



Doctrine: The Holy Spirit

What the Holy Spirit Does in Us: 2, Baptizes

From earliest times there has been a desire in many Christians to experience the presence and power of God. People want more than a list of doctrines to believe and behaviors to live. This hunger has found expression in church history in various movements. The most recent iterations have been the Pentecostal (from 1901 onward) and Charismatic (1960's on) movements. They underscore a legitimate hope of experiencing God's powerful presence.

The idea that we might know the divine presence and power through a direct connection with the Holy Spirit is based on the Bible itself. In the Old Testament we read of God's Spirit working with great power in various people, at various times. But we also read God's promise, through Jeremiah (31:31-34), Ezekiel (36:24-27), and Joel (2:28-32), that he would enter into a new covenant with people in which he would replace their hard hearts with soft hearts, and on them write his law. He would put his Spirit into people, moving them to keep his law and making them all prophets. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the Messiah with the promise that he would baptize people in, or with, the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). Jesus encouraged this expectation, promising that "rivers of living water" (meaning, life in the Spirit) would well up from within any who came to him (John 7:37-39). Prior to his ascension he instructed the disciples to wait for John's promise to be fulfilled in them (Acts 1:5-8). Acts describes that happening. But what is this Spirit-baptism and how is it experienced?

There are three primary understandings of the baptism of the Spirit. *The Pentecostal* view is that the book of Acts describes the baptism of the Spirit as a one-time, post-conversion experience that is granted to Christians who satisfy certain conditions. Not all believers meet these conditions (such as, seeking it, separation from all known sin, total surrender and obedience, and adequate faith) and so, not all Christians have been baptized in the Spirit. While all Christians have the Holy Spirit not all have this deeper and second experience of the Holy Spirit and his power. Acts, they say, shows that speaking in tongues is the necessary evidence of being baptized in the Spirit.

The Charismatic view is that the baptism of the Spirit may occur with conversion but may occur later. They value speaking in tongues but do not believe that Acts shows it to be the only proof of Spirit-baptism.

Spiritual power is the result of being baptized in the Spirit. As with Pentecostalism, Charismatics believe certain conditions must be met and so the Christian community is two-tiered – those who have been baptized in the Spirit and have a fuller Christian life and those who have not.

The Traditional view (for lack of a better term) is that the baptism of the Spirit occurs at the moment of conversion for all believers. This is evidenced by an assurance that God is our Father (Romans 8:15), and by a transformed life. After our initial and one-time baptism in the Spirit, Christians can and should experience further "fillings" of the Spirit granting spiritual power, especially for ministry (though some refer to this as further "baptisms" in a less technical use of the term). I observe that when the Bible describes the effects of Spirit-given power it describes the person as "filled" with the Holy Spirit. The word "baptized" seems reserved for the initial event itself.

A traditional definition of Spirit-baptism might be... "Baptism in the Spirit is the initial work of Christ immersing a person in the Holy Spirit the moment they believe, thus uniting them to Christ and to other believers, such that they are changed and affected by the permanent indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit". As Paul wrote, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13 NIV). The word "baptized" in this verse is a Greek aorist indicating action occurring at a point in time, rather than ongoing or repeated action. And this, Paul says, is true of "all".

It is not possible in this article to fairly spell out the biblical arguments said to support the Pentecostal and Charismatic views, nor (as I think can be done) to refute them. While acknowledging some valuable aspects of these movements, one of the concerns is that their theology turns the reception of Spirit-baptism into a works-merited experience. This suggests that the best Jesus has for us is reserved for those who are worthy. That diminishes the graced-based and full salvation Christ purchased and promised us. Jesus gives all who simply come to him the Spirit, not like a trickle but like a river.

