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Receiving the Holy Spirit

Throughout the scripture, but especially in the book of *Acts*, the apostles speak to us about “receiving the Holy Spirit.” We have all been trained and steeped in the idea that God is absent from our lives until we do the right thing (believe, obey, stop sinning, etc.). So when we read these words we automatically assume that they are describing to us an absent God (the Holy Spirit) who at last becomes present in our life when we get our act together.

Nothing could be farther from the Truth! To understand why this is not correct, we have to start with the most fundamental question about the gospel: "Who is Jesus?"

He is the one in whom all humanity exists (Col. 1:17), in whom all humanity is adopted into the Triune Life (Eph 1:5, 2:15), and in whom all humanity is reconciled to the Father (Col. 1:20). He lives in inseparable union (perichoresis) with the Holy Spirit (John 16:14) and in inseparable union (perichoresis) with humanity.

Perichoresis is the fundamental nature of life. It means that the Father lives not just *with* the Son, but *in* him. Likewise the Son lives *in* the Father. (John 14:10-11.) When the Triune God made humanity in his image, he made us to share in this perichoretic life through the Son's incarnation. The Son lives in human nature - this is the gospel (Acts 17:28, John 14:20.)

So the gospel tells us that the Son has permanently taken up residence in our humanity and that the Holy Spirit lives in the Son. Therefore the Holy Spirit lives in our human nature, his presence being mediated to us by the Son.

With a proper of understanding of who Jesus is, we can then go on to define what "receive the Spirit" means in the book of Acts.

The gospel shows us that it cannot mean that an absent God, the Holy Spirit, suddenly becomes present in our lives. If the Holy Spirit were absent from the world we would cease to exist. The persons of the Trinity indwell and uphold both one another and humanity.

In fact, the Greek "lambano", translated "receive" in Acts, means to accept, receive, or take to one's self. There is nothing about this word in Greek or in English that requires that the one being embraced must be absent before he is received. So, taking into account what we know about who Jesus is, the imagery must be one of embracing and welcoming someone who is already present.

In fact, we ought to stop and think about how it is possible to receive, accept, or embrace someone who is not present. It's not possible, is it? In order to embrace and receive someone, that person must be present with us. Since we could never have gotten ourselves into the Holy Spirit's presence, the Father has poured him out on all flesh (Joel 2:28) through the incarnation of the Son as the man Jesus Christ.

Here's an analogy:

My wife is present in my life and we have a relationship. When she comes home in the evening from work I can receive her, take her to myself and embrace her. Or, I can give her the cold

shoulder and ignore her. My response to her does not establish whether we have a relationship - we do have one; that is already established. My response to her dictates what kind of relationship we will have, a close one in which she "fills" my life (another word that appears often in Acts) or a distant one in which I try to ignore her.

She is in my life; now I have to be willing to embrace her. The Holy Spirit is, through the Son, in the life of humanity. Now we have to decide the extent to which we will embrace, receive him and allow him to fill our lives. But he's not going anywhere, and he's always talking to people everywhere about their identity in the Son and asking them to trust him enough to let him fill their lives with the knowledge of their identity as children of the Father in Christ.

In fact, this is exactly what Luke tells us at the start of the book of Acts. He quotes Peter telling the crowd on the day of Pentecost that what was prophesied has now been fulfilled: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17.) It doesn't say the Spirit is poured out on believing people, or good people, or even the specially chosen people. It says he is poured out on all people.

This good news about who Jesus is, and therefore about who the Holy Spirit is, and therefore about who humanity is in relationship to them and the Father, is the best news we could ever hear about our unbelieving friends and relatives. No matter what they believe, or how much they don't believe, they are just like us. They are included, adopted, redeemed and have the Holy Spirit living in them.

They don't know any of this about themselves, and that leaves them lost in the dark about their real identity as children of the Father. We can take great hope and encouragement from the fact that whenever we tell them about their identity in Jesus, the same Spirit who inspires us will be speaking to their hearts and souls to testify that what we are saying about Jesus is true.

That's why we want to be careful to tell the truth about who Jesus is and who humanity is. We want our testimony to match what the Holy Spirit is saying. He is alive in them, telling them that the Father has adopted them in his Son Jesus Christ. When we get the gospel right, we will tell them the same thing, and the results will be exciting and life-changing.

~ Jonathan Stepp