THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF
"BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT"
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In a paper presented at the 1982 S.P.S. Conference at Fuller, I addressed the question of the relationship of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the event of baptism in the Spirit. The paper argued that Pentecostal doctrine does not do justice to the Pentecostal experience in this respect. There was a narrowing process from Pentecostal experience (what the Pentecostals experienced when they were baptized in the Spirit) to Pentecostal witness (how they testified to this experience) to Pentecostal doctrine (how it became schematized in teaching) to Pentecostal statement of faith (in which teaching was made official by particular Pentecostal denominations).

Pentecostal statements or definitions of faith concerning baptism in the Spirit are almost always restricted to the following points:

a. it is an enduement of power for ministry and service;2
b. Jesus is the baptizer;
c. it is evidenced (either necessarily or typically) by the sign of speaking in other tongues.

Of these, the first alone is intended to answer the question "What is baptism in the Spirit?” However, the customary reply in terms of enduement for power is answering in terms primarily of purpose. It may be helpful here to distinguish between purpose (what is it for?) and meaning (what is it?). While in the world of applied science and technology, it is natural to define things solely in terms of purpose, in the realms of persons and personal relationships it is less satisfactory. We can then ask the more basic question "What is the meaning of baptism in the Spirit?"

The 1982 paper without developing the language of meaning and purpose urged that the meaning of baptism in the Spirit lies in the believer’s changed relationship to the persons of the Trinity, and in particular to the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the Spirit is manifest and through whom we have access to the Father.3 That this understanding is not foreign to Pentecostal experience and witness, though not found in more schematized Pentecostal doctrine, was indicated by numerous references to early Pentecostal literature.4 These can be summarized in a quotation from Stanley Frodsham:

' The Pentecostal Baptism of the Holy Spirit brings a deeper and clearer revelation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.'
The same pattern of witness to a new level of relationship with Jesus Christ, as with the Spirit and the Father, is found in the testimonies of charismatics to baptism in the Spirit. For example Andrew Jumper, a Presbyterian minister, wrote of his baptism in the Spirit in the mid-1960s:

It was not "something" - not just an experience - but it was someone who happened to me. There came into my life an inward reality, an inner presence, that is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself.  

Other examples are not difficult to find. Before returning to the relationship of Son and Spirit, I want to take this line of thought further, and say not only is the person of the Son central to the meaning of baptism in the Spirit, but so is the Father. Only when we see baptism in the Spirit as a Trinitarian event will we correlate its meaning and purpose with the meaning and purpose of God's entire salvific plan in and through the Incarnation of his Son.

The use of the prophecy of Joel in Peter's Pentecost sermon shows clearly that the meaning of Pentecost is not just the availability of a sublime personal experience, but rather the initial realization of God's plan to have a people who would be his very own, who would glorify him and declare his majesty. It is the inauguration of the new age, the beginning of the "last days" (Acts 2:17). Here "the last days" has a theological sense of the eschatological era, the establishment of a new creation in Jesus Christ, the eschatos Adam, the "last man" (1 Corinthians 15:45).

It is true that the first Pentecostals were very conscious of the "last days". But this was focused on the imminence of the Second Coming of Jesus and the urgency of evangelism in the remaining period, generally presumed to be very short. They took "the last days" in more of a chronological than a theological sense. They paid less attention to the shape of what was to come. They were of course greatly influenced by the limitations of the circles from which they came, all affected by the pervasive individualism of modern Western society, accentuated on the Western frontier of the USA. As a result the heightened attention to biblical prophecy became filtered down to a focus on a "personal Pentecost" and the imminence of the end, while the whole sense of a decisive move towards the fulfillment of God's plan for the whole race was weakened. It is only as through the Spirit Jesus is seen to be the way to the Father that the whole sweep of God's plan from creation onward is grasped. Notice how Paul automatically moves from