Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Its Purpose(s)

In the ongoing discussion of *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* which has taken place over the past century, most people have come to agree on at least two things. First, it is an experience of the Holy Spirit. Second, it is as legitimate an experience for Christians today as it was for those of the First Century church. But this discussion has made it equally clear that there are several additional points where a range of differing opinions continue to be maintained. And these points have significant implications for the Christian life.

The first such issue is "When does baptism in the Spirit occur?" Generally speaking, the answer to this question identifies this experience as being related to conversion/initiation (James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), or it postulates this baptism as being related to some later, some subsequent spiritual experience. As such, it has been classified alternatively as an experience of purification or sanctification (A.M. Hills, *Holiness and Power for the Church and the Ministry* New York: Garland, rpt. 1984; Charles J. Fowler, *Back to Pentecost* Philadelphia: Christian Standard Co., 1900), or an experience making possible a life of power or an overcoming life (W.E. Boardman, *The Higher Christian Life* New York: Garland, rpt. 1984; Arthur T. Pierson, *Forward Movements of the Last Half Century* New York: Garland, rpt. 1984; P.C. Nelson, *The Baptism in the Holy Spirit* Fort Worth: Southwestern Press, 1942). It has also been typified as an experience of empowerment for service or the release of gifts in the work of ministry (R.A. Torrey, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rpt. 1974; Carl Brumback, "What Meaneth This?" Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1947; Ralph C. Horner, *From the Altar to the Upper Room* New York: Garland, rpt. 1984). How one answers this question surely has much to say about the purpose for which this baptizing work is given, but as yet a consensus on the answer(s) has not been reached.

The second issue is "How does one verify, or is it possible to verify that s/he has, indeed, been baptized in the Holy Spirit?" This is the question of evidence, or of evidences. Again, answers differ. Some suggest that the answer lies solely in faith (Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), or in the experience of results which "attend or follow that baptism" such as when we are "strengthened with might in the inner man" (Asa Mahan, *Out of Darkness into..."

The third issue is “For what purpose is this baptism given?” What are to be the consequences of this baptism? What is its significance for the individual Christian, for the Church as a whole, and for the world? Undoubtedly it is this issue which, while not totally independent of the first two, is ultimately the most important one, for it provides the reason that such a baptism exists at all. Unfortunately, it is often the most overlooked. The discussion, then, tends to get sidetracked on issues which even if they are not meant to do so, can derail what might prove to be a more fruitful activity. Thus, the question remains. Why this baptism in the Spirit?

Is it to be understood primarily or only as an act of incorporation into the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13)? Is it to be understood primarily or only as an act of empowerment (Acts 1:8)? Is it to be understood primarily or only as related to the overcoming or triumph over sin (Keswick) or to the eradication of the sin nature (Holiness), or is it even related to sin or the lack thereof in the Christian life? Are the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) to be understood primarily as evidences, or should they be understood as the consequences related to the purpose for which “the baptism” is given? Or, are the fruit of the Spirit something which is independent of baptism in the Spirit?

Early Pentecostals affiliated with the mission on Azusa Street in Los Angeles called it a “gift of power upon the sanctified life . . .” [The Apostolic Faith 1:1 (September 1906), p. 2]. It was described as “…power [for witness? or living a life of holiness?] and understanding of the Word [revelation? or hermeneutics?] and the glory of God [triumphalism? or a theologia crucis?]