

Lesson 16: Acts 11:1-18 Cornelius' Household and Speaking in Tongues

Introduction

How do we understand the role of the gift of tongues in the Church today? There is a major disagreement among Bible-believing Christians on this topic. And the book of Acts is a primary source in that disagreement. It is not a question I'm going to fully address today. However, how we understand the gift of tongues in Acts affects how we understand the gift of tongues today. That's the piece of the question that falls under this study: correctly interpreting what we observe in the text of Acts.

I am working from the belief that the text of Scripture should define our theology and how we understand our spiritual experiences. Experience and theological tradition should not take primary place in defining how we interpret the text. And that is a challenge. We come to the Bible with our own spiritual experiences and with the experiences that we've seen in other people, and we want the Bible to help us make sense of it all.

For example, when we come to Acts and ask the question, "Is speaking in tongues an outward sign of the internal baptism of the Holy Spirit?", believers who have had a negative experience with speaking in tongues might easily be guided by that negative experience in their interpretation of the text, just as believers who have had a positive experience with speaking in tongues might easily be guided by their positive experience when they interpret the text.

On one extreme there are theological traditions that downplay the role of the Holy Spirit so much that the only place you ever hear Him mentioned is the doxology, "Praise, Father, Son and Holy Ghost." And there He is called a "ghost." Not very inviting. Other traditions emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit so much that you might go to an evangelistic meeting and never hear the name, Jesus, at the meeting. It is all about feeling the Holy Spirit.

Neither of these more extreme theological traditions should feel comfortable with the book of Acts, which regularly refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, and always in a way that points to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

In this lesson, I am not speaking to the extremes of the disagreement. And I am not speaking to Christians who place theology, tradition, and personal experience on an equal or higher footing than the Bible. I am assuming that the Bible is the primary authority for defining our theology and experience. And I am assuming the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Still, with those assumptions there are some significant challenges to correctly interpreting the gifts of the Spirit and baptism of the Spirit. Bible-believing Christians who seek first to understand God's Word, and who are in Christ, and who are filled with the Holy Spirit still disagree on the best way to define some points of theology about the Holy Spirit. There is an internal disagreement among Bible-believing Christians.

I will be addressing this particular question of whether speaking in tongues is an outward sign of the internal baptism of the Holy Spirit because it is a very good question that arises out of the text of Acts. Our study of Acts is driving the question. It is a question we ought to be asking, in light of our two current stories; the salvation of Cornelius and his household; and the follow-up report by Peter to the believers in Jerusalem.

The role of tongues in the salvation experience of Cornelius and his household is another one of these issues that we encounter in Biblical narrative about which we have to ask, "what in this is prescriptive for all believers?", it becomes a norm we apply in the Church age, and "what is descriptive of this particular incident?", something that happened to them but does not necessarily speak to our own experience. We've encountered several examples of this prescriptive/descriptive challenge in the narrative literature of Acts. The first one I pointed out was the interesting example of drawing lots to see who would fill Judas' place as an Apostle. That's interesting because it was a clear practice described in Acts and yet, almost nobody draws lots today to discern God's will in

major leadership choices. You don't see that in the churches. We are fine with that being a descriptive example of what happened and it's not prescriptive for how we should choose our leaders. We also considered Peter's language in his first evangelistic sermon, his challenge to the Jewish crowd to repent and be baptized. And we can ask, "Were Peter's words a norm that we ought to use when we share the Gospel?" Should the four-laws or whatever method end with the challenge, 'Repent and be baptized?' Or does this sermon described by Luke give us a pattern or principle to use in our evangelism without demanding we repeat the exact same challenge?" It's not a norm that needs to apply whenever we do evangelism. I spent a little more time addressing the communal sharing of property in the early Christian fellowship: a clear practice back then that we do not repeat today, and I spent more time on the special, miraculous gifts of healing practiced by the Apostles. Should we expect miracles of healing to happen today in our churches with the same amount of power and frequency as we see in the record of the Jerusalem awakening? That's another prescriptive/descriptive question.

This challenge of discerning between the descriptive and prescriptive in Biblical narrative affects a lot of issues. I suggested in these previous two examples a process we can use to help us interpret narrative text like Acts carefully and faithfully. I will follow that same interpretive process here that I used in those previous lessons.

When trying to understand whether we are dealing with a unique experience versus a norm for the Church, context really is king. Our interpretation of what we observe in the text is driven by context. And not only by the immediate context of the narrative, but by an expanding context that moves from the immediate passage outward in consideration of the surrounding context, then in consideration of the whole context of Acts, then to the context of the New Testament epistles.

1. What does the text say?

Applying that process to role of tongues in the salvation experience of Cornelius and his household, we start with simple observation. What does the text say? The pouring out of the Holy Spirit occurs in Acts 10:44-48, so that text is our starting point.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

We observe that the gift of the Holy Spirit is poured out on all who were listening to the message. The circumcised believers, that is the Jewish believers, were amazed. It is not clear exactly why they are amazed. To be amazed means something's happening that you did not expect to happen. Did they assume that God would not accept Gentiles? "Why are we even here?" Or did they assume the Gentiles would need to go through a process of obedience to ceremonial law before they could be born again?

We need to pay close attention to the phrase, "the gift of the Spirit." In this case, speaking in tongues is not being referred to as, the gift of the Spirit. That's the point of the logical connector "for" in the following sentence. They recognized that the gift of the Spirit had been poured out for, or because, they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.

The gift of the Spirit is not "tongues" in this passage. "Tongues" is proof of the gift of the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is the Spirit. Peter used the same language at Pentecost, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children." The Spirit is the promise. He is a unique

gift given to believers in the New Covenant age. Speaking in tongues is a visible manifestation of the Spirit's presence in the individual.

Perhaps this is what surprised the Jewish observers most. The promised Holy Spirit, prophesied by Joel is for Gentiles, too. Not only are they included, they are fully included with the same spiritual standing as the Jews.

Peter understands this manifestation of tongues as a sign of saving faith, so he then orders that these Gentiles be baptized. That answers one question for us. In this instance, speaking in tongues is indeed a sign to Peter that these men and women had been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Tongues is proof, in this story, of true belief.

The question not answered is whether we should always or even often expect tongues to be manifested when a person truly believes in Jesus. It happened to them. Should we expect it to happen as a norm?

2. What is the immediate context?

The next step is to consider the immediate context of the passage. We considered the whole conversion story last week. So, let's move on to Peter's report back in Jerusalem. He will sum up for us the events we have already considered. This is Acts 11:1-18.

¹ Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, ³ saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

⁴ But Peter began *speaking* and *proceeded* to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, ⁶ and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. ⁷ "I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' ¹⁰ "This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. ¹¹ "And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were *staying*, having been sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² "The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. ¹³ "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; ¹⁴ and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵ "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ "Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life."

Peter's reception back in Jerusalem begins with an accusation. "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter had struggled himself with going to Cornelius' house. God had to impress upon him the new theological reality that the Old Covenant ceremonial law had ended. God also gave him eyes to look inwardly at his own prejudice. The brethren in Jerusalem now face the same challenge. They are experiencing the same kind of cognitive dissonance, the same dismay when they hear that Peter disregarded the cleanliness code. God brought Peter into a new understanding. Now it is up to Peter to bring his fellow Jewish believers also to this new understanding.

So, Peter explains to them about the vision, the leading of the Spirit, the appearance of the angel and the manifestation of tongues. We also find out a piece of new information. When Cornelius and his

household began to speak in tongues and praise God, Peter remembered the Word of Jesus, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Peter’s understanding of the experience is grounded in the Words of Jesus.

Peter’s explanation convinces the brothers in Jerusalem that God’s offer of forgiveness is extended also to Gentiles. The issue is not fully resolved. Members of the Jewish church will continue to struggle with the nature of Gentile inclusion, leading to the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. But for now, the idea that Gentiles can be born again is affirmed.

In the telling of the story, Peter clarifies two questions. He clarifies both the nature of this manifestation of tongues and a purpose for the manifestation. At Cornelius’ house he had said, “[they] have received the Holy Spirit just as we did.” Here he says, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” Peter is referring to Pentecost, the beginning. The manifestation of tongues Peter witnessed in Cornelius’ house was the same kind of miracle that he and the others experienced on the day of Pentecost. That miracle was the miracle of speaking truth about God in an actual foreign language not known to the speaker. What makes such a strong impact on Peter at Cornelius’ house is that the miracle he sees occurring with Cornelius is the same miracle. Peter does not say, “I wonder what is going on here? This is new. I’ve never experienced the Spirit like this before.” No. He says, “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.” This is a spiritual experience that is not new to Peter but what’s new is that it’s happening to Gentiles.

God uses the repetition of the same kind of manifestation of the Spirit to impress on Peter, and on those six Jewish brothers that were with him, and now on the believers in Jerusalem, that the Gentiles are included into Christ just as we are.

So first, Peter’s words here clarify that we are talking about the same kind of speaking in tongues as at Pentecost. Second, Peter’s words indicate God’s purpose that the Jewish believers would have a powerful sign of Gentile inclusion. This miracle is for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to acknowledge that these Gentiles have truly believed.

This is the conclusion of Peter and of the gathered believers in Jerusalem.

¹⁷ “Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life*.”

One last observation from Acts 11:1-18. Peter here links the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the baptism of the Holy Spirit by quoting the words of Jesus that he had remembered. It appears in this passage that to be born again through faith in Jesus and to be baptized in the Holy Spirit are the same thing, or they happen at the same time. That is what is described at Cornelius’ house. But we need to expand our context out to consider other examples of the outpouring of the Spirit to see if the pattern in Acts is consistent.

3. What does the rest of the book of Acts say?

Our third step is to expand out to the whole book of Acts. There are four passages in Acts that describe the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. All four passages have a unique sequence of events.

At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Jewish believers who spoke in tongues had believed in Jesus for some time. For example, we could say of the Apostle John that he believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the moment he ran into the empty tomb (John 20:8). Now, some 50 days later, he is experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. There is considerable separation between his faith in Jesus and his experience of the Spirit. There is also no connection to baptism or the laying on of hands in the Pentecost account.

In Samaria in Acts 8, many Samaritans believe in Jesus and are baptized by Philip but do not experience the manifestation of the Spirit until Peter and John come from Jerusalem and lay hands

on them. We are specifically told that the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16).” This account does not mention speaking in tongues, but I believe that kind of manifestation should be assumed, since Simon the magician becomes jealous as he witnesses the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Samaritans through Peter and John. I don’t think he would have become jealous if Peter and John laid hands on the people and said, “Now you have the Holy Spirit,” and then those people went away and there was no physical manifestation, there was nothing for Simon to see. I believe he must have seen some outward effect. I think speaking in tongues is the most likely, since this passage parallels our other passages that explicitly name speaking in tongues. So, that’s my interpretive guess. The outward manifestation of the Spirit that made Simon so jealous was the miracle of speaking in tongues. I’ll just continue with that assumption.

That’s two stories. Then at Cornelius’ home in Acts 10, the Holy Spirit falls on Gentile believers before Peter can even challenge them to believe. They speak in tongues and are baptized afterwards.

Finally, in Acts 19, a group of 12 who had received the baptism of John but lacked knowledge about Jesus believe what Paul is saying and receive baptism in the name of Jesus. Paul then lays hands on them, the Spirit comes on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy.

I’ll leave it to you to go back and consider each passage and make your own chart of similarities and differences. I am going to focus in on the separation between belief and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we see in the Pentecost example and the Samaritan example.

We can apply what we observe in these four passages to two questions. Is speaking in tongues the normal Christian experience that gives witness to the inner baptism of the Holy Spirit? And is the baptism of the Holy Spirit something distinct from the new birth that occurs when a person places their faith in Jesus, such that it is, at times, a second experience that comes after forgiveness of sins?

On the one hand, we see speaking in tongues functioning as proof of Spirit baptism in the Cornelius example. That’s the conclusion Peter draws. And we have the Pentecost and Samaria examples showing us that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit might occur many days after the moment of saving faith.

On the other hand, we might wonder why the gift of tongues is mentioned only in these four examples in the whole of the book of Acts. Is there something special about these cases? The Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized without any mention of tongues. Paul regains his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit without mention of immediately speaking in tongues. We do not get a mention of tongues at Antioch when the Gospel goes there, or at any of the churches Paul plants. We know Paul practiced the gift of speaking in tongues. He’ll tell us that in the letter to the Corinthians. And we know members of the Corinthian church spoke in tongues. Should we draw any conclusion from the silence of Acts in all of these other cases, except for the four examples?

4. What do the New Testament Epistles say?

We have gone as far as we can with Acts. We have made our observations and there are still some questions. Our next step is to expand our context out to include the New Testament epistles. In Acts, we are dealing with narrative, which often describes events without giving explanation. And some of those events are unique or transitional. The letters to the churches provide us with a source of direct teaching and explanation for the growing body of Christ.

Our major source for teaching about the gift of tongues is in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In fact, this is our only source for teaching about the gift of tongues. The gift is not clearly mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. It often depends on your theology whether you will see tongues somewhere else in an indirect case, such as the groaning of the Spirit in Romans 8:26. But we are not told that that’s an instance of speaking in tongues. The only direct discussion teaching about tongues is 1 Corinthians 12-14. So if you are interested in studying the gift of tongues, that’s really the place you should go.

Part of that study should include Paul's two other spiritual gift passages in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, even though they don't mention the gift of tongues. In all three places (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians), Paul uses the body analogy to give us an image for our individuality through a unique distribution of gifts among members, that's what makes us different; our personality, our gifts; and we also see our unity through spiritual inclusion in Jesus Christ into one body. One body, unity. Many members, diversity.

Speaking about the gift of the Spirit, Paul also highlights love in all three places (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians) as critical to the use of spiritual gifts and to maturity of the body. For Paul, the fruit of the Spirit, beginning with love, is more important than the gifts of the Spirit. Jesus did not say, "They will know you by the gifts of the Spirit." He did say, "they will know you by your love (John 13:34)." The gifts are given as a way for us to love one another in the power of the Spirit as we exercise the different roles and gifts of teaching, and serving, and showing mercy, and leading. Unfortunately, in Corinth the gifts have become a major source of division.

Again, Paul's reminder that we are born into one body is especially important for our current discussion. I will read a short piece of his teaching to the Corinthians. This is from 1 Corinthians 12:7-13.

⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. ¹² For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Wow! You really get oneness here. There is one Spirit, one Spirit, one Spirit. So, many gifts, but one Spirit and one body. Paul's point about diversity indicates that the gift of tongues is not a gift given to all believers as proof of the Spirit's filling. Tongues were a sign of the Spirit's presence in the four examples provided in Acts, but it would be inconsistent with Paul's teaching here to assume from Acts that all believers are intended to experience one gift in particular. To one is given one gift and to another is given another gift. The gift of tongues is part of this list. The Spirit distributes to each one individually as He wills, according to His purpose. It was His purpose to distribute the gift of tongues in Acts in these four places, but here he's saying that's not the norm. The norm is that there's a variety of gifts that spread over to the individual members of the body. This direct teaching is helping us think about the examples we have back in Acts.

Paul goes on to teach, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." The baptism of the Holy Spirit is what includes a person into the body of Christ. This is the new birth experience. Paul makes a similar argument in Ephesians 2 where he speaks of the mutual inclusion of Jew and Gentile into one body saying, "for through [Jesus] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18)." Paul makes the point even stronger in Romans 8:9.

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.

Paul's language equates baptism of the Spirit with the new birth. Christians are born again into one body. If you are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, you belong to Christ. If the Spirit is not in you, then you do not belong to Christ. To give one more example of Paul's language here is Titus 3:5-6.

⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...

We see here Paul connecting together our forgiveness in Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit, the washing of the Spirit. In his mercy, the Father washes us clean by pouring the Spirit out on us through Jesus. That's the new birth experience. That's where we get forgiveness, it's through the washing, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There are not two critical experiences. There is one critical experience. To be born again in Jesus and to be baptized by the Spirit are two different ways to describe the same spiritual experience that occurs when a person truly believes in Jesus.

An interesting exercise is to read through the New Testament letters looking for exhortation to a second experience of the Spirit. You believe. Now you need to be baptized in the Spirit. Or, now you need a second cure. You need to go further. If baptism of the Spirit is a second experience that unlocks Christian power, we would expect the teachers of the New Testament to lead us in that direction, to point us to that experience. What we see instead is a constant calling back to our experience of new birth in Jesus Christ. These are our two New Covenant Rituals. Baptism celebrates that internal baptism of the Holy Spirit that happens when you first believe. And the Lord's Supper is a constant looking back to the cross. Or we can apply it individually: a constantly looking back in ourselves to that moment that we unite in Christ in His death and in His resurrection. The New Testament writers call people back to their relationship with Jesus, not forward to some other experience. We go deeper into Christ. We do not graduate beyond Christ. We are taught to accept what is already true of us in Jesus that we may not be applying. But the Spirit already indwells us. The challenge for us is not to unlock some new experience but to learn to live by faith, to abide in Christ, to be filled with His Spirit who already indwells us, to walk with God. This is the language, the call of the New Testament authors.

5. How do we apply the New Testament context to the narrative passages in Acts?

Coming back to Acts, if the New Testament letters connect our new birth in Jesus together with the baptism of the Holy Spirit as one experience, then how do we understand the separation between faith in Jesus and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit that we see in Acts at Pentecost and in Samaria?

Acts records a moment in salvation history that is both transitional and unique. We are transitioning from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, and we are witnessing the unique birth of the Church.

In this transitional period, God the Father has given it into the Son's hands to pour out the Spirit after the Son ascends into Heaven, rather than immediately upon His resurrection from the dead. So, John running into the tomb, believing in Jesus could not receive the Holy Spirit because in God's timing, God is going to say, "Wait." Those who immediately believed in the resurrection of Jesus would have to wait until Pentecost to receive the Holy Spirit. They are not required to go and wait in Jerusalem to establish the norm for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. You know that everybody has to wait fifty days after. They are required to go and wait because the beginning of the Church has not yet happened. God's choice was to pour out the Spirit at Pentecost. The feast at which the Jews celebrated the birth of Israel would also be the feast at which the Church is born. And it would be a feast where we have Jews and God-fearers gathered from all over the known world. That's why the Apostles and other initial believers experienced delay between when they believed and when they received the Holy Spirit.

Recognizing the period of transition from the Old Covenant reality to New Covenant reality explains the separation between belief and outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, but why is there also a time delay in Samaria?

We understand that delay by recognizing the pattern in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurs in the first half of Acts. The Spirit falls on Jews at Pentecost, and they speak in tongues; the Spirit falls on Samaritans in Samaria and they speak in tongues; the Spirit falls on Gentiles in Caesarea and they speak in tongues. The response of Peter and the other Jewish leaders is one of surprise. They are not expecting this. "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to faith*." And this may be why we don't see the importance of the pattern, because it's kind of obvious to us: the Gospel is for everybody. It was not obvious in the beginning. It wasn't obvious that it was for everybody without everybody becoming Jewish, or adopting Old Covenant Law. This is something new that is being worked out.

Jesus prophesied in Acts 1:8 both the geographic and ethnic spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the remotest parts of the Earth. That spread is pictured at Pentecost, you know, in one moment when we have Jews and God-fearers from so many different nations believing in Jesus. The miracle of tongues at Pentecost symbolically overturns the confusion created at the Tower of Babel. There were many languages nobody understood. Here, through the many languages the people understand the Gospel. And they understand in their heart language. They really understand it.

So, Jesus has told His disciples to participate in the ethnic expansion of the Gospel. But in the newness of the New Covenant, the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem are still struggling in defining the people of God as especially Jewish. That's the thing about Pentecost. It does look like everybody from all around, everywhere, can come and place their faith in Jesus. But all of these people look very Jewish. And even those who weren't Jewish were acting Jewish. They were here at Pentecost. So, the leaders of the Jerusalem church needed to see clearly that the door has been opened to all peoples without requiring those peoples to adopt Old Covenant Jewish culture. In Samaria, God holds off the coming of the Spirit until after Peter and John arrive, and in so doing creates a two-way link. The Samaritans now connect the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Apostolic teaching of Peter and John, which is important because we don't yet have a New Testament. So, the new movement is going to depend on the teaching of the Apostles as authoritative. So that's one way the link goes. But there's also a link back. Now the Apostles connect the reception of the promised Spirit with these half-Jewish Samaritans. Like, oh! Okay. These really are our brothers! They also have the Spirit.

The same two-way link occurs in Caesarea. Cornelius and his household connect true faith with the Apostolic preaching of Peter, and Peter connects the reception of the Spirit among the Gentiles with simple faith in Jesus. In fact, that's really the emphasis of this story: it is getting Peter to see that the Gentiles are included by faith, not by becoming Jewish. So, this is how I interpret these events. God designed a three-part outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile as a way to affirm the transition to the New Covenant definition of the people of God as all who place their faith in Jesus, regardless of their ethnicity or culture.

John will later write about his vision of this reality in Revelation 7:9-10.

⁹ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; ¹⁰ and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Everyone is included. And the Apostles needed to know that. After this unique period of this transitional outpouring of the Holy Spirit to Jew, then Samaritan, then Gentile, after this we see through the New Covenant record the consistent identification of the new birth experience with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We are not going to see it separated anymore. We only clearly see the separation at Pentecost and in Samaria. Apart from this unique beginning, New Covenant believers are indwelt immediately by the Spirit when they place their faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

To wrap-up this lesson, here are three quick things, three related issues.

1. Is tongues evidence of the new birth?

In our four Acts examples, yes, I do believe that tongues is evidence of new birth at Pentecost, and in Samaria, and at Cornelius' house, and later with those twelve at Ephesus. This evidence was provided for specific purposes in the transitional period. We do not see tongues relied upon as evidence of the new birth in all of Acts or in any of the New Testament epistles. We see it in these four moments. But it is not the norm for the New Covenant people of God. Tongues is a gift that's given to some, not to all. It is not the normal evidence of being filled or baptized with the Holy Spirit.

2. Should we expect a second experience of the Spirit that comes after we believe in Jesus?

Should we expect the second experience of the Spirit? Well, in one sense, yes, and in another sense, no. I would say you should expect a second experience, and a third experience, and a fourth experience; you should expect to have a variety of experiences in your walk with Christ. Some of those experiences might be uniquely liberating or life-changing. But there is only one critical moment.

Now, I would not define any of those subsequent experiences as the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the internal reality that we celebrate with the outward ritual of baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is synonymous with new birth, with the indwelling of the Spirit, with being united in Christ. These are all various expressions for the same spiritual reality that follows the moment a person truly believes in Jesus. Sometimes that moment is expressed outwardly, maybe with great joy or with some kind of sign. Sometimes it's received with an inner kind of piece. And sometimes there is no sign at all. There's a faith moment. A new birth without any kind of confirmation from our emotions or outward manifestations.

To attach the language of the baptism of the Holy Spirit to an experience that occurs after someone places their faith in Christ is to make a theological mistake with the language of the New Testament. That is not to say that the experience the person experienced is invalid or a mistake. It could be a very powerful experience. When we are born again, we are baptized by the Spirit. And yet, growth in Christ can look very different for different believers for different reasons. To give just an example, it is possible for someone to come to faith in Jesus and have no mentorship in how to live the Christian life and so, they continue to strive to live the Christian life in the power of their own flesh. If that person later comes to an understanding of how to abide in Christ by faith, of how to rely on His power instead of their own, that person might experience a powerful sense of liberation in their Christian walk. Seeking to define that experience, they might be taught, or they might notice themselves this language of the baptism of the Spirit in the Bible, and they will say, "This is the moment when I was baptized in the Spirit, not back then." My disagreement would not be with the experience of that believer. I can affirm that they have come to a powerful crossroad in their faith. My disagreement is with using the Biblical term, "baptism of the Spirit," to describe what has just happened. That individual was baptized by the Spirit into Christ when they first believed. And we could argue whether they really just didn't believe, or now it's their first moment of belief. But that's so hard to know. It is possible to believe and then later have a very powerful experience. And we don't need to then deny the original belief, even if it's not so clear. So, this individual will assume that they truly did believe before, but that was when they were baptized by the Spirit. And now they have, for the first time, begun to yield to the filling of the Spirit to work through them. And it is a new and unique experience in their walk with Christ.

Even if I cannot come to agreement about the language with some of my brothers and sisters in Christ who use the term, "baptism of the Spirit," differently than I do, what I would really like to see agreement on is the idea that Christian maturity is not a search for some new spiritual experience. It's not something you learn through your visions, or your dreams, or I have to have this whatever I'm calling, "the baptism of the Spirit," so that I can attain maturity. Christian maturity involves learning to live in light of our new birth in Christ. It's about going deeper into our relationship with Jesus as we walk with Him and obey Him. It involves continually look back to the moment of our new birth and preaching to ourselves the truth of the Gospel as we learn to live in those truths. We don't have to go up in Heaven to grab some new truth, or down at the Earth to grab something else. It's right there before you. It's the words you spoke when you placed your faith in Jesus. You didn't understand everything you were saying and of course you don't know how to live in it. But it's learning to live in the truths of the Gospel that'll lead us, over time, to walking faithfully, loving faithfully in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what brings about spiritual maturity. An example of what I'm talking about: to preach the truths of the Gospel, you can't do much better than the four phrases of Galatians 2:20. Preaching this to yourself each day and learning to live in it.

I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;
and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

These truths keep us very Christ-centered. And we don't want to forget the Holy Spirit so we can jump ahead to Galatians 5 and remember the fruit of the Spirit. In 5:25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." So, living by faith in the Son of God is walking in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and it's seeing the fruit of the Spirit developed in us.

3. Where do we see the Holy Spirit at work in the book of Acts?

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit manifested in the gift of tongues that we see in Acts should catch our attention and should raise questions. But the Spirit is not present only in these four stories. So, we don't want to let the power of these stories eclipse the steady work, the steady guidance and power provided by the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people through the whole narrative.

Jesus said, "wait for the Spirit and then witness." The Spirit of God empowers and directs the people of God as they give witness to new life in Jesus, both through their words, and through the reality of the new life in them, we give witness. The Spirit's presence, His guidance, His power is a major theme in the book of Acts, and we're going to keep coming back to it as we go through this series.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 11:1-18. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What connection is there between speaking in tongues and new birth in Christ? When we consider important theological questions like this that arise out of a passage of historical narrative we need a method to help us determine what is unique to the specific context and what applies more broadly. Studying the issue in an increasing scope of context is a method that helps us interpret the issue outside the narrow context of the passage. We start with the immediate context.
Re-read 10:44-48. What does the text say?
3. Now consider the immediate context. What information is added in Acts 11:1-18 that helps you understand the phenomena in 10:44-48? How do Peter and the apostles speak about the people in Cornelius' household speaking in tongues and the Holy Spirit? What do they take away from the phenomena?
4. Now consider the broader context of the book of Acts. Read over the experience of Pentecost in Acts 2, the experience of the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the experience of the men Paul met in Acts 19. What stands out to you as similar in these passages and different? What else stands out as important?
5. The next step is to consider the rest of the New Testament. The most important passage is 1 Corinthians 12-14. What information in that passage adds to your understanding?
6. How about Romans 8 and Ephesians 5:18?
7. Why do you think there is not much more emphasis in the New Testament on speaking in tongues or being filled with the Spirit?
8. Consider the three concluding points in this lesson. Do these points sound correct to you? What would you add or change? What Scripture would you use to support your interpretation?