

What is the Gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38?

What is the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38? Do we receive it today?

We read in Acts 2:38 “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

First, I do not know of any topic of discussion that has been more heavily discussed in the church today than the meaning of this last part of Acts 2:38. Some additional questions that we could ask about the gift of the Holy Spirit are as follows. Is this something that the Holy Spirit gives? Is this gift the Holy Spirit Himself? Was this promise made to all believers universally? Was this made only to those present at Pentecost? These are just some of the questions asked in regard to this short sentence.

Let’s look at the context. Jesus had ascended into heaven a few days earlier. He told His disciples to remain in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). He said that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them (Acts 1:8). In Acts 2:1 we see that the apostles were gathered in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in other tongues. Now, many were standing by from many different nations who witnessed these miraculous events that the apostles performed. Some said that the apostles were drunk. However, Peter quotes prophecy that states that the Spirit would be “poured out” on all men (Acts 2:17) and that this was the fulfillment of that prophecy. In verse 33, Peter says that the promise of the Holy Ghost is what they now saw and heard. He goes on to tell them about the resurrection of Christ and their guilt for putting Jesus to death. Then, on account of the great guilt they have, the crowd interrupts Peter’s sermon when they ask what they need to do to be saved. Peter’s answer is for them to “repent and be baptized.” He then states, “AND, ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In other words just as the prophets had promised that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all men; just as they see the promise of the Holy Ghost being fulfilled in their eyes; they too could receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Ghost here is the miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason to conclude otherwise from the context. All of the references to the Holy Spirit prior to this were referring to the miraculous nature of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason to conclude in this context that the “gift” of the Holy Spirit is anything less than the miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Now let's turn to Acts 10:44-48. Here we find Peter speaking to Cornelius things that he needs to do to be saved. However, there was some doubt in the minds of the Jews present whether Gentiles could be saved. To affirm this fact, the Holy Spirit is sent upon Cornelius and all those in his house and they spake with tongues. This phrase that describes this miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit is found in verse 45. We read, "And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost." The same phrase, "the gift of the Holy Ghost" is used in this passage. It is clear that in this passage it is referring to the miraculous. So "the gift of the Holy Ghost" in Acts 10 is the miraculous manifestation of the Spirit.

In Acts 11, Peter describes what happened to the house of Cornelius in the presence of other Jews. He states in verses 15-17, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" Peter says a few things that indicate that the gift of the Holy Spirit that Cornelius and his house received was the same gift of the Holy Spirit that occurred in Acts 2. First, he says that "the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us, at the beginning." The significance of the phrase, "at the beginning" refers back to Acts chapter 2 and the events that happened therein. Second, he says, "God gave them the like gift." He refers to the speaking in tongues as a "gift" like unto that which God gave "us." The "us" in this context refers not only to the apostles, but also to all the brethren in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1). When did the brethren in Jerusalem receive this "gift?" When they repented and were baptized. So the "gift of the Holy Spirit" in Acts 2:38 refers to the miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Do we receive the "gift of the Holy Spirit" of Acts 2:38 today? No. We read in 1 Corinthians 13 that miracles were things that were going to be done away with when that which was perfect comes. That which was perfect (the complete revealed word of God) came. Therefore, the miracles were done away with.

Finally, an additional question arises regarding Acts 2:38. How can one say that baptism continues to be "for the remission of sins" if the "gift of the Holy Ghost" is no longer given? The construction of the English sentence does not necessarily imply that if one receives remission of sins, that therefore one MUST receive the gift of the Holy Spirit as

well. We use this construction in our language as well sometimes where one thing is a lasting benefit, whereas another thing is only a temporary benefit. For example, we have seen TV commercials where if you buy one product you receive another free. Can those who advertise say “Send in your money now and you will receive the product, plus an additional gift?” Now suppose you wait a year and call that place. You say you want the product. They say, however, that they no longer have the additional gift. You can understand that perfectly well because it has been so long since the offer was made. The same idea is present here. The “forgiveness of sins” is ongoing forever. You can get that by repenting and being baptized. However, the additional gift has expired and no longer comes with the original product. We do not have to say of necessity that just because one is offered the other has to be given as well.