

“He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”

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John was looking for the one who would come after him, the one he had been told by the one who sent him, that he would see a sign, a quite specific sign by which to identify that one.

It is John the evangelist who records John’s testimony

“The one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”

There he is day by day preaching repentance and practicing a standard ritual for Jews that goes along with the challenge to change your ways.

It’s called a ‘mikvah bath,’ and was by no means uncommon, and during the course of this ministry, quite in the style of the Old Testament prophets John attracted folk from all over the countryside – from as far away as Nazareth and again to John’s account a number became his disciples. And all through that time he is looking for the sign – the sign that would identify the one for whom he was preparing the way.

All this is generally consistent with the account given by each of the Gospel writers, and as a matter of course, speculation was rife.

Is this baptiser the coming Messiah? Emphatically NO said John, and it is strangely only Luke that records John saying that the coming one will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

I find that it’s a little detail like that which pushes me to dig deeper – to see if there are any other little differences in the accounts and to consider what they might mean.

Now of course Luke wasn’t there, in fact he was very late on the scene having joined up with Paul on one of the Apostle’s missionary journeys. A doctor by profession, an amateur historian with an eye to detail and a

listening ear for any story which would flesh out the report he was writing for his Gentile friend. Today we would rank him with the investigative journalists, and modern research into other sources continues to support the accuracy of his account. But of course, he wasn't there, nor for that matter, was Matthew, though he certainly was an early addition to the ranks of the disciples. And Mark, who wasn't there either, is thought to have recorded the stories told by Peter.

He certainly was there, among the crowds on the bank of the Jordan, along with Andrew, and John, and Philip, and Nathaniel. In fact, John's account suggests they all journeyed back to Galilee together, at which point Jesus then takes time out in the desert to ponder the big issues he is now facing.

Faced with a multiplicity of detail each Gospel writer includes only those things they think are important; those that are consistent with the themes and emphases they wish to present. Obviously Peter didn't rate the journey back to Galilee as important as did John so Mark's account jumps straight from the Jordan to the desert. Only Luke adds fire.

And in a way that's quite consistent with the picture we have of the fire and brimstone preaching of John – you brood of vipers! Sounds like a good old pulpit-thumping Presbyterian from back in the day!

And that stuff about the winnowing fork and the threshing floor.

Maybe he was a little too much influenced by the popular concept of what the coming Messiah would be like – a powerful king who would defeat the Roman oppressors and turf them out of Israel.

Maybe that's why from prison he sent his disciples to Jesus with the question “Are you the one? Or should we look for another?”

It's Mathew who tells us his answer -

“Tell John what you see – the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news brought to them”

This response to that question repeats almost word for word what Luke records Jesus saying in his sermon that day in Nazareth, very early in his ministry when he read from the scroll of Isaiah.

“The spirit of the lord is upon me because he has sent me to bring good news to the poor – to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind – to let the oppressed go free – to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”.

I suspect that Luke when he notes the word fire in connection with Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit has Pentecost in mind - the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, that turned a humble fisherman into a courageous and eloquent preacher - not some fiery judgement.

And just a little Segway here. Did you notice in the various texts that John saw the dove, and Jesus saw the dove, but only Jesus heard the words?

And on the day of Pentecost the disciples began speaking in tongues, glossolalia it’s called, but the listeners heard the good news in their own language. It may not be necessary to read this as the disciples suddenly being able to speak in another language – but rather that it was all in the hearing.

Let me share a personal experience to give some insight as to why I think this may be the case.

When the Charismatic renewal came to NZ in the early ‘70s I had just begun my ministry in Gisborne and a visiting Pentecostal preacher came to town. He joined me in a session after my evening service to explain what was happening, for those who may be interested.

Quite a few were interested. At one point after talking about the gift of prophesy he said “I think someone here has a word from God”

A woman I knew well began hesitatingly to speak. She stopped and the preacher said “I think there’s more,” and another member of our congregation spoke the rest. They told me later that both had heard a voice in their minds speak the full message, but the first had felt

embarrassed and stopped part way, leaving it to the other to finish speaking what they both heard. The rest of us didn't hear anything.

Now while many gifted speakers down through the history of the church have gathered crowds with powerful presentations of the gospel as did Peter on the day of Pentecost, countless others, by responding to an internal prompting have found words of peace and blessing they didn't know they had, to bring comfort and insight to another's difficult or painful situation. In my view that's no less a work of the Holy Spirit - the symbolic flame that John foresaw connected to baptism in the Spirit.

But back to my text for today – “he will baptise you”

What John was talking about wasn't what we know as the initiating ritual by which Christians are ingrafted to the Body of Christ.

The Hebrew word he was using, probably 'mikvah' carried the same meaning as the Greek word Luke used – 'baptizo' which means 'to immerse' Quite literally, John was 'the Immerser' and what he meant was that while the Spirit of God was known to have inspired certain people for special occasions, when the chosen one arrived, he would immerse in the very life of God, those who chose to follow him.

Something quite different from the ordinance of ritual cleansing John was offering.

And certainly the early church seemed to expect there would be some manifestation of the fact that a new believer was so immersed, not in the waters of Baptism, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the reading from Acts set down for today Luke tells how the Christian council in Jerusalem had heard that even the Samaritans had become believers. They wondered whether the Holy Spirit would be bestowed upon them, as at that point although they had been baptised into the name of Jesus, none had shown the expected sign of having received the Holy Spirit. It's important to remember that in the minds of many Judeans Samaria was 'a land of half-breed and heretics' as our commentator has put it.

So they sent Peter and John to pray for Samaritan believers, including laying their hands upon them, and all received the Holy Spirit. I can only assume that meant they spoke in tongues like the disciples on the day of Pentecost

Interestingly there is another occasion which Luke recounts when Paul was revisiting Ephesus, (Acts 19) and he finds a group of disciples. He asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they became believers. They reply that they've never heard there was a Holy Spirit.

So Paul asks "Into what then were you baptised?" It turns out they had apparently been immersed by John, or one of John's disciples. Paul tells them there is more, they are then baptised in the name of Jesus, and when Paul lays his hands upon them and prays, they receive the Holy Spirit. Luke records they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

That was the experience of many who became involved in the Charismatic Renewal, and while it may have been expected in the early church even there it caused all sorts of issues, so that Paul has to write some guidelines for congregations which you will find in his letter to the Christian congregation in Corinth. Unfortunately the renewal caused splits in many of our congregations and lead to the growth of the independent Pentecostal churches.

In that regard I came across a helpful comment which pointed out that both Apollos and this group of John's disciples had heard an incomplete gospel and that the church is called not only to bring the gospel to those who have never heard it, but to continue to grow the understanding of those within it. No one has "arrived" nor can claim to have a corner on the truth, but as Paul says to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:14-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, . . . ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with

which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

And so he prays for the Ephesians and he prays for us

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,^[a] ¹⁵from whom every family^[b] in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.