

Receive the Holy Spirit By Obedience?

Christ is Risen! (He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!)

³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Act 5:32 ESV)

The Church loves to rejoice at the baptism of an infant. The question for this sermon is who here would agree that the infant was chosen by God to be baptized because of his or her obedience. I doubt that anyone would agree with that for a number of reasons. First, just speak with the parents to learn whether the child has been an obedient son or daughter since birth.

Second, it appears that the Scriptures are clear that our personal salvation does not come about because of our obedience of works because then we would not be saved by grace in getting something we don't deserve but we would be saved by works in meriting something that our good deeds do deserve.

In light of this, how are you going to understand verse 32 of the first reading for the 2nd Sunday of Easter from Acts chapter 5? It says:

³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Act 5:32 ESV)

Now according to Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, verse 38 when a person is properly baptized there are two gifts even infants receive:

be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Act 2:38-39 ESV)

The word "baptized" is a passive form of the verb which means that baptism is not something I decide to do like being confirmed but it is instead something that God does to me using the voice and hands of the pastor along with the water. Your deciding to be baptized is not the cause of your becoming saved but instead is the means of grace whereby God causes you to be born again according to 1 Peter 1:3—

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Then we again are faced with an apparent contradiction that while the Bible certainly reveals that our obedience is not the reason why we are baptized, we are faced with our text from Acts 5:32 which proclaims that God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey him. How are we to reconcile these apparently different teachings?

There are two ways to reconcile such differences. The first way is to examine the context to see if we are missing something that resolves the apparent contradictions. The second method is to look at the original Greek.

It is this second method that does help us. When we read the word “obey” in the English we will jump to the conclusion that such obedience is talking about proper observing of God’s will in our lives. That Greek word is pronounced as **hoop-ak-oo-o**. But the word that Luke uses in Acts 5:32 is only found four times in the New Testament pronounced as **pi-tharkh-eh-o**. It’s meaning is not to obey a commandment or law but a magistrate or superior. It appears three times in Acts and once in Titus 3:1 where Paul advises Titus what to preach:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, (Tit 3:1 ESV)

Though both Greek words are translated into the English as “obey”, the second word carries the connotation of obeying an authority over you. Now how does this all relate to the baptism of an infant? To what authority is he obeying? Is he obeying his parents who because of their faith wanted to provide him with the gift of salvation that comes through the Pentecost waters of baptism for even infants.

Now some may argue that the infant does not understand what is going on so how can he be obedient? Let’s say that the infant was not begotten but adopted son brought home from an orphanage at 1 month old. Would he begin to obey his new parents? Yes, he would by eating the food given to him, wearing the clothes in which he is dressed and sleeping in the crib prepared for him.

The obedience that God points to in giving the Holy Spirit to an infant was not the child’s own obedience but the obedience of the parents in doing what Jesus applauded in Luke 18:

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Luk 18:15-17 ESV)

For the baptism of an infant, it is the parents who brought the child to Jesus so that He could touch him or her which He does through the waters of baptism. As the years follow these faithful parents will be bringing the child to worship services, Sunday School and confirmation so that the LORD Jesus will continue to touch. They will find that having received the Holy Spirit does not make their child sinless. He will be a sinner like his parents and question at times whether he is truly saved due to his sin.

Perhaps his parents will remind him of this story I am about to share. A member of a Christian congregation visits the pastor to tell him that she often speaks to Jesus personally. The pastor challenges her to ask Jesus the next time they talk as to what sin she did when she was 15 years old. A couple of weeks later the woman again meets with the pastor who asks her if she remembered to ask Jesus the question. “Yes, I did” she answers. “And what did He say,” asks the incredulous pastor. She replied, “He told me that He forgot.”

In continued obedience to their vocation of being parents, they can tell the child the Good News that at the baptism not only was the gift of the Holy Spirit received but also in regard to sins, Jesus in Hebrews 8(12) promises that “I will be merciful toward their iniquities and I will remember their sins no more.” And that gracious promise is true for every adult believer also. Amen.