

WHAT IS THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

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by Gerald L. Priest, Ph.D.

Professor of Historical and Practical Theology

Vital to a proper dispensational understanding of New Testament ecclesiology is the unique ministry of Holy Spirit baptism. The baptism of the Holy Spirit has often been mistakenly equated with an experiential “second work” of grace subsequent to regeneration which gives victory over sin and power for service. Pentecostals say that tongues-speaking is an evidence of Spirit baptism. Great evangelists D. L. Moody and R. A. Torrey confused Spirit baptism with Spirit filling and made it a special crisis event that every Christian should seek. However, the New Testament teaches that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not additional but is basic to the salvation of every believer. Nor is it experiential but positional and judicial. Surely, all believers need spiritual power to live the Christian life, and therefore should be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). But this filling is simply the control of the Spirit and is synonymous with walking in the Spirit (Gal 5:16–25). Such a life is characterized by obedience to Christ. But filling is not baptism. If baptism of the Spirit were the same as enduement with power, the carnal Corinthians certainly fell short of it; yet they were *all* baptized with the Spirit.

What exactly, then, is Holy Spirit baptism? Paul wrote the Corinthians, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). According to this verse, the baptism of the Spirit is the non-experiential placement of the believer into the body of Christ, His church (Eph 1:22–23). This baptism, which differs from water baptism, is a distinctive feature of the New Testament church and is foundational to it. All the references to Holy Spirit baptism in the Gospels are future, that is, referring to the time of the church age, which had not yet begun (cf. Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; and John 1:33). Pentecost marks the beginning of the church, inaugurated by the baptism of the Spirit, when He came upon the assembled believers (Acts 2:1–4; cf. Acts 11:15, 16). This was the fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Acts 1:5— “For John baptized you with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ made possible His ministry of incorporating believers into His body through the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). On the basis of the grammar in both Acts 1:5 and 1 Corinthians 12:13, it appears that Christ is actually the *author* of the baptism, and the Spirit is His *means* of doing it. Spirit baptism is thus Christ’s work of placing believers in the church, through the Holy Spirit, beginning at Pentecost (Acts 2). The evident end of the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit will come when He is “taken out of the way” at the rapture of the church (2 Thess 2:7). The baptizing work of the Holy Spirit is therefore limited to the church age.

The baptism of the Spirit is not referring to a local body of believers, but placement in the universal body of Christ. The forced idea that the New Testament knows only local assemblies and never a universal body, would necessitate Christ having thousands of “bodies” all over the world. However, the Scripture states that He has only *one* body, with a diversity of members (cf. Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:12). In writing the Corinthians, Paul includes himself as baptized with the others (“we were all baptized”); he was probably not a member of this parochial church. “We all” transcends the local congregation and extends Paul’s meaning to include all Christians everywhere, i.e., the collective church (cf. 1 Cor 1:2, where Paul is writing to “all in every place who call...upon...Christ”).

Nor can the baptism of the Holy Spirit mean water baptism. Obviously, Christ distinguishes

between water and Spirit baptism in Acts 1:5. The mistake made by early church fathers and some denominations is the confusion of water baptism and Spirit baptism. While there is a connection between the two in that the former is the public testimony of what the Spirit unites us to—the Christ who died, was buried, and arose from the grave—water baptism can never accomplish such a union. Furthermore, Paul uses universal language in Ephesians 4:5 when he says, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Whoever has the Lord and the faith also has the baptism. Not everyone who is or has been a believer has been immersed in water, but every believer can claim the baptism of the Spirit. And yet nowhere in the New Testament is anyone commanded to be baptized by the Spirit, which leads to the conclusion that it is an automatic occurrence which takes place at conversion, and is, therefore, a one time event. The filling of the Spirit, on the other hand, is emphatically commanded and can be repeated (Eph 5:18). In fact, the filling reoccurred to the same group of believers in the early church (Acts 2:4; 4:31). If baptism were the same as filling, it would mean that the believer could be removed from the body of Christ and then reinstated by a second baptism. As Charles Ryrie states, “such an idea is completely foreign to the Scriptures” (*The Holy Spirit*, p. 109).

Finally, when we say that Spirit baptism is positional or judicial, we recognize the difficulty of many to comprehend this. Some Christians believe that any truth regarding salvation must be experienced or felt to be valid. Yet they should consider that positional truth is no less “real” than experience. In fact, the former is more decisive in the sense that sometimes our feelings can play tricks on us; objective truth is substantial and conclusive. Moreover, consider the fact that other foundational doctrines are likewise judicial, such as justification by faith alone. No one can be experientially as righteous as Christ. And yet we must be as righteous as He in order to have acceptance with God. The solution is in the judicial act of God imputing Christ’s righteousness to the sinner’s account on the basis of His atoning sacrifice and by means of effectual faith. This is forensic; it is legal, yet it is definitely *real* in the sense of actual. And so is it with the baptism of the Spirit. We were *really* placed into the body of Christ when we trusted Him as Savior, even though we did not “feel” it when it happened. However, the baptism of the Spirit does produce experiential results. For example, we can enjoy the blessing of knowing that we are united with Christ; the Holy Spirit has made that possible. This spiritual bond is the eternal possession of every believer. It also means that we are united with every other believer (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:3). What believer has not sensed, when traveling to a foreign country, the spiritual attachment with other Christians who do not even know his language? Further proof that we have been incorporated into the body of Christ is the witness of the indwelling Spirit that we belong to the Lord and have eternal life (1 John 5:7–12). Indwelling is not the same as the baptism of the Spirit but it is pertinent testimony that we indeed are in Christ and are sealed unto the day of redemption (Eph 1:13). The baptism of the Spirit secures believers to Christ and to His body (the church) and provides for them the basis of godly living in this age. The Holy Spirit has set them apart from the dominion of sin and Satan unto God in order to walk in newness of life.