

# The Gift of the Holy Spirit and Acts 2:38

By Steve Williams

A recent article suggests that the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38 is "eternal life."<sup>1</sup> In this brief study I would like to present evidence that the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38 is the Holy Spirit Himself, the commonly accepted interpretation of this passage.

Grammatically the phrase "the gift of the Holy Spirit" can be a genitive of apposition or a subjective genitive. A genitive of apposition is where two nouns or pronouns are placed together in such a way that the second, in apposition to the first, explains the meaning of the first in a fuller sense. For example, "the city of Thyatira" (Acts 16:14) is a genitive of apposition.<sup>2</sup> If Acts 2:38 is a genitive of apposition, the "Holy Spirit" explains more fully what the gift is. The phrase means "the gift, namely, the Holy Spirit" or "the gift, that is, the Holy Spirit."

If Acts 2:38 contains a subjective genitive, the phrase means "the gift given by the Holy Spirit." Grammatically both the subjective genitive and the genitive of apposition are possible. Context must decide which is correct. If Acts 2:38 refers to a gift which the Holy Spirit gives, the next logical question is, "What is the gift?" Salvation has been suggested which would make the phrase a repetition of "forgiveness of sins" in the previous clause of Acts 2:38. This is unlikely due to the distinction between the two results of baptism, evident in the Greek by the word "and" (*kai*).

"Salvation" as the gift of the Holy Spirit is also unlikely due to Biblical terminology. "Salvation" or "eternal life" is usually spoken of as the gift of God (Acts 8:20; Rom. 5:15; 6:23; 2 Cor. 9:15; Eph. 2:8; Jas. 1:17), although occasionally Christ is the giver (Eph. 4:7). Technically, in light of the doctrine of the trinity, one can refer to these as the gift given by the Holy Spirit, but that phraseology is not the usual Biblical way of speaking. For this reason, "the gift of the Holy Spirit" in Acts 2:38 is probably not a subjective genitive meaning "salvation."

The nearer context in Acts 2 and the wider context of the whole New Testament suggests that "the gift of the Holy Spirit" is a genitive of apposition meaning "the gift, that is, the Holy Spirit." The "promise" of Acts 2:39 refers back to the "promise of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33). The promise of the Holy Spirit is the promise that the Holy Spirit Himself would be given as is fulfilled in a miraculous way in Acts 2 and in the non-miraculous indwelling for all Christians. This gives content to the "promise" of Acts 2:39 which lends authenticity to the "gift" of Acts 2:38 being the Holy Spirit Himself.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, when the Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit giving something, the usual manner is to speak of "gifts" (plural) of the Holy Spirit while "gift" (singular) refers to the Holy Spirit Himself as the gift (Acts 10:45). When speaking of the "gifts" given by the Holy Spirit, Paul uses *charismata* (1 Cor. 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31) rather than *dorea* as in Acts 2:38. If "the gift of the Holy Spirit" in Acts 2:38 refers to a gift which the Holy Spirit gives, identifying the gift is difficult among the many options. Therefore the easier interpretation is to understand the gift as the Holy Spirit Himself.

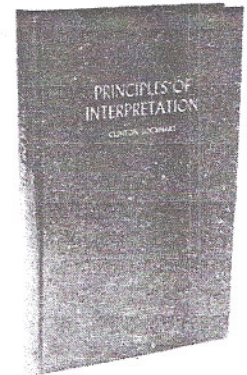
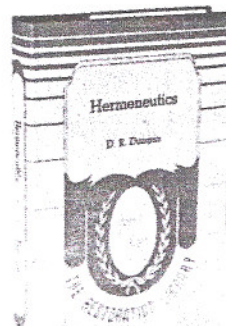
The identity of gift of Acts 2:38 as the Holy Spirit Himself is in full accord with Biblical teaching that the Holy Spirit is given to the church (Acts 5:32; 10:45; Rom. 8:15; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13-14). The interpretation that the "gift of the Holy Spirit" is the Holy Spirit Himself as the gift is also in accord with the overwhelming majority of commentators and Greek scholars, including notables names like J. W. McGarvey, F. F. Bruce, and J. H. Thayer. Some translators are so certain of this they translate with a genitive of apposition. For example, the TEV says, "You will receive God's gift, the Holy Spirit." William Beck's translation reads, "You will be given the Holy Spirit."

Therefore, the best interpretation of Acts 2:38 is that the "gift of the Holy Spirit" is the Holy Spirit which is given as a gift. As J. W. Roberts concluded, (1) it is the simplest explanation, (2) it is in harmony with the immediate context as well as the entire Bible, and (3) most scholars so interpret the phrase.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Harold Littrell, "The Gift and the Promise of Acts 2:38, 39," *Gospel Light* 59 (Feb. 1989): 25.
2. J. W. Roberts, "Exegetical Helps — The Genitive of Apposition," *Restoration Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1959): 36-37.
3. J. W. Roberts, "The Gift of the Holy Spirit," *Restoration Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1960): 234-37.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-38.

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