

ISSUES AND ANSWERS

What was meant by the Lord's words in John 20:22, "Receive the Holy Spirit"?

Why did the Lord say to His disciples "Receive the Holy Spirit" prior to Pentecost and what does it mean?

One of the most mysterious statements of our Lord came on the first evening following His resurrection. Meeting privately with His disciples, He commissioned them for the task of world evangelization, (v. 21). Having breathed on them, He stated, "*Receive the Holy Spirit*" after which He conferred upon them divine authority to declare either the forgiveness or retention of sins, based upon reception or rejection of Him, (v. 23).

What makes this statement so intriguing is that the Lord had previously said that He would send the Holy Spirit - the Promise of the Father - at a future time (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4). They were instructed to tarry in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Spirit which would mark the beginning of the Church. Once the Holy Spirit descended, believers would be baptized into one Body and endowed with Power from on High so that the newly formed Church could begin the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. But if the Holy Spirit was to come at Pentecost as promised, why then did the Lord breathe upon His disciples and command them to receive the Holy Spirit when the Spirit was promised to come at a later time?

Two main reasons are typically given to provide an answer to this interesting question. One possible reason is that the disciples were simply being given a symbolic announcement, anticipating when that event would occur. As such, it did not represent the official coming of the Spirit as promised but was simply a foreshadowing and declaration from the Savior Himself of what was to occur at the conclusion of His forty-day post-resurrection ministry (Acts 1:3). However, the Lord did say to them "*Receive the Spirit*" so it would hardly seem that it was just symbolic wording.

Another possible reason is that the disciples were being given a limited portion of knowledge and power at that time, until the Spirit would come in His fullness. His breathing upon them calls to mind when God breathed into Adam the breath of life – infusing life and power into him. Similarly, they too would have power, if needed though nothing is recorded in Scripture of the use of that knowledge or power just prior to Pentecost. This reason makes sense since the Spirit came upon others in the OT, such as Bezalel for the building of the Tabernacle (Ex. 31:3) and to Samson several times in his life. It was a typical aspect of ministry of the Spirit in OT days, though temporary in nature. Though stronger, this reason also lacks.

However, a more complete answer it seems is that the Lord was indeed preparing His disciples for the coming of the Spirit in all His fullness at Pentecost. It was in anticipation of that great event as promised. Yes, it would provide them with limited knowledge and power they would possibly need pre-Pentecost since that has always been one of the ministries of the Spirit. But the main difference however is that the coming of the Spirit would now be in a new capacity in which the disciples would experience an even greater power and ability than ever before (Acts 1:8). In some ways, it would mark the final way in which the Spirit would be received – temporarily and in a limited manner, to establish a sharp contrast of the work of the Spirit at that time, and what was to come at Pentecost. It would no longer require a special action of the Lord to effectuate, but instead it would demonstrate a new dimension of the Spirit's ministry, a permanent dimension in which He would never leave the believer (John 14:16; Ps. 51:11), after baptizing them into the Body of Christ, and making it possible to be filled by Spirit to do even greater things for Him. How encouraging to know that the present day ministry

of the Holy Spirit for believers is far greater and more powerful now than it was even during our Lord's earthly ministry.

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