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Acts 2:41 and the Spirit

By Bill Lockwood

When I first heard the “argument” from Acts 2:41 which supposedly lays to rest the doctrine that the “Spirit dwells in Christians only through the Word of God,” I thought it very little since it rests upon a complete misapprehension of what was intended by that phrase. However, I am finding out that not a few put much stock in this “argument” to prove a direct, personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Argument

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.” From this verse some press the following conclusion. (1) The Pentecostians received the Word before they were baptized. (2) But if the Spirit dwells within the child of God only through the Word, then (3) those Pentecostians received the Spirit who indwelt them *prior to their becoming Christians*, since they “received the Word” before they were baptized. (4) But this conclusion is false, hence, the Spirit could not dwell in Christians only by the Word.

Response

First, if this argument means anything at all, it demands that we cannot accept the idea that the biblical phrase “Holy Spirit dwells in you” refers to His habitation in us by the Word *in any way whatsoever*. For, if one confesses that the Spirit is in us in *any fashion* by means of His Word, then the same “problem” will exist.

Second, John 1:12 reads, “As many as received Him [Christ] to them gave He the right to become children of God.” The becoming children of God comes *after* one receives Christ. What then have we? One who has “received Christ” but who is still a child of the devil. If our brethren will take in hand to explain how it is that one can “have received” Christ while still a child of the devil, I will explain how one can have received the Spirit’s message (Acts 2:41) without having “received” the indwelling of the Spirit.

Third, Ephesians 3:17 teaches that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. Shall we renounce this inspired word in view of the Acts 2:41 argument? See this: (1) We must have faith before we become Christians by being baptized into Christ. (2) Christ dwells in our hearts by faith. (3) Therefore, Christ dwells in our hearts before we become Christians.

Fourth, Acts 10:44-47 reveals a case where non-Christians received the Holy Spirit for Peter heard them speak with tongues and prophesy. Here is demonstrated that there is some sense in which the Spirit can be given, namely the miraculous, which does not demand that recipients thereof be Christians.

Now, these four observations are tendered to the brotherhood not to *establish the truth* on Acts 2:41, but to demonstrate to all that the common usage made of it to renounce the doctrine that the Spirit dwells in us only by means of the Word is seriously at fault.

Acts 2:41

How then is Acts 2:41 to be understood in view of the concept that the Spirit dwells in Christians *only by means of His Word*? To say that the Spirit dwells in an individual is only to say that one *continually lives in compliance with the Spirit's instructions*. No more. It is a figurative expression denoting that one lives in faithfulness to the Word.

First, see Galatians 4:19. Paul was in travail until “Christ was formed” in these Christians. How, I ask, could this “forming” be accomplished? *By living in obedience to the Spirit's inspired instruction and in no other way*. It is actually possible an original recipient of the letter could have read the message of Paul here, memorized the entire letter—it was thus in his mind—but due to a failure to **implement** the instructions and heed the warnings, Christ would **not** be formed in his life. The Word would be literally harbored within the folds of the brain, but Christ would not yet have been formed.

Second, consider Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Verse 15 reads in parallel fashion, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Can we say that “the peace of Christ” ruled their hearts *before they were immersed*? Acts 17:11 tells of the Bereans who “received the Word with all readiness of mind” and who “therefore believed” (v. 12). According to the Acts 2:41 argument in review, the Pentecostians had the “Word of Christ dwelling in them richly” and were already “ruled by the peace of Christ” before they were baptized!

What is the problem here with my rendition? Obviously, I am using the phrase “Word of Christ dwelling” in two different senses. This is precisely the point. The phrase “the Holy Spirit dwells in us only by His word” refers to a Christian who walks continually in compliance with that Word. But the phrase “receive the Word” only means that the listeners were in a state of acceptance of the message, just as in Acts 17:11.

Origin of the Mistake

Baptist J. B. Moody, in his printed debate with brother James A. Harding in 1889 charged Harding with believing that the Word is the Spirit. This he said in response to Harding's insistence that the Spirit of God works only through the Word of God in conversion. Baptists have continually made this charge throughout the years due to a lack of understanding of the very principle of agency. That the Spirit always utilizes an instrument, the Word of God, is *not* to say that the Spirit *is* the Word of God! Moody even supposed that Harding's defense of the truth meant that somehow Harding believed that the Holy Spirit was literally *in* the Word. I say this with all the kindness I can, but when our brethren charge the Acts 2:41 argument against us it derives from the identical *misunderstanding* that embarrassed Moody.

Spirit Only through the Word

For emphasis sake, note again, “receiving the Word” means “acceptance” of the teaching in the sense of mental agreement or acquiescence that the message is right. However, “the Spirit dwells in us by the Word” does not merely indicate one who mentally accepts the truth but is always a figure of speech used regarding a Christian who *continually* walks in obedience to the Word. The continual nature of it is manifest in the New Testament, “He that keepeth his commandments abideth in him, and he in him” (1 John 3:24). John 14:23—“If a man loves me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.” Is a person “keeping” the Lord’s Word by obedience in faith and repentance as he comes to Christ? Yes. Does this mean therefore that before his baptism “deity dwells in him?” No. John refers to the *continual obedience of his children* in both passages and the Spirit of God dwelling in one refers to this alone. It involves, in the words of *Maurice Lusk, III*, not the imbibing of the existence of God, “but imbibing His ‘nature’ by imbibing the characteristics of His personality as they are revealed in Scripture, then incorporating these characteristics into our personality.”