

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

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Does the Holy Spirit indwell a New Testament Christian? If so, is it possible to determine the nature of this indwelling? Is it representative (only through the Word of God) or is it personal and spiritual? Let's examine each of these questions in light of the phrase, "the gift of the Holy Spirit" as found in Acts 2:38.

In Acts 2:38, the church historian and New Testament prophet Luke writes, "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." There are two commands and two promises in this passage. The two commands are "repent" and "be baptized." The promises are contingent upon obeying the commands. The remission of sins is conditional. One must repent and be baptized in order to obtain the remission of sins. There must be a response of faith and a heart change before one can be forgiven of past sins. Then, one must change his/her spiritual state before God by being baptized (an immersion in water). This new birth is the means of entrance into the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). In addition to these significant spiritual changes, one is also promised the "gift of the Holy Spirit." The interpretation of this phrase hinges upon the meaning of the genitive used. The phrase is *tēn dōrean tou hagiou pneumatos*. The phrase "of the Holy Spirit" is a genitival phrase. What type of genitive is this? What are the choices?

If the student of God's Word examines the Greek grammars on this point, he/she will find that there are many diverse uses of the genitive in the Greek. However, two choices present themselves as the most viable. They are: (1) appositional or epexegetical and (2) subjective

genitive. What are the differences between these two types of genitives? Why would one be preferred over the other?

The following uses of the genitive are taken from William Chamberlain's grammar of the Greek New Testament pages 29-31. The genitive case in the Greek New Testament is the descriptive case. A particular thing may be described from many viewpoints. It may be described from the standpoint of ownership, in which case, it is the genitive of possession (Matt. 26:51). It may be described from the standpoint of value, in which case, it is the genitive of price (Matt. 10:29). It may be described from the standpoint of source, in which case, it is the genitive of source (Mk. 1:6). It may describe from the standpoint of quality, in which case, it is the genitive of quality (Rom. 6:6). It may be used in apposition to another noun to further define it, in which case, it is called the genitive of apposition (also, epexegetical, or genitive of identity) (II Cor. 1:22; 5:5—the earnest which is the Spirit). It may be used as a Hebraistic genitive, in which case, it is used as a genitive of definition (Mark 2:26; Luke 4:22). It may be used to express time or place, in which case, it is called the genitive of time or place (Matt. 24:20). It may be used as an objective or subjective genitive. In this case, the genitive case of one substantive is used with another substantive which expresses action. Chamberlain comments, "If the substantive in the genitive case is the agent of the action expressed by the other, it is called a subjective genitive. If the substantive in the genitive case is the recipient of the action, it is called an objective genitive" (*An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 31). The interpretation of the subjective genitive is entirely a matter of exegesis and not of grammar. The immediate context and general usage must be called in to decide the point (Moulton, *Prolegomena*, 72 as cited by Chamberlain, 31). Chamberlain lists a few other uses of the genitive, for instance, the genitive absolute, but these do not fall under consideration of the genitival phrase in Acts 2:38.

From the information given above we can readily see the difference between the genitive of apposition and the subjective genitive. If the phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” is an appositional genitive, it means: “the gift which is the Holy Spirit.” If the phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” is a subjective genitive, it means: “the gift which the Holy Spirit gives.”

Why would one of the above interpretations be preferred over the other? The reader should be aware that the vast majority of Greek grammarians interpret the phrase, “the gift of the Holy Spirit” to be appositional (A. T. Robertson, James Hope Moulton, Richard A. Young and Daniel B. Wallace to name a few). Why would they choose this interpretation over the subjective genitive?

First, Richard Young classifies the appositional genitive as a genitive functioning as a noun phrase. Specifically, he states that it is *adjunctive to a noun in another case* and he cites Acts 2:38 as an example with these comments, “The gift is the Spirit Himself, the one who administers God’s saving grace to the repenting individual. Although outward manifestations may follow, the phrase itself does not refer to a particular gift given by the Holy Spirit (subjective genitive)” (*Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 39). The phrase refers to the Holy Spirit which is the gift. The phrase “of the Holy Spirit” is genitive while the noun “gift” is accusative, singular, feminine of *dōrea*—the direct object of the verb “receive.”

Second, Wallace states that in the genitive of apposition construction, the head noun: (1) will state a large category, (2) will be ambiguous, or (3) will be metaphorical in meaning (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 95). In the phrase, “the gift of the Holy Spirit” the word “gift” is the head noun. Is it stating a category? Is it ambiguous? Is it metaphorical? The word “gift” is used ambiguously (what gift?) and the phrase “of the Holy Spirit” clarifies and names the gift. Remember, this gift is a promise received by obedience to the commands to

repent and be baptized. Another gift is in view and it is a promise, namely, forgiveness/salvation. It would be redundant to make “the gift of the Holy Spirit” equal salvation. Consequently, the phrase, “of the Holy Spirit” clarifies which gift constitutes the second promise in the passage. It is the gift which is the Holy Spirit.

Third, there are other passages, constituting a remote context, in which the Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit is given to a Christian at the time he obeys the Gospel. Consider the following passages. “And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him” (Acts 5:32). “What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (I Cor. 6:19). “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6). “He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit” (I Thess. 4:8). “Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit” (I John 4:13). These passages are difficult to deny.

Fourth, in regards to the remote context, the only other time the phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” occurs in the New Testament is Acts 10:45. “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.” Peter identifies this construction for us. It is an appositional genitive. How do we know? Peter states, “Can any man forbid water, that they should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” (Acts 10:47). The “gift of the Holy Ghost” is “the Holy Ghost as the gift.” McGarvey comments, “The fact that this gift of the Spirit was manifested by the miracle of speaking in tongues distinguishes it from that gift of the Spirit promised to all who repent and are baptized (ii:38)” (*New Commentary On*

Acts of the Apostles, 214). The “gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 2:38 is not the miraculous or charismatic gifts imparted by the Spirit. Lenski comments, “the gift is bestowed upon each and every repentant and baptized soul and cannot therefore refer to the charismatic gifts of the Spirit (tongues, healing)—all Christians did not receive these miraculous gifts” (*Commentary on Acts*, 109). Therefore, though the grammatical construction is the same (appositional genitive) in Acts 2:38 and Acts 10:45, the meaning is somewhat different. Once again McGarvey states his view of Acts 2:38, “The second blessing promised on condition of repentance and baptism, is the “gift of the Holy Spirit.” By this is not meant that miraculous gift which had just been bestowed upon the apostles; for we know from the subsequent history that this gift was not bestowed on all who repented and were baptized, but on only a few brethren of prominence in the several congregations. The expression means the Holy Spirit as a gift; and the reference is to that indwelling of the Holy Spirit by which we bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, and without which we are not of Christ” (*New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*, 39).

Why would an interpreter choose to exegete the phrase, “the gift of the Holy Spirit” as a subjective genitive?

First, he would have to have a compelling reason to reject the interpretation that the phrase “of the Holy Spirit” is an appositional genitive. There is no grammatical reason for doing this. The only reason would be an appeal to the larger context of Scripture or to one’s personal theological view. If one rejected completely the view that the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian personally, he would be obligated to reject the appositional genitive choice in the passage under study. As we have already shown, the larger context of Scripture supports the interpretation of the appositional genitive in Acts 2:38. It does not refute it. Consequently, a rejection of the appositional genitive exegesis of Acts 2:38 indicates one’s personal theological view which is

being used to support an interpretation of the phrase under study as a subjective genitive. What this amounts to is a theological interpretation verses a grammatical interpretation of the phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” in Acts 2:38.

Second, the subjective genitive means that the substantive in the genitive (of the Holy Spirit) is the agent of the action expressed by the other substantive (gift). There is a major problem here. If we interpret Acts 2:38 as a subjective genitive, we are left with ambiguity as to what the “gift” is that the Holy Spirit gives. This has caused confusion. Is the gift salvation? Is the gift the miraculous or charismatic gifts? Or, is some other gift in view? An interpretation of a passage of Scripture that leads to greater ambiguity is not the preferred interpretation.

We are left as biblical interpreters to examine the evidence and decide what is the strongest position. One’s personal view concerning the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a factor in making this decision. However, the stronger grammatical and contextual position, in my judgment, is to interpret the phrase “the gift of the Holy Spirit” as an appositional genitive—the gift which is the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Holy Spirit indwells the Christian spiritually and personally and this indwelling is a promise that is received after one has repented and been baptized into Christ.