23 and Luke 11:13, as He came up from the water during His immersion. This constitutes Jesus’ example for us to receive the Holy Spirit under His covenant.

### 3) Acts 19:1-5

*“And it came about that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples, and he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’*

*And they said to him, ‘No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’*

*And he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’*

*And they said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’*

*And Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’*

*And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”*  
(Acts 19: 1-5)

In the dialogue of verses 2&3 Paul expected these disciples to have received the Holy Spirit when they believed and were immersed. When they indicated that they had not even heard about the Holy Spirit, Paul asked them *“Into what then were you baptized?”* Paul’s question revealed that he obviously expected these disciples to have known how and when they would have received the Holy Spirit, if in fact they had been indwelt by the Spirit.

At the end of verse 3 the disciples indicate they were baptized into John’s immersion. According to Mark 4:1, John’s immersion was a *“baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* For everyone but Jesus, John’s immersion never promised nor yielded the gift of the Holy Spirit. Acts 19:4 indicates Paul explained to these disciples about John’s baptism, and the fact that John was pointing the way to Jesus.

Acts 19:5 states: *“When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”* Paul’s up-front question *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”* would certainly indicate he taught these disciples who knew only John’s baptism that immersion in the name of Jesus now yields the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit. They were then immersed in the name of Jesus-- even though they had previously received forgiveness of sin through John’s immersion.

This Scripture example shows, therefore, that immersion for the forgiveness of sins alone is not sufficient for receiving the Holy Spirit “automatically” from God. Disciples need to be taught that the Holy Spirit can be received at immersion in the name of Jesus, contingent upon the recipient’s faith that He will receive the Spirit as he comes up out of the water. And certainly this passage rules out any “retro-active” receiving of the Spirit, which some have claimed.

#### 4) Galatians 3:2

*“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”*  
(Galatians 3:2)

In this verse Paul asks the Christians in Galatia, whom he had originally discipled; *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?"* This rhetorical question underlines the fact that they had received the Spirit by faith. Faith is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."* Romans 10:17 further clarifies: *"Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ."*

True Biblical faith, then, is built upon knowledge and understanding of God's Word. Faith necessarily regards those realities which can not be seen with the physical eyes. This is especially true with regards to the receiving of the Holy Spirit into our bodies.

Therefore, receiving the Holy Spirit at immersion must happen by faith, which constitutes the knowledgeable participation on the part of the recipient. Everyone must understand and at least expect, by faith [*the conviction of things not seen*], the Holy Spirit to come into their body as they come up from the water of immersion. Anything less than this will not yield the indwelling Spirit, for the necessary biblical faith is absent.

#### 5) Matthew 12:43-45 and Luke 11:24-26

*"Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order.*

*Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation."*

(Matt. 12:43-45)

*"When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order.*

*Then it goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."* (Luke 11:24-26)

In these two texts Jesus teaches about the state of a person who is cleansed. As a result "*the unclean spirit*" goes out of Him and passes through waterless places. The unclean spirit then returns to the man and finds him "*unoccupied, swept, and put in order*" (Matthew 12:44). He then brings along seven other spirits more wicked than himself and "*the last state of that man becomes worse than the first*" (Matthew 12:45).

One possible application for this text would have Jesus describing a person under the NT that was immersed for forgiveness of sins ("*his house swept and put in order*"), yet did not receive the indwelling Holy Spirit ("*unoccupied*"). If this scenario does apply to NT immersion, then going into the water for the forgiveness of sins alone could have disastrous results. Without the Holy Spirit occupying and guarding the cleansed individual, he is susceptible to a much greater degree of uncleanness as he continues.

Those who contend that knowledge and faith regarding the Holy Spirit are not necessary at immersion, but only hold to a conviction for the forgiveness of sins, may in fact be placing themselves and those they teach in a worse spiritual condition than if they were never immersed!

We conclude therefore that the individual immersed in the name of Jesus Christ must be appealing not only for the forgiveness of sins, but also for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The word "for" in Acts 2:38, which translated means "with a view toward"\*, not only pertains to its immediate object (the forgiveness of sins), but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. Without the knowledge and expectancy to receive the Holy Spirit as one comes up out of the waters of Christian immersion, the Spirit will not come to reside inside of the person being immersed.

To remove all doubt, I currently teach disciples to consciously ask the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit as they come up out of the water during their immersion. I myself did not specifically ask for the Holy Spirit as I came up out of the waters of the Gallatin River on July 24, 1977. But I fully expected, by faith in God's Word, that I would receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit into my body as I came up out of the water. Such a faith, a view toward, is required by



the NT for receiving both the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling Holy Spirit at water baptism(immersion) in the name of Jesus.

Seeking the truth involves pursuing full compliance with the Scriptures. Eternal life and death may very well hang in the balance.

\* Greek translation of “eis” rendered by Alfred Marshall, Parallel NT in Greek and English

Steve Compton  
January 2009

Thank you to Bonnie Willems, Mark Stevens, and James Compton for edits, and Christiana Compton for typing.