

Is Obedience Required Before Receiving God's Holy Spirit?

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We have heard about so-called "difficult" scriptures—verses that seem to have a somewhat ambiguous meaning that needs to be clarified. Sermonettes and even sermons have been given on such scriptures.

Some scriptures need clarification because human beings often read into them their own preconceived notions or ideas that they want to believe. However, the true meaning of any verse can usually be determined if we study with an open mind and a willingness to be corrected. For this reason some have contended that there really are no difficult scriptures—only difficult people!

Acts 5:32 is a classic example of taking a clear, unambiguous scripture and transforming it into a difficult one. It concludes the apostle Peter's reply to the members of the Sanhedrin to whom he was preaching the gospel. He tells these religious leaders that they were guilty of murdering Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, and that God had exalted Him to be Prince and Savior to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. Finally, he says, "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to those who obey Him" (verse 32).

Most reasonable and objective people would easily understand this. Peter is saying that those who heed the gospel message of repentance from sin and active faith in the sacrifice of Christ will begin to live lives of obedience to God's commandments, and thus He gives them His Spirit. However, some contend that it is not that simple.

To convince others that obedience to God is not a prerequisite for receiving the Holy Spirit, numerous objections have been raised to this simple, direct explanation of this plain scripture. As a result, much confusion has resulted regarding the exact meaning of Peter's statement. Is this scripture really a "difficult" scripture requiring a complicated explanation, or does it simply mean what it says? What does the Bible really say about receiving the Holy Spirit?

No Obedience Without the Spirit?

One of the objections that has been raised to this understanding of Acts 5:32 is that it is impossible to obey God before receiving His Spirit. Therefore, it would be impossible to receive God's Spirit if obedience were a requirement.

To answer this objection, we must first review the Bible's stated requirements for receiving God's Spirit: "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Here, in another simply stated scripture, we find two basic requirements to receive His Spirit: 1) repentance and 2) faith in the sacrifice of Christ. (Baptism is an outward confession of this faith in Christ's sacrifice.)

What is repentance? Repentance is a deep and genuine feeling of remorse over having committed sins, bringing about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is accompanied by an urgent desire to make the necessary changes in our life so we avoid committing the same sins again. In other words,

true repentance brings about an earnest desire to obey God. In turn, this earnest desire causes us to begin to make changes in our lifestyle to conform to God's commandments.

When John the Baptist preached a message of repentance to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, he demanded that his followers make changes in their lives. "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Luke 3:8). When John was preaching, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, but John made it clear that God expected the people to begin changing their lives to demonstrate that their repentance was genuine.

Paul preached the exact same message regarding repentance. Notice what he says in Acts 26:20 before King Agrippa:

[I] declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

A truly repentant person will immediately begin striving to obey God. The changes that the individual makes in his life are the "fruits" that demonstrate that his repentance is genuine. This does *not* mean that the repentant sinner obeys God *perfectly*. Even those who have received the Holy Spirit do not obey God perfectly. It means that the individual has ***turned his life around and is oriented toward obeying God***. Upon producing the fruits of repentance and demonstrating faith in the sacrifice of Christ through baptism, God gives him His Holy Spirit.

As Peter simply stated, God gives His Holy Spirit to those who obey Him!

Given to Preach the Gospel?

Another explanation of Acts 5:32 says that the obedience mentioned in this scripture is that of obeying God's command to preach the gospel, not obeying God's laws. Proponents of this explanation argue that Peter's statement came about because the authorities called the apostles into account for disobeying their command not to preach about Jesus. This derives from Peter's comment in verse 29, "We ought to obey God rather than men." They imply that his statement that "God has given His Holy Spirit to those who obey Him" refers to the apostles' willingness to preach the gospel in the face of strong opposition.

There are a number of problems with this interpretation. First of all, as we have seen, it ignores the clear requirements God lays down for receipt of the Holy Spirit—repentance and faith in the sacrifice of Christ. Nowhere in the Scripture does God require the preaching of the gospel as a prerequisite for receiving His Spirit. Rather, the power of the indwelling Spirit of God inspired and motivated the apostles to preach the gospel *after* they had received the Spirit (Acts 2:4).

Furthermore, this interpretation ignores the overall thrust and context of Peter's statement:

The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, *to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*" (Acts 5:30-31)

Again, what is repentance and how does one receive forgiveness of sins? Repentance is turning from sin—the transgression of God's law (see I John 3:4, KJV)—and beginning to obey that law. Following repentance, one receives forgiveness of sins through faith in the sacrifice of Christ.

Then Peter proceeds to say,

And we are His witnesses to these things [the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ], and so also is the Holy Spirit [which] God has given to those who obey Him [those who have heeded the gospel message to repent and therefore oriented their lives to obeying God].

Clearly, Peter is talking about a willingness to obey God's commandments, not about preaching the gospel.

Splitting Hairs

Still another objection deals with the translation of Acts 5:32. Some argue that the Greek word translated "obey" is a present tense participle which indicates ongoing activity. Some versions translate the last few words of the verse to read "[which] God has given to those obeying Him," as opposed to the more common rendering of "[which] God has given to those who obey Him." This is an effort to show that God did not mean that obedience must precede His giving of the Holy Spirit.

In reality, this is splitting hairs and a moot point. Regardless of the verse's translation, the grammar does not shed any new light on whether the Spirit was given before or after obedience. If the present tense participle is used, it simply shows that those who heeded the gospel message are now obeying God.

Lawkeeping Not Required?

Finally, some appeal to the words of the apostle Paul to try to show that obedience to God has nothing to do with receiving the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul states,

This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? (Galatians 3:2-3)

Paul then goes on to explain how Abraham was justified by faith and shows that the only way anyone can be justified is by faith.

Those who say that Paul's words mean that one does not have to obey God in order to receive His Spirit simply do not understand what he was talking about. They also do not understand the circumstances that the apostle was addressing. The main problem in the churches in Galatia was that people were being taught that they could be justified—have their sins forgiven and be brought into a right relationship with God—by lawkeeping. The people's minds were being turned away from faith in Jesus Christ. Paul was reminding them that the only way anyone can receive forgiveness of sins is through faith in Christ's sacrifice.

To drive his point home, Paul reminds the Galatians that they did not receive God's Holy Spirit by lawkeeping while ignoring faith in the sacrifice of Christ. He points out that, without faith in the sacrifice of Christ, no one can be justified, no one can be forgiven of sins and no one can be given the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

This does not negate the fact that there are still basically two requirements for receiving God's Spirit, namely, repentance and faith in Christ. Both of these requirements must be met before one can receive the Spirit. As stated previously, repentance involves turning from sin and turning toward obedience to God's commandments.

Yes, Acts 5:32 means exactly what it says. To those who are willing to believe the simple truths of the Bible, there is nothing difficult about this verse at all. God gives His Holy Spirit to His humble, faithful people who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12).

In other words, God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him!