

What does it mean “baptism in / with the Holy Spirit?”
A Series on the Holy Spirit - Baptism verses Filling: Part 2

“Baptism in / with the Holy Spirit” is mentioned by 4 people in the New Testament.

John the Baptist – baptizing a variety of people at the Jordan River

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He **will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** (Matt 3:11)

I baptized you with water; but He will **baptize you with the Holy Spirit.** (Mark 1:8)

John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will **baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**” (Luke 3:16)

I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, “He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who **baptizes in the Holy Spirit.**” (John 1:33)

Jesus – speaking to the apostles just prior to His ascension

for John baptized with water, but you will be **baptized with the Holy Spirit** not many days from now.” (Acts 1:5)

Peter – recounting an event to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, “John baptized with water, but you will be **baptized with the Holy Spirit.**” (Acts 11:16)

Paul – speaking to the Corinthian Christians about unity amid the diversity of spiritual gifts

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)

The meaning of “baptism with the Holy Spirit” has been the source of controversy in Christianity. In an attempt to understand this phrase, one of the first questions asked is whether “baptism of the Holy Spirit” took place at the time of regeneration or sometime after. Initially the biblical data clearly shows that Jesus’ promise of “baptism with the Holy Spirit” took place after regeneration.

On the first night after the Resurrection, Jesus makes His first appearance to the disciples and says, “receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).

One day during the following forty days, Jesus tells the apostles, “Before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5).

Significant for its recording in all of the gospels, John the Baptist’s prophecy (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) is fulfilled by Jesus’ statement.

Ten days later, Pentecost takes place where tongues of fire rest upon the apostles, who were already regenerated with the Holy Spirit, and they speak in a known foreign language that was not native to them (Acts 2:3-4).

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In this first instance of “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” the testimony is directed towards the devout Jews living in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5) who were very likely genuine Old Testament Believers.

In later instances, “baptism with the Holy Spirit” appears to take place coincident or very near to regeneration.

One significant instance is recorded twice in the book of Acts. Peter has a vision (Acts 10:9-17; 11:5-10), which he does not understand. When prompted by the Holy Spirit to visit the home of Cornelius, a “righteous God fearing and devout” Gentile, to preach the good news, the apostle Peter observes the Holy Spirit falling on them and identifies the event as “baptism with the Holy Spirit” reminiscent of Pentecost based on the supernatural events that took place (Acts 10:32-48; 11:12-18).

The event provides the meaning to Peter’s dream: the gospel is available to Gentiles (Acts 10:45-47; 11:17-18)

It is worthwhile noting that the Gentile Cornelius and his household were likely genuine Old Testament Believers.

In two other instances, it is not explicitly clear whether they exemplify “baptism of the Holy Spirit;” however, the presence of spectacular signs is suggestive of it, and they occur at or near the time of regeneration.

In Acts 8:5, Philip is proclaiming Christ to the Samaritans, who are mixed race Jews. The apostles Peter and John come down from Jerusalem to pray that they may receive the Holy Spirit. Until now, the apostles are uncertain if the Holy Spirit was available to non-Jews. When Peter lays his hands on them while praying, the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). There is no mention of this event being a “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” and no spectacular events are recorded here.

While the Acts 8:14-17 event appears to be the indwelling and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, there is another account of an apostle laying his hands on new Believers of Christ, which results in the Holy Spirit coming upon them. In this instance at Ephesus, Paul encounters twelve Old Testament Believers who were baptized by John the Baptist but were unaware of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7). When Paul lays his hands upon them, they begin to speak in tongues and prophesy. There is no indication if this was similar to Pentecost nor identified as “baptism by the Holy Spirit,” but the miracles suggest the possibility that it was.

Another question worth exploring in discovering the meaning of “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is: what purpose does it serve?

On the day of His Ascension, Jesus tells His apostles, “...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

In His last earthly words to the apostles, Jesus tells them that they will receive power, a supernatural power, such that it will authenticate them and their testimony of the gospel to the world.

The first indication of this supernatural power comes at Pentecost where the apostles have tongues of fire on them and speak in tongues (Acts 2:4). While not a fulfillment, Peter sees a similarity, prophesy in a variety of foreign tongues, to Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:14-21; Joel 2:28-32). Peter uses Joel’s prophecy to show that Jesus Christ will be the one who will pour out the Spirit on Israel in the latter days. The scene is amazing and memorable, so much so that when the “Holy Spirit fell” again (Acts 10:44), Peter identifies this outpouring of God’s Spirit as an immersion with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-16).

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At Pentecost, in the presence of devout Jews “from every nation,” the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” sets up Peter’s testimony of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:5-41), and about three thousand are saved (Acts 2:41).

When the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-45), the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” served as a testimony to the apostles that the gospel was intended for all men (Acts 11:1-18).

If Acts 8:14-17 was a “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” it served as a testimony to the apostles that the gospel was available to mixed race Jews.

If Acts 19:1-7 was a “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” it is difficult to understand its purpose. Perhaps Paul’s focus on “John’s baptism” indicated that there was a John the Baptist sect, and the tongues and prophesy served as a testimony that Jesus was the One that John the Baptist foretold.

While Jesus’ prophecy to His disciples (Acts 1:5) was fulfilled by the only two instances that the Bible identifies as “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” does it occur for all Believers?

The Bible does not indicate whether or not “baptism of the Holy Spirit” occurs for all Believers. The only two instances that it is recorded indicated that it does not occur for all Believers.

When the apostle Paul speaks of baptism by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), which on first glance may suggest that “baptism with the Holy Spirit” occurs for all Believers, he speaks of baptism in the figurative sense: immersion as the end of the old life and emersion as the birth of the new life. This becomes apparent when comparing to an earlier reference of baptism that Paul makes to the Corinthians.

“And all were baptized (Greek: “baptizō”, definition: to immerse) into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:2).

Paul speaks of “baptized into Moses” to symbolize the shared experience that defines the nation of Israel and marks the end of one life the nation has known to a new life of God’s promise. However, the context is that this physical association is not the basis for spiritual salvation for the nation of Israel, and Paul exhorts the Corinthians to avoid Israel’s mistakes (1 Cor 10:5-14).

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized (Greek: “baptizō”, definition: to immerse) 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)

With a similar grammatical construction, as Paul speaks of the indwelling Holy Spirit diversity of bestowed gifts, his phrase “baptized into one body” defines the unity of God’s church and marks the end of one’s life of selfishness and pride to a new life serving one another regardless of socioeconomic position and type of spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:4-27).

Another question worth exploring is what is the relationship between “baptism with of the Holy Spirit” and tongues?

While tongues are noted as a feature in both instances of “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” elsewhere the mention of tongues is not associated with “baptism of the Holy Spirit”.

In one instance, tongues resulted when Paul laid his hands on the recipients of the Holy Spirit (Act 19:6). In contrast, the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” took place without any human mediation.

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When Paul speaks to the church of Corinth about the spiritual gift of tongues (1 Cor 12:1-31; 14:1-40), he explains the purpose of the gift and how it should be exercised with restraint and in an orderly way. In contrast, the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is not something that the recipient controls.

When the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” occurred on Pentecost, a violent rushing wind heralded the event and tongues of fire distributed themselves among the disciples (Acts 2:2).

Taking Jesus’ words literally (Acts 1:5), the violent rushing wind that filled the house (Acts 2:1-4) would be the immersion with the Holy Spirit.

In the second instance of the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 10:44-46), Peter observed that “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15-16).

In other instances where the “Holy Spirit fell” and spectacular signs took place, the Bible never mentions the events as “baptism with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:13-17; 19:6).

Thus the second occurrence of the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” must have had features, other than tongues, that caused Peter to conclude that it was like Pentecost.

It is difficult to conclude that “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is a separate event from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (regeneration) which occurs when one expresses genuine faith. When the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” took place with the apostles (Acts 2:1-4), it was an event that occurred after their regeneration. When the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” took place with the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46), it was an event that occurred at the time of regeneration.

“Baptism of the Holy Spirit” is marked by supernatural features that occur around human beings and enables the recipients to glorify God with a known foreign language not native to the speaker. The two events also served very important purposes for the first century church: 1) a supernatural parallel to Joel’s prophesy which pointed to Jesus Christ, 2) a supernatural validation of the gospel and 3) a supernatural validation of the gospel’s intent for all people. On the question of whether “baptism with the Holy Spirit” occurs today, the Bible is silent.

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