

THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: A NON-SUBSEQUENCE VIEW

Introduction

Before He ascended to heaven, Jesus commanded His disciples “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the Father’s promise” (Acts 1:4).¹ Jesus then explained how this promise would come to pass by them being “baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days” (Acts 1:6). Jesus’ words are interesting, because the disciples had already received the Holy Spirit when Jesus commissioned them to live on mission in the days following His resurrection (John 20:21–22). Why would they need to wait for a *second* experience—specifically, a *baptism*—of the Holy Spirit?

Throughout this paper, I will answer this question by arguing that Spirit-baptism is something that occurs *simultaneous with*—not *subsequent to*—conversion. I will argue this position by briefly exploring Spirit-baptism in the Epistles, Spirit-baptism in Acts, and finally by considering how we should respond to someone who claims a subsequent baptism of the Spirit today.

Spirit-Baptism in Paul’s Theology

The only reference to Spirit-baptism in the epistles comes from 1 Corinthians 12:13 where Paul declares, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink.” This passage is critical to our understanding of Spirit-baptism in the New Testament, because it occurs in a didactic section of Scripture where Paul is explicitly teaching doctrine for the church. As such,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will come from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

this passage provides more prescriptive weight to our understanding of Spirit-baptism than other passages that are descriptive in nature (e.g. in the book of Acts; see below).²

In context, Paul is writing about the specific gifts the Holy Spirit gives believers for ministry in the church (1 Cor. 12:1–12). In the verse twelve, Paul declares that “the parts of that body, though many, are one body.” (1 Cor. 12:12). By using this metaphor, Paul reminds the church that there is indeed a diversity of gifts, but this diversity of gifts is for the unity of the body. When we come to verse thirteen, Paul stresses the unity of the church even more powerfully by reminding the believers that each of them have received the Holy Spirit. In Paul’s argument, verse thirteen functions as a critical reminder for the church not to be divided by their diversity of gifts, but instead to be united around their common unity in the Spirit.

Paul’s argument makes no sense, however, if there are some believers who have not received the Holy Spirit or if there is a hierarchy of blessing associated with unique experiences of the Spirit. It makes more sense to understand Paul as looking back to what the Spirit has done in gathering the church together, establishing a common basis of unity upon which to build the life of the church. Paul is, therefore, not speaking about a subsequent experience to salvation. Instead, he is referring to the very experience of salvation whereby believers were incorporated into the church. (cf. Eph. 1:13–14).³ In Paul’s understanding, the Spirit “is the eschatological sign that the new age has arrived,”⁴ and this is revealed through the gathering of God’s people from among Jew and Gentile alike.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John, Volume 4: Peace in the Storm* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 1124–25.

³ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987), 44–49; James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 396–98.

⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 431; cf. John R.W. Stott, *The Baptism and Fulness of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1964), 28.

Additionally significant is the grammatical structure of Paul's words, which directly parallels the four accounts of Spirit-baptism language used in the Gospels (Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk.3:16; Jn. 1:33).⁵ Each of these accounts are from John the Baptist when he declared that Jesus will baptize people "with the Holy Spirit." Grudem concludes that Paul's original audience would have read his words as identical to the words from John the Baptist found in the Gospels, indicating that for Paul and for the early Christians, baptism in the Spirit normally and consistently referred to all the Spirit does in the heart of a person at conversion.⁶

Spirit-Baptism in Acts

If this is true, then why did the disciples experience the baptism of the Spirit in Acts 1:6 subsequent to Jesus' commissioning of them in John 20:21–22? I think Grudem is right when he says it's because the book of Acts marks the vital period of transition between the Old and New Covenants.⁷ R. C. Sproul helpfully points out that a primary question in Acts is the matter of who would be included in the new covenant community. It's very significant that there were four "Pentecostal-type outpourings" that correspond to four distinct groups of people: Jews, Samaritans, God-fearers, and Gentiles.⁸ Sproul goes on to say:

The Jews received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost [Acts 2]. The Samaritans received the Spirit during the ministry of Philip, Peter, and John (Acts 8). The God-fearers received the Holy Spirit at Cornelius's household (Acts 10). And finally there is an outpouring to strictly Gentiles at Ephesus (Acts 19). All four groups, and all in the groups, received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.⁹

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 766, 768; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1996), 194.

⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 768–69.

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 770–73.

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 1990/2018), 126.

⁹ Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*, 127; cf. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 80–89; Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 453–59. This understanding runs contrary to the neo-Pentecostal interpretation of these same events, which sees these outpourings of the Spirit as justification for a "second blessing" subsequent to salvation. See for example, J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 203–205.

Seen in this light, the disciples' experience at Pentecost was indeed a subsequent baptism of the Spirit, but only because it marked a unique moment of transition from one covenant to another—one that is not normative or repeatable for believers today. While each of these experiences could be used as justification for a Spirit-baptism subsequent to salvation, the redemptive-historical significance of these events makes it clear that they were unique transitional moments in the history of redemption. Schreiner concludes:

The primary purpose for granting of the Spirit at Pentecost, to the Samaritans, to Cornelius and his friends, and to the Ephesians twelve is to testify that those who receive the Spirit are members of the people of God. The pouring out of the Spirit signifies that the new age has commenced... Membership in the people of God is not confined to the Jews; it includes Samaritans and Gentiles.¹⁰

Schreiner also notes that, “the giving of the Spirit fits with the missionary character of Luke-Acts.” This gives further evidence to the transitional nature of these experiences, because as Schreiner notes, “Luke sees in the dispensation of the Spirit the widening of the mission of the church and the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for in every case the gift of the Spirit is tied to the message of Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Lord.”¹¹ Schreiner is quick to note, “the primary purpose [of Spirit outpourings in Acts] was to certify that those who received the Spirit belonged to God's people.”¹² Taken together, we can see why the expansion of the gospel to non-Jewish people was accompanied by the outpouring of the Spirit. In this process, God was visibly demonstrating the full inclusion of all types of people into his new covenant community, thus

¹⁰ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 458–59.

¹¹ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 459.

¹² Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 459.

indicating the dawning of a new age in which Jesus is Lord and the Spirit is present within every believer (Ezek. 36:24–27; Jer. 31:31–34; cf. John 7:37–39; 1 Cor. 12:12–13; Eph. 1:13–14).¹³

Further evidence for this conclusion comes from how the biblical characters interpret these events. Upon close investigation, it's clear that the biblical characters do not interpret these something that is normative for believers in every generation. Instead, their interpretation centers around their surprise that God has poured out His Spirit on non-Jewish people (Gentiles) and therefore, has included them in New Covenant promises. For example, the circumcised believers who accompanied Peter to the Cornelius' house “were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles*” (Acts 10:45, emphasis added). Peter himself declared, “Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have?*” (Acts 10:47, emphasis added).¹⁴ What was remarkable to these early believers was not the notion of a subsequent baptism of the Spirit (indeed, there is no mention of this). Instead what surprised these early believers was that God was clearly indicating the full inclusion of both Jewish and non-Jewish people into the same group to be identified as His people (c.f. Eph. 2:11–3:6).

Because believers today are not in such a transitional period and because the Spirit has already established the full inclusion of both Jews and non-Jews into the body of Christ, there is

¹³ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 454–55.

¹⁴ This would also explain why the apostles were sent to Samaria to investigate the report of the Samaritans receiving the “the word of the Lord” in Acts 8:14–15. It would also explain why Paul asked the Gentiles in Ephesus if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed (Acts 19:2). Allison notes that Paul's question demonstrates what would have been normative for believers at this time—namely, the baptism of the Spirit *at conversion*. See Gregg R. Allison, “Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (2012): 16.4, 12.

no reason to expect a subsequent baptism of the Spirit (properly defined) beyond conversion.¹⁵ Additionally, there is no reason to attach an interpretive meaning of normativity to various experiences of the Spirit when such an understanding does not conform to the transitional nature of Spirit-baptism in the book of Acts. Of course, this raises an important question: how do we explain the variety of experiences people attribute to the Spirit beyond salvation?

Subsequent Experiences Today?

The above discussion provides a framework for how to interpret reports of people experiencing “the baptism of the Spirit” subsequent to their conversion. In a technical sense, they are most likely incorrect. As we’ve seen, the baptism of the Spirit distinctly refers to the cleansing work of the Spirit at conversion.¹⁶ However, such persons may be describing a genuine experience of the Spirit filling them, renewing them, and manifesting His presence in their life. This shouldn’t surprise us at all, as the Scriptures make clear that being filled with the Spirit manifests the power of God in our lives (John 14:23; Romans 8:5–11). Moreover, the apostle Paul exhorted believers in Ephesus to not “get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but *be filled by the Spirit*” (Eph. 5:18). Paul’s language is given as a present-tense imperative, which literally means to “go on being filled”—thus implying a continual, ongoing experience of being empowered and controlled by the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ In this case, we may disagree over

¹⁵ Boice argues, “there is not a single instance in the New Testament in which any believer is urged to be baptized with the Holy Spirit or even commanded to be, for the simple reason that he cannot be urged to seek something that has already taken place in his life. This baptism of the Holy Spirit or union with Christ is the foundation and basis from which all other personalized spiritual blessings flow.” *Foundations*, 398.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 769.

¹⁷ William Klein, “Ephesians” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Abridged Edition ed. by Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), Accordance notes on Ephesians 5:18. Klein writes, “The imperative makes it clear that this is a command for all Christians. The Greek present tense used here rules out any once-for-all reception of the Spirit but points to a continuous replenishment (lit., “go on being filled”)... Finally, the verb is passive: “Let yourselves be filled with the Spirit.” This is not a manufactured experience, though it can be rejected (cf. Gal 3:2, 5). There may, therefore, be successive fillings of the Spirit; indeed, the Christian life should be an uninterrupted filling. What this verse will *not* substantiate is the claim that after becoming a Christian, a single, additional, definitive filling is essential for completion.”

terminology (“baptism” vs. “filling”), but we can still affirm the *experience* as genuinely given by the Spirit.

The danger arises when a second baptism of the Spirit is seen as an indication of our spiritual worth or value in the eyes of God. In response, someone may claim to experience this baptism as a means of promoting their own status in front of others. In such a situation, we should graciously push back on a believer who uses this as a means of self-promotion. Such a person is not walking in the Spirit, because the Spirit bears witness of Jesus (John 16:13–14). Moreover, Paul tells us the fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22) and love is not self-seeking (1 Cor. 13:5).

Conclusion

Spirit-baptism is the work of Jesus whereby He cleanses us from sin and incorporates us into His church. This work occurs at conversion and not subsequent to it. The reason why we discover various outpourings of the Spirit in the book of Acts is because of the unique redemptive-historical nature of its events which mark the transition from the Old to the New Covenant age. In the present age, therefore, Spirit-baptism occurs for a person once and for all at their moment of conversion.

This conclusion should not lead someone to believe that the Spirit’s power or direction were unique to the first century. Even though Spirit-baptism in the book of Acts is set within a unique transitional time period, the Scriptures clearly exhort believers for every time period to be filled with and led by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:26). Believers who have been baptized into the body of Christ by His Spirit should, therefore, eagerly pray for and seek out the Spirit’s empowering presence for everyday life and ministry.

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