

“We’ve Got Spirit, Yes we do:” Sanctification in the Acts Church

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Abstract:

The Greek word *pneuma* offers insight into the difference between salvation and sanctification as understood by the Acts church. Salvation is cleansing from sin, symbolized by water images including water baptism. Sanctification is filling with the Holy Spirit, symbolized by air images including a dove. The word *pneuma* means spirit, breath, air, or wind. This essay suggests that the Acts church would have conceived of sanctification as exchanging our human breath, for the Holy Breath of God. Salvation changes us from the outside in, and sanctification changes us from the inside out.

First let's look at the life of Peter. He was strong willed, opinionated, and impulsive. His words and reactions reflected that, even after being saved by Jesus along the sea of Galilee. He cut off a guy's ear in the garden of Gethsemane, then turned around and denied he even knew Jesus. After Jesus died and rose again what did Peter do? Not much. He hid in an upper room in fear. He went fishing. But within minutes of being sanctified, he hit the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming, "God has made this same Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.... Repent and be baptized." (Acts 2:36,38) He was the same inside, but after Pentecost, what came out of him was touched by the Holy Spirit. Now he had new words, a new attitude. And he changed the world. So can you.

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

So next let's look at the day of Pentecost:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind [*pneuma*] came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*] and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit [*pneuma*] enabled them. (Acts 2:2-4)

For the Acts church, sanctification was the critical event that broke open the gospel and sent it to the far corners of the world. We are the church in the new millennium and we are connected to the Acts church by history and by the Holy Spirit, the instrument of our sanctification. But today we find it hard to explain this seminal event in church history. What is sanctification? What makes it different from salvation? I suggest looking at it in a very old way, so old it may seem new.

THE GREEK WORD FOR SPIRIT

A new old perspective on sanctification starts with our interpretation of the Greek word *pneuma* [πνεῦμα]. In the King James version, it was translated as “ghost.” Today we usually translate this word as “spirit.” But it was also used by the writers of the Bible to mean breath, air, or wind, as we can see in Acts 2:2. If we examine this carefully, some new ways of looking at things appear.

New Testament writers used the word *pneuma* to describe the motivating force inside a human. This motivating force shows up in modern American English as school spirit or team spirit. We see it at basketball games in the chant “We’ve got spirit, yes we do. We’ve got spirit how ‘bout you!?” At which point the opposing team takes up the chant, returning it louder, and so it goes until one side runs out of spirit. Their motivating spirit is spent.

Unfortunately, the English word “spirit” can also be used to “ghost” as well. A ghost is often considered a disembodied spirit. It contains the intellect and identity of a person, but without the physical body. The ghost is what is left over after the body dies, for example: Marley’s ghost from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. So we translated Holy *Pneuma* as “Ghost” for many years. This is not necessarily wrong, but it can give the modern reader a very different impression than a Greek reader from the first century.

THE HOLY BREATH OF GOD

What if we were to translate *pneuma* as “breath”, rather than “spirit”?

Holy Spirit [*hagios pneumatos*] becomes the Holy Breath of God. God exhaled and his breath is so powerful that it has its own consciousness and identity.

What did it mean to the Acts Church to be filled with the Holy Spirit? For this we must read Hippocrates and other Greek physicians to see how they conceived of our biological process

at the time the New Testament was written. Greek doctors taught we were hollow. They thought we were inflatable, like tires. We fill our lungs with air [*pneuma*] as breath [*pneuma*] like a bellows, and the lungs pump the arteries with air pressure. This air pressure allows us to live, move, stand upright. When a baby was born they saw it take its first breath (inhale), and when people died, the doctors observed them breathe their last (exhale). If we look at some medical texts from the period, we see that Greek doctors thought humans were hollow and filled with air [*pneuma*].

So when the writers of the New Testament used the word spirit [*pneuma*] they had in mind something real and physical but unseen, like breath, air or wind. So too, the readers of the Gospels and Epistles would read the word and imagine the Holy Spirit as physical, but unseen. To them, sanctification meant being filled with the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*] in a real, physical, and literal way.

Today we understand lungs and breathing better, we are not like tires. Blood flows through our arteries, not air. But the oxygen taken in through our breath [*pneuma*] that fills our lungs is taken by the blood and connected to every cell in our body through the capillary system. It is the oxygen in the air we breathe that allows us to live, move and stand upright. We can survive weeks without food, days without water, but only minutes without air [*pneuma*]. The Greeks were not really that far off from the truth.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT ACTS 2

If we were to go back and re-read Acts 2:2-4 with this interpretation, we see some very vivid connections emerge from that day at Pentecost.

2 “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent *pneuma* (wind) came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” --Of course we see the direct, physical impact

of wind on the world. This wind was observable by others in the city (v6). His holy breath left his holy lungs with such power, it slammed into the city. It made an audible sound when it hit the building. It was real, but unseen.

3 “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.” -- This makes perfect sense when we understand that the Holy Breath of God passed through his mouth and over his tongue to get to this room.

4 “All of them were filled with the *pneumatōs hagiou* (Holy Breath of God) and began to speak in other tongues as the *pneuma* (breath) enabled them.” -- The unholy air was driven out of the room by the force of God’s Breath, the disciples breathed in the Holy Breath of God and it filled their lungs. Here the connection to the Holy Spirit and tongues becomes apparent. Since they were no longer breathing their own breath, but now breathing the Breath of God, as it passed over their tongues, it affected their words. Their words could be understood by anyone in the city of Jerusalem, no matter what language they spoke. Speaking in tongues was essential to the communication of the gospel.

The New Testament writers conceived of being filled with the Holy Spirit literally. If we, today, think about being filled with the Holy Spirit, in a very literal sense, it would mean that we no longer breathe our own breath, our selfish, carnal, pagan breath; but we breathe the Holy Breath of God. Just like the oxygen we breathe, he would penetrate every cell in our body, giving us life, strength and movement. The breath [*pneuma*] in our lungs is no longer our own, but now wholly God’s. When we are sanctified we no longer breathe plain, selfish, individual air, we breathe in the Holy Breath of God. He penetrates every bit of us, totally and completely. As in the old sense of Holy *Ghost*, the Holy *Breath* of God would still be a motivating force in our lives. That interpretation would not change.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SALVATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Now the difference between salvation and sanctification as it was understood by the Acts church is clear: *Salvation* is saving us from the wages of sin, when we accept, (believe in) the death of Jesus on the cross. The wages of sin is death. We are condemned to death because of sin, both ours and Adam's. The Old Testament law required a sacrifice, a death, for our sin. But God sent his son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, to pay those wages on the cross; to be that sacrifice. *We are reconciled with him*. This is symbolized in scripture with water. Being born again is with water. We are washed in the blood of the lamb. Baptism is a visual and physical representation of salvation and the outward cleansing from all sin.

Sanctification is when we stop breathing in our old human breath, and we begin to breathe in the Holy Breath of God. His breath is now our breath. *We are united with him*. When we look at scripture we see air imagery associated with the Holy Spirit. It descended on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a Dove. Jesus "breathed" on his disciples after the resurrection before the ascension. "And with that he **breathed on them** and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John 20:22.

APPLICATION TO OUR LIVES

When we were saved, we went to the altar and asked the Lord to forgive our sins. We laid claim to the promise of redemption and reconciliation. We were cleansed from our sins. We were changed from the outside, in. But we were still breathing our old human breath. When we become sanctified, we are thoroughly changed from the inside, out. We are now breathing the breath of God. His air fills our lungs. He gives us the strength and power to speak his words boldly. All we have to do is ask him. It's not difficult. It's not magical. It's an act of will.

What does this mean? We are still the same people. We still have the same lungs, the same throat, lips, teeth and tongue. We have the same emotions, the same history, the same family. The world around us is still the same. People are still good and bad. What made us angry before will still make us angry. What made us happy still makes us happy. Sanctification doesn't change the outside. But what comes out of us from the inside changes: our words, our attitudes, our reactions.