

Chapter Seven

The Surprises of the Holy Spirit: 2

The Surprises of the First Century

Purpose: The purpose of this talk is to move from expansion of minds as to the Lord's work in the 20th century to place it in the context of God's whole purpose in Christ. In this way it prepares the ground for the teaching on God's One Plan in Chapter Eight. It also gives an introduction to the Jewish character of Christian origins. The reflection at the end then brings in the eschatological completion at the end of history from another angle.

Presentation: When this teaching is given as a separate talk following the session on the Surprises of the 20th century, there is more opportunity to describe the background situation of each surprise. This is often important because most hearers will have little idea of who the Samaritans are and have never heard before of "God-fearers" like Cornelius. Again with the reflection at the end, it is best to ask the audience what they are seeing as the similarities and the differences between the 20th century and the 1st century, and then only afterwards to add in any missing dimensions. It is important that the difference between the outward from Jerusalem movement in the first century and the return movement of the 20th century is made clear and its significance indicated.

My Question

Through my study of the history of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, I had reflected much on its meaning and significance for the whole Church. I saw that it was the first time a revival-renewal movement of the Holy Spirit had penetrated the Catholic Church as well as the Protestant world. That had to indicate a high level of significance. But when I first saw this series of surprises of the Holy Spirit, I asked myself the question: Has any pattern like this ever happened before in the history of the Church? As I went back through the centuries, I could find no parallel. But then it dawned on me that there was a parallel: it happened in the first century, right at the beginning of the Church. This teaching presents what I saw.

The Four Surprises at the Beginning

First Surprise: The first surprise was the day of Pentecost itself described in Acts chapter 2. Although Jesus had told the disciples, "stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24: 49), they would have had little idea in advance what this would mean. The account of how this promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost itself points to an element of surprise: "And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." (Acts 2: 2). This event was clearly a huge surprise to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the feast. "And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language." (Acts 2: 6). This astonishment is again noted a few verses later: "And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others mocking said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" (Acts 2: 12 - 13). This kind of accusation will be made in later revivals and was said of Azusa Street.

But what happened was not just external phenomena: there was an outpouring of the Spirit that transformed the recipients. So in explanation Peter cites the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2: 17), and the prophecy continues by referring to prophecy, dreams and visions. In

Acts 11, Peter interprets this event as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jesus in Acts 1: 5: “John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 11: 16).

We should notice that all those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost were Jews. All the eleven disciples and those who waited with them in the upper room (see Acts 1: 13) were Jews. So were all the onlookers: “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.” (Acts 2: 5). Later those visiting Jerusalem for the feast who were present mentions “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes” (Acts 2: 10). But proselytes were Jews, convert Jews, that is Gentiles who had officially converted to Judaism. We come later to those Gentiles who identified with Judaism but who did not go through a rite of conversion. So the first surprise is **the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Jews.**

Second Surprise: The second surprise is **the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans.** This event is described in Acts chapter 8. Samaria is impacted through the preaching of Philip who “went down to a city of Samaria, and proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8: 5). News of the impact of Philip’s visit reached the apostles in Jerusalem: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John.” (Acts 8: 12). Peter and John prayed for these Samaritans “and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8: 17). It seems that the same transformation with visible evidence occurred in Samaria as on the day of Pentecost, because the magician Simon sees the impact of this imposition of hands by the two apostles. Simon does not ask to receive the Holy Spirit but for the same power as the apostles manifest: “Give me also this power, that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 8: 19).

This coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans was a surprise to them and to the onlookers. To understand the element of surprise we need to understand how the Jewish people perceived the Samaritans. The land of the Samaritans had been part of the northern kingdom known as Israel that became separated from the southern kingdom called Judah at the time of the rebellion led by Jeroboam (see 1 Kings 11). But because of the idolatry and disobedience of Israel and its kings, the Israelites of the ten tribes were taken into exile. “And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel” (2 Kings 17: 24). We read soon after how the king of Assyria sent them one of the priests taken into exile to “teach them the law of the god of the land” (2 Kings 17: 27). So the Jews saw the religion of the Samaritans as a hybrid faith religion that mixed elements of the law of Moses with pagan practices. During the time of Nehemiah and Ezra we read how strongly they fought against this corruption of Mosaic faith. In Jesus’ day, we are told that: “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4: 9). Nonetheless, the Samaritans retained a copy of the Torah of Moses, which they honoured, and they practised circumcision. Maybe telling the story of the Samaritans comes before the account of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (later in Acts 8) is because the Samaritans were circumcised and the Ethiopian was not. But the surprise especially lay in the fact that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Jews, and were not being received and then treated as “second-class” believers.

Third Surprise. The third surprise was **the first coming of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles.** The account of this further spread of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is found in Acts, chapter 10. Cornelius is described as “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.” (Acts 10: 2). This is not the picture of a full-blooded pagan! He was a Gentile who believed in the God

of Israel, and worshipped the God of Israel in the synagogue and in his home. He has imbibed many values of Judaism, including the importance of alms-giving. These people were known as “God-fearers”.¹ But he has not taken the step of conversion to Judaism to become a “proselyte” (see Acts 2: 10), which would have required circumcision. So he remains a Gentile, outside the covenant of the Lord with Israel. So this episode details the Spirit being poured out beyond the covenant people, but on those who have to some degree identified with the faith of Israel. The words of the angel to Cornelius, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10: 4) indicate how the life of Cornelius was already being shaped by the synagogue.

Note how the story is full of mention of supernatural intervention and guidance: the whole event and its preparation is orchestrated by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 10: 3 - 6, 10 - 16, 19 - 20, 22). Peter speaks to Cornelius and his household about “the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea” (Acts 10: 37) and about how “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10: 38). This event in Caesarea had the suddenness of the day of Pentecost. Like Pentecost, there was no laying on of hands. “While Peter was still saying this [message], the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.” (Acts 10: 44).

The surprise element is immediately noted in the biblical text: “And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles* [my italics]. For they heard them speaking on tongues and extolling God.” (Acts 10: 45 - 46). This surprise is spelled out further when in Acts 11 Peter is called upon to justify himself to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who are described as “the circumcision party” (Acts 11: 2). After giving a summary of his experience at Joppa and in Caesarea, Peter tells them, “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us [Jews] at the beginning.” (Acts 11: 15). As with the twentieth century surprises, the surprise element especially lies in the fact that God pours out his Spirit on people for which those who have already received think to be impossible. In a little book describing his amazement at his first experience of attending a large Catholic charismatic conference, Pentecostal Vinson Synan shared how he was convicted by God from the account in Acts 11: 17 where Peter says, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11: 17).

Fourth Surprise. The fourth surprise is **the gift of the Holy Spirit to complete pagans** who had had no prior contact with the synagogue or faith in the God of Israel. This follows immediately after the description of the “Gentile Pentecost” at Caesarea. “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 11: 19 - 20). The account here does not refer explicitly to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Antioch. It simply says: “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11: 21). Then when Barnabas arrives from Jerusalem, the text states: “When he came and saw the grace of God he was glad” (Acts 11: 23). But the description of Antioch at the beginning of Acts 13 indicates the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in the church there, where there were “prophets and teachers” (Acts 13: 1) and the Holy Spirit speaks to them as thy worship the Lord (see Acts 13: 2).

¹ We find that when Paul visits the synagogue on his mission trips, the accounts indicate that he addressed both Jews and God-fearers (see Acts 13: 26). Converted God-fearers played an important role in the spread of the Church.

Reflection

When we look at this series of surprises we can see that there is a moving out from the Jewish people to the nations by a series of steps. It is describing the beginning of the fulfilment of the words of Jesus just before his ascension: “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1: 8). It is a realization of the calling of Israel to bring blessing to the nations, and the word in Isaiah that “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Is. 2: 3). It is a fulfilment of the post-resurrection command of Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28: 19). The sequence proceeds from the all-Jewish audience in Jerusalem, first to the people of Samaria, then to Gentile friends of the Jews, and finally to the Gentiles or pagans described in the New Testament as “far off”: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2: 13). Just as in the twentieth century series of surprises, in this series too after the surprise of the surpassing character of the gift itself comes the surprise that God pours out his Spirit and life on people we, the insiders, thought were “outside” and not able to receive this gift.

But there are significant differences between the two sets of surprises. The most striking is that the first century series start in Jerusalem and move out towards “the end of the earth” while the second series in our day begins at “the end of the earth” and moves back towards Jerusalem. The first century describes the outward movement that of scattering and dispersal. The second movement describes the return movement of ingathering. In other words, besides the moving back through history noted at the end of Chapter Six, there is a geographical return towards the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

This pattern of dispersal and of ingathering suggests that as the first series belongs to the origins of the church the second series belongs to the build-up towards the completion at the second coming of the Lord Jesus in glory. Although the first series described here happened within about twenty years, the second series covers more than half a century. I am not drawing the conclusion that the second coming of the Lord is imminent in our human understanding of imminence, like this year or within five years, or at most ten. But it does suggest that the 20th century outpouring of the Holy Spirit belongs to the period of “count-down”, of preparation for the climax and the completion.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is new for you as you look at the first century sequence of surprises?
2. What significance do you see in this pattern of going out and coming in, of dispersal and of ingathering?
3. What are the implications of this teaching for evangelization?