

“Baptized!”

Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 2:36-41 ¹

¹³ Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to talk him out of it. “I am the one who needs to be baptized by you,” he said, “so why are you coming to me?”

¹⁵ But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.” So John agreed to baptize him.

¹⁶ After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy” (Matthew 3:13-17).

Now fast forward some three years as Peter shouts to the crowds at the Festival of Pentecost, ³⁶ “So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”

³⁷ Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” ³⁹ This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God.” ⁴⁰ Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!”

⁴¹ Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all (Acts 2:36-41).

These two scenes form the “bookends” of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In the first scene, God the Father speaks out of heaven at Jesus’ baptism and the God the Spirit descends in the form of a dove to rest on the shoulder of God the Son. This event, recorded in each of the four Gospels, is the source of our mental image of the Holy Spirit taking the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32), and I believe that this is also the first place in the Bible where all three Persons of the Trinity appear together in the text.

The second scene took place fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, at the Jewish Festival of Pentecost. The Bible tells us that *during the forty days after his crucifixion, [Jesus] appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.*

In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:3-5; notice the Trinity once more).

So it was that *on the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on Pentecost Sunday, 2009 (May 31).

Godly Jews from many nations were living in Jerusalem at that time. When they heard this sound, they came running to see what it was all about, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers (Acts 2:1-6). This second scene, the second “bookend,” records the conclusion of the sermon Peter preached that morning, and how the crowd responded to it.

As we’ve noted, this is Pentecost Sunday, and we could go in many directions with these texts, but this morning I want to focus on three areas of confusion that have grown out of the Pentecost experience: (1) “the baptism of the Holy Spirit”; (2) the spiritual gift of “speaking in tongues”; and finally (3), “being filled with the Spirit.” We’ll not be able to treat any of these exhaustively, but perhaps we can gain a little more understanding for the journey.

The key issue in seeking such understanding is to use a bifocal approach as we examine each text. On the one hand, we’ll do our best to understand what the particular passage seems to mean in its specific context, and on the other, we’ll enlarge that context to include the New Testament as a whole. It’s especially important to discern whether a particular text is congruent with the primary teachings of the New Testament or whether it represents some sort of exception, and if so, of what sort.

The matter of “**the baptism of the Holy Spirit**” is a prime example of the need for such discernment. Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38, for example, could be understood to mean that water baptism is prerequisite to receiving “the gift of the Holy Spirit”: *“Each of you must repent of your sins, turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ to show that you have received forgiveness for your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Another passage that has led to persistent misunderstanding is found in Acts 8:14-17: ¹⁴ *When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there.* ¹⁵ *As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁶ *The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.* ¹⁷ *Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

If we look at these two passages alone, apart from an examination of the whole New Testament, we might conclude that water baptism is a necessary prerequisite to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that the “laying on” of apostolic hands is necessary to receive the Holy Spirit, and therefore, that “*confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead*” is insufficient in itself to receive God’s gift of the Spirit’s presence in our lives (Romans 10:9). Do you begin to sense the problems here? Fortunately, clarity is not terribly difficult to discover. These are both “exceptions that prove the rule.”

With respect to water baptism and “Spirit baptism,” the overall witness of the New Testament is clearly that those who “*confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead*” receive the Gift or the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in that same moment, whether water baptism is present or not. As Paul put it:

- “*And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago*” (Ephesians 1:13).
- “*Those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all*” (Romans 8:9).

With respect to the “laying on of hands,” there’s no suggestion anywhere else that the laying on of apostolic hands was necessary before converts received the Spirit. For example, nothing is said about this being done to the Pentecostal believers in Acts 2, to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10, or to the Philippian jailer’s household in Acts 16.

The situation with Cornelius is especially helpful. Cornelius was a Roman army officer who “*was a devout man and who feared the God of Israel*” (Acts 10:22). He was a Gentile, a non-Jew, and this put him outside the boundary in which the Apostles intended to preach the Gospel. In order to breach this boundary, God sent visions both to Cornelius and to Peter, and this resulted in Peter’s being reluctantly willing to visit Cornelius in Caesarea and to tell him the Good News about Jesus.

The Bible says that *even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the message. The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. And there could be no doubt about it, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.*

Then Peter asked, “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:44-47).

These three “exception incidents” in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea each had a specific purpose as God began to help the Apostles and the other disciples understand what Jesus meant when He told them to “*tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

Those first believers were just as human as we are, and they had a hard time with the idea that God was really serious about creating a Kingdom of “*every tribe, language, people, and nation*” (Revelation 5:9). As we, too, admit in our more honest moments, they really wanted God to limit the Kingdom to people of their own sort.

The three exceptions in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea were divinely designed to emphasize the fact that God really was serious about the fact that in Christ “*there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female*” (Galatians 3:28), and that “*Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Romans 10:13).

The matter of water baptism in these passages is also the source of a great deal of confusion, and I’ll have to deal with that on another day. Perhaps this morning it’s sufficient to note that while water baptism preceded the gift of the Spirit in Jerusalem and in Samaria, such baptism followed the gift of the Spirit in Caesarea. Water baptism was neither the issue nor the point in these accounts.

The thrust of these three exceptions is to demonstrate beyond any possible doubt that God’s salvation applies first to the Jews, then to the hated half-blood Samaritans, and finally even to the despised Gentiles, such as we are. In recognition of their exceptional nature, these three experiences are often referred to as “the *Jewish Pentecost*,” “the *Samaritan Pentecost*,” and “the *Gentile Pentecost*.”

What, then, shall we make of the popular teaching these days that multitudes of Christians have never received the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” and that all such “unblessed” believers should seek this gift until they experience it? The first thing to note is that such teaching does not come from the New Testament. This error comes from the mistaken attempt to equate the *baptism* of the Spirit with the *spiritual gift* of “speaking in tongues,” or “unknown languages” (1 Corinthians 12:27-31).

There are at least two types of “**speaking in tongues**” in the New Testament. We see the first of these in the Jewish Pentecost, where the Apostles and other disciples were empowered to speak in known languages that they themselves had never learned so that the international Jews who had come to observe the Passover might hear the Gospel in their own languages. The second is found in the Gentile Pentecost, where “speaking in tongues” seems to refer to ecstatic speech that is not a known human language. The International Mission Board refers to such ecstatic speech as “private prayer language,” and such speech is what people usually mean when they refer to “speaking in tongues.”

While such ecstatic speech remains to this day as one of the thirty or so spiritual gifts named in the New Testament, we do well to note that ecstatic speech was the source of a great deal of confusion and conflict in the early church (and remains so today), and that what we call “the love chapter” of 1 Corinthians was written specifically about such conflict (1 Corinthians 12-14). It’s also important to note that neither of these kinds of speech is reported at the Samaritan Pentecost, which shows that neither should be considered normative or required.

To summarize all this, when taken as a whole, the New Testament teaches that the “baptism of the Spirit” is an event simultaneous with faith in Christ, that is never repeated, and that need not be sought as some “second blessing.” Further, the New Testament gives no instruction about being *baptized* with the Spirit, since that baptism takes place once for all at initial faith. We are baptized with or receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of our first faith in Jesus, becoming full citizens of God’s Kingdom with “all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto.” This baptism is a once-for-all experience, giving us access to all the glories of God’s inbreaking Kingdom.

But the New Testament does instruct believers to **be filled with the Spirit**, which is a different matter entirely (Ephesians 5:18). Being filled with the Spirit has to do with placing our lives at the Spirit’s disposal and under the Spirit’s control. Such filling is a moment-by-moment experience, repeated, renewed, and deepened throughout every moment of our lives, because the Spirit’s control of our lives is no more automatic because we’ve been born again than salvation is automatic because we’ve been born physically. God’s Spirit controls or “fills” our lives by invitation only, and this filling has to do not with salvation, but with power.

When Paul wrote, “*Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*” (Ephesians 5:18), his point was that the person who is filled with the Spirit will be controlled by the Spirit even as some persons are filled with and controlled by the desire for alcohol or other drugs. And the context of this verse makes it clear that Paul regarded this filling as an experience needed by every Christian, not some esoteric matter for the spiritually elite. Being filled with and controlled by God’s Spirit is absolutely essential for a normal Christian life. Anything less is *sub-normal*.²

Let me conclude by suggesting five steps toward such filling:

1. We acknowledge that we need God’s Spirit to fill and to control our lives, and we ask God to do this.
2. We abdicate all control of our lives, asking God to lead and guide us through Scripture, spiritual promptings, circumstance, and fellow believers.
3. We abandon any sin that we consciously tolerate in our lives, asking God to reveal any sin of which we’re not aware (Psalm 139:23-24).
4. We appropriate God’s powerful promises and life principles, found throughout the Bible.
5. We abide in Christ all the days of our lives, bearing eternal fruit through the Spirit’s work in us (John 14-15).

² See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Bombay, India: Gospel Literature Service, 1957).

And if we continue to do these things, Paul told us that our roots will go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. We will have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high and how deep His love really is. We will experience the love of Christ, though we will never fully understand it, and we will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God (Ephesians 3:17-19).

“Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).