

Holy Spirit: Baptism

This resource includes an article on the Holy Spirit's work on the day of Pentecost, and discusses why as Christians we should seek the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

What is the baptism of the Spirit? How do we seek it? Is it even necessary? Should it be expected? These are questions that many Christians have regarding the Holy Spirit. We are going to take a look at Acts 1 and 2 to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Day of Pentecost

In Acts 1, after His resurrection, Jesus meets with the disciples one last time to pass on some vital information. In Acts 1:4 Jesus says, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." Jesus knows that if the disciples are going to be able to fulfill their mission, they must receive something that is absolutely necessary.

This is pretty amazing to me! The disciples had touched Jesus, eaten with Jesus, and been taught by Jesus, God in the flesh, for the last three years. They had the best Life Group ever! They had sat under the best preacher ever! But Jesus told them that they still lacked something. Their teaching would not be enough, their intellect wouldn't be enough, their abilities wouldn't be enough—they needed the Holy Spirit. Jesus knows that when we take the Holy Spirit out of the equation, we are limited to our natural abilities and natural intellect. As Mark Batterson says, "Our testimony is limited to our words and our impact is limited to our abilities."

So, Jesus tells the disciples that there is one absolute necessity for them, and for us, if the gospel is going to "go viral." That necessity is the baptism of the Holy Spirit!

Acts is often called "The Acts of the Apostles." I think it could more correctly be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles," because it's through the supernatural empowerment of the Holy Spirit that the apostles accomplish their mission.

Let's take a look at what happened on the day of Pentecost. Jesus' followers are together on the morning of Pentecost, the spring harvest festival, and all of the sudden a violent and powerful wind blows through the room, and tongues of fire come to rest upon each of them. The Scripture says that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Holy Spirit enabled them.¹

As the disciples were speaking in other tongues (apparently really loudly), a crowd formed to find out what the loud sound was. When these people from the nations gathered around, they were utterly amazed, because they heard Galileans speaking in their own languages, proclaiming the praises of God.

We see tongues throughout the book of Acts, but this is the only instance in which tongues is described as an intelligible language. This is the exception with tongues. Usually when speaking in tongues is mentioned in Scripture, the language is not a recognizable earthly language. This reflects Paul's thoughts in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels...", that tongues is perhaps an angelic language.

¹ Acts 2:1-4

So how did the crowd respond to this crazy scene on the day of Pentecost? In Acts 2, we read that some people in the crowd were “utterly amazed and perplexed”² at what was happening. They didn’t understand what God was doing—they didn’t even know how to wrap their minds around it. At the same time, they had an attitude of amazement toward what God was doing. I believe this is most peoples’ response the first time they encounter a powerful work of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues.

There were others in the midst of this powerful, explosive event who simply made fun of the disciples and mocked them for speaking in tongues as they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. These people said, “They have had too much wine.”³

In the midst of the amazed, perplexed, and mocking crowd, Peter stands up and begins to explain what is happening. The wavering wimp, Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, now stands up and courageously preaches, full of the Holy Spirit. Peter tells the crowd that what they see and hear is what the prophet Joel prophesied hundreds of years ago, when he said, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”⁴

Throughout the Old Testament, only a select few were empowered by the Holy Spirit for works of service. Specifically, we see that the Holy Spirit empowers three kinds of people: prophets, priests and kings/leaders. The Spirit comes upon them to empower them to fulfill God’s mission. At any given point there were only a few people alive who were empowered by the Spirit for works of service.

Peter’s declaration is that the day has arrived when God will pour out His Spirit, not just on a select few, but on all people! The male and the female, the young and the old, the servants and the free!⁵ Peter says that everyone can now experience the empowerment of the Spirit and experience gifts such as prophesy, dreams, and visions. For Peter, Joel’s prophecy is a trajectory verse for the last days—that includes us!

So, the first evidences we see when the Holy Spirit is poured out in power are charismatic gifts (the gifts of the Holy Spirit), but empowerment with the gifts is not an end in itself. Sometimes I feel this is where Pentecostals fall short. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not just about inner transformation, the work of empowerment God does in us is for a specific purpose. That purpose is to be equipped to accomplish His will. Let’s look at what else happened on Pentecost.

In verses 22–36, Peter stands up and preaches a powerful Christ-centered message. Those who heard the message were “cut to the heart”!⁶ Peter’s preaching was so powerfully anointed by the Holy Spirit that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit came as he spoke the word of God. This is something our words alone can’t do. Through the Holy Spirit, our testimony is not limited to our words. The Holy Spirit can take our words and use them to bring such conviction that they “cut to the heart.”

When the crowd heard Peter’s anointed message, their response was, “What shall we do?” Peter tells them to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁷ That day 3,000 people put their faith in Jesus and became part of the church family! On the day

² Acts 2:12

³ Acts 2:13

⁴ Joel 2:28

⁵ Acts 2:17-18

⁶ Acts 2:37

⁷ Acts 2:37-38

of Pentecost, we see the Holy Spirit's power through His gifts, which led to powerful proclamation of the gospel, which led to repentance and transformed lives. What happened after the day of Pentecost? How did the Holy Spirit's empowerment continue to impact the early church?

We see in Acts 2:42–47 that the new believers were devoted followers of Jesus Christ! Their lives had changed. When you think about it, it is amazing that the 120 apostles impacted the 3,000, and not the other way around. This can only be explained by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's power produced transformed lives that lived deeply with one another, that were generous, and were outreach oriented. The chapter ends with a statement of how the gospel was going viral: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."⁸

Importance of Holy Spirit Baptism

In Acts 1 and 2, we see Jesus promise the disciples the "gift of the Father"—that they will be "baptized with the Holy Spirit." When this promise is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, Peter and the rest of the disciples are transformed and equipped to carry out the Great Commission. From that event, the church explodes and the trajectory of the Gospel is set. Throughout the book of Acts, we see other instances in which believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit and gifts of the Spirit are evident. This experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit for empowerment to be a witness is available for us today. The result of baptism in the Holy Spirit, as demonstrated in Acts, will be greater accessibility to the gifts of the Spirit, increased fruit of the Spirit, and a greater ability to witness.

There is controversy regarding when and how the baptism in the Holy Spirit takes place, and if Acts 2 is a model. The question debated is as follows: "Is the work of the Holy Spirit described in Acts 2 the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that happens at conversion, or does Acts 2 describes a post conversion baptism in the Holy Spirit, separate from regeneration?" There are people who love Jesus and study their Bible on both sides of this issue.

First, let me make it clear that the Bible clearly teaches that all Christians are "born again" and receive the regenerative work of the Spirit at the moment of salvation. However, I do believe that what we see in the book of Acts is a separate and often subsequent work of the Holy Spirit. This work is available to every believer for an increased effectiveness in witness. We need this empowerment because of our weakness. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not a spiritual merit badge, signifying some great spiritual accomplishment—it is a step toward surrendering our weakness to God's care, so that His Spirit may work more fully in us. Therefore, a believer who is baptized in the Spirit is no better than a believer who has not experienced the baptism yet. I am grateful for the baptism in the Spirit, because that experience has helped me in my weakness. It has not, however, made me categorically superior to other Christians. We are all weak, broken individuals in need of our Savior and the power of the Holy Spirit to live for God's glory. Admitting that weakness and surrendering our pride is one of the first steps in seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

There are three reasons I believe baptism in the Holy Spirit is separate and subsequent to conversion:

1. I believe we see several instances in Scripture in which believers (baptized in some cases)⁹, who were following Jesus experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit. For instance, the disciples

⁸ Acts 2:27

⁹ Acts 9

had already received the regeneration of the Holy Spirit when the day of Pentecost came. After Jesus' resurrection, but before Pentecost, "Jesus breathed on them [disciples] and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"¹⁰ In the Garden of Eden, God breathed into Adam and gave him life—after Jesus' resurrection He breathed on His disciples and gave them eternal life through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit! Yet, it is not until the day of Pentecost that the disciples are filled, or baptized, with the Holy Spirit.

2. Secondly, while it may seem to us that a package deal of regeneration/baptism in the Holy Spirit would be a bit cleaner, we must realize that regeneration and baptism as separate experiences is actually consistent with the whole counsel of Scripture. In the Old Testament, we see individuals empowered by the Holy Spirit, but who have not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit like a New Testament believer. In other words, they are not "born again" in the Old Testament, but they are empowered. So, the idea of the baptism of the Holy Spirit being a separate work from regeneration in the New Testament (and today) is consistent with what we see in the Old Testament.

3. Finally, when we see Jesus prepare His disciples for the day of Pentecost in Acts 1, Jesus focuses on the missional purpose of the day of Pentecost and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. When regeneration and empowerment get lumped together, we lose the focus on the Holy Spirit's missional work. The salvation experience is about receiving new life and entering into a relationship where God is your Father. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is about being empowered for witness.

So that is a very quick overview of why I believe the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a subsequent experience to salvation. However, if you don't agree with me on this issue, we can still love each other and fellowship together.

Conclusion

What strikes me the most about the story of Pentecost is how the Holy Spirit used Peter. This is such a powerful picture of the difference the empowerment of the Spirit makes in our lives. In the gospels, Peter is a wavering wimp who can't even stand up to a servant girl. In Acts, we see him, full of the Holy Spirit, stand up in the midst of mockers and preach a powerfully anointed message which results in 3,000 people being saved!

No matter where you stand theologically on this topic, I hope studying the first two chapters of Acts will prompt you to open your heart more to the Holy Spirit, and to hunger for more of the Holy Spirit's work in your life. I don't think any of us can say that we have experienced all the Holy Spirit has to offer to us.

If the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a new concept to you, and you would like to seek it out, I recommend reading through the book of Acts and observing how the Holy Spirit works. Also, talk to a friend who has experienced the baptism of the Spirit and hear their story. Spend time in prayer and worship asking God to reveal more of His Spirit to you, and ask for the baptism.

The Holy Spirit is not a Pentecostal, Baptist, or Presbyterian doctrine. The Holy Spirit's power and presence is a Christian doctrine—one not to just be recited in a creed, but to be experienced in our lives. May we seek the Holy Spirit and always keep in step with Him.¹¹

¹⁰ John 20:22

¹¹ Galatians 5:25

Relevant Scriptures:

Joel 2:28–32 *Prophecy of the Spirit*
Acts 1–2 *Pentecost*
1 Corinthians 13-14 *Gifts of the Spirit*

Questions for Discussion:

1. On the day of Pentecost, there were those who experienced God’s empowerment, those who observed and were amazed and perplexed, and those who made fun of the scene. Which of those three groups (one, several, all) do you relate with?
2. How has this resource changed the way you think about the Holy Spirit?
3. Can you think of a time when the Holy Spirit has helped you in your weakness?
4. What steps could you take to get to know the Holy Spirit better? To open yourself to the gifts of the Spirit and baptism in the Spirit?

Further Reading:

- *Want More* by Tim Enloe
- *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* by Roger Stronstad