

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FIRE

by Walton Weaver

Two times in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is connected with fire. The first time is Matthew 3:11 where John the Baptist tells the Jews,

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit AND FIRE (NKJV, emphasis added).

Then in Acts 2:2-4 we read that as the apostles were waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4),

suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, AS OF FIRE, and one set upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (NKJV, emphasis added).

Let's take a closer look at these two cases.

What Is The "Fire" In Matthew 3:11?

The reference to *baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire* (Matt. 3:11) has been an often discussed subject, but much disagreement has developed over the meaning of *and fire*, and exactly to whom the promise applies. The statement has been explained in the following ways.

1. Some have seen here a direct reference to the "fire" mentioned in Acts 2:3. One writer, for example, says, "this was literally fulfilled on the day of Pentecost," and another, in almost the same words, wrote, "this prophecy was literally fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in tongues of fire, Acts ii.3."
2. Others have said that "fire" in this passage is an image of the Spirit's purifying work upon the individual; that this is a figurative description of the Spirit's consuming a person's faults. To state it in a positive way, the terms "in fire" describe "the kindling, sanctifying fire of the Holy Ghost."
3. Another view is that the "fire" here is "an experience that accompanies the Holy Ghost when he comes into the life of a person"; or, it is "an experience that flashes through the human body and causes one to feel happy and full of joy," the "feeling that accompanies the Holy Ghost as he quickens the body he enters."

4. Finally, the most common view (and what seems to me to be the correct one), is that “fire” in Matthew 3:11 is the fire of the last judgment into which the wicked will be cast.

We will now make a few observations on these different views:

(1) Little needs to be said about the view that the promise of “baptism in fire” of Matthew 3:11 was literally fulfilled in the reference to “fire” in Acts 2:3. The careful reader must have observed that there is no reference to literal fire in Acts 2:3; so how could John the Baptist's statement about fire have been *literally* fulfilled on the day of Pentecost? The passage in Acts 2 says “cloven tongues *like* as fire” (KJV), or “divided tongues *as* fire” (NKJV).

McGarvey cites another reason why this interpretation is not possible. He says, “even if these tongues had been actual fire, their sitting on the heads of the apostles could not have been constituted a *baptism* of the apostles *in* fire.” It might also be remembered that Jesus did not add “with fire” to his promise of Holy Spirit baptism when he made it to his disciples (see Acts 1:4-5); nor do we have any mention of “tongues like fire” sitting on Cornelius and his household. Yet Peter recognized this event as also being a fulfillment of Jesus' promise (Acts 11:16).

(2) The second view makes the statement in Matthew 3:11 speak of only one baptism, a baptism in the Spirit. “In fire” is only added to give a description of the nature of the Spirit's work. Those who hold this view see only one class of people receiving this promise — i. e., they say the “you” who were to be baptized in Spirit and fire identifies only one class and one destiny. The fallacy of this position is that “you” in v. 11 takes into account both believing and unbelieving Jews. A mixed audience was being addressed when the promise was made. So “baptism in the Spirit” could refer to one class, the believing Jews, and “in fire” could refer to another class, the unbelieving and impenitent Jews. This approach takes into account the warning tone of the passage while the former view totally disregards it.

The context also favors the view that two classes are under consideration in v. 11. In v. 10 John has already divided the audience into two parties by his illustration of the fruitful and unfruitful trees. The one represents good men, the other evil men. In v. 12 the wheat and chaff are used for the same purpose. The pronoun “you” takes in both classes of men. John had already used the word “you” in an indefinite way when he said “I baptize you,” when in fact he had not baptized those in his audience.

Also the term “fire” is used in both vv. 10 and 12 to describe the fate of the wicked. In v. 12 it is called the “unquenchable fire.” We should not overlook the parallelism in the three sentences appearing in these three verses. “Fire” has the same meaning in verses 10, 11, and 12. For this reason, two baptisms are under consideration here, and two classes are to receive the baptisms. In other words, Spirit baptism and fire baptism are presented as

opposites in this passage. They cannot be opposites and “fire” merely describe the manner of the Spirit's work. For these reasons, it appears that “fire” does not describe the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, but the condemnation of the wicked. As McGarvey says, “It is clearly the wicked who are to be baptized in fire, and the fulfillment of the prediction will be realized when they are cast into the lake of fire. (Rev. xx.15.)”

(3) This third view hardly needs refutation. How would one go about trying to establish *from Scripture* that “fire” in Matthew 3:11 is the kind of “experience” and “feeling” the author quoted claims for it? No such attempt is made by him. All we have is *his* word on the matter; such a conclusion cannot be established from the word of God. This writer is simply reading his own “experience” back into this passage and into Acts 2:3 (he takes “fire” in both passages to refer to this kind of experience and feeling).

This same writer goes on to tell us that this experience “might be compared with a current of electricity that flashes through the body when a person contacts a wire that is charged lightly.” “The person so effected,” he says, “feels a tingling sensation. At times the body is jerked about quickly but with no painful feeling. It is rather a pleasant feeling that makes one happy or full of joy. At times only one member of the body is moved or jerked. Sometimes the hand, sometimes the foot or both feet in the holy dance.” How about that!! Look what we have been missing by not understanding that “fire” in these passages promises this kind of “experience” for all who will truly believe! But if this were true, why does not the Bible speak of such “experience” when it describes what happened when certain people were baptized in the Holy Spirit (i. e., in Acts 2 and 10)? Not one word is said about such an experience for either the apostles in Acts 2 or Cornelius and his household in Acts 10. They were baptized in the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues, but absolutely nothing is said about a baptism in “fire” or of such effects coming from Holy Spirit baptism as are described by this writer. Besides, we have shown in the above section that the tone of Matthew 3:11, as well as the context, shows that baptism in “fire” is the opposite of baptism in Spirit, and that baptism in fire is an act of condemnation and not something “felt by every one” baptized in Spirit.

(4) From what has already been said in our discussion of the first three views, it should be clear that this fourth view is the correct understanding of the baptism of fire mentioned in Matthew 3:11. The “fire” in this passage is the fire of the last judgment into which the wicked will be cast.

What Is The “Fire” In Acts 2:3?

We have already found it necessary to set aside the view that the “fire” in this passage is the same as the “fire” of Matthew 3:11. In the latter passage a literal fire is obviously meant, but here the language will not allow a literal fire. Luke unequivocally says, “cloven tongues *like* as of fire” (KJV). The word translated “cloven tongues” means tongues “distributing themselves,” or “parting asunder” (ASV; i. e., among the apostles); not a

tongue-like, forked appearance in each case, as the term “cloven tongues” would no doubt be understood. The change from the plural (tongues) to the singular (*it sat*) supports this conclusion. At first the fire-like appearance was “in a single body, and then suddenly parted in this direction and that; so that a portion of it rested on each of those present” (Hackett). McGarvey concludes that the change from the plural to the singular was used “to indicate that not all, but only one of the tongues sat upon each apostle, the term *distributed* having already suggested the contemplation of them singly.”

One can easily see the symbolism involved in the fire-like tongue appearance over the heads of each of the apostles. They spoke in tongues, or languages (Acts 2:8, 11), they had never learned. The miraculous knowledge of the language each was speaking was being revealed to each of them by the Holy Spirit. The tongue shaped (though not “cloven”), fire-like flames symbolized the presence of the Spirit making known to them the language each was speaking. They were in fact immersed in the Spirit as Matthew 3:11 promised, and the “tongues like as of fire” that “sat upon each of them” was symbolical of what was happening to them as they were now speaking languages they had not before known. Nor could they have known them even now without this special revelation of the Spirit.