

Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit

A plain-language summary of Gregg R. Allison's article

Introduction

The New Testament describes many ways the Holy Spirit works in Christians. He gives new life, helps believers understand God's Word, makes them more like Christ, gives spiritual gifts, strengthens them against sin, and empowers them for ministry. Two works are especially important here: baptism with the Holy Spirit and filling with the Holy Spirit. They are closely related, but not the same thing.

What Is Baptism with the Holy Spirit?

Baptism with the Holy Spirit is something Jesus does for every Christian when that person comes to faith. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit. Paul explains that all Christians have been baptized by one Spirit into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). The point is not that a few Christians receive a special spiritual experience that others lack. Rather, Spirit baptism is part of becoming a Christian. Through it, Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to the believer and brings that believer into his body, the church.

This means Spirit baptism has several important features. First, it happens at the beginning of the Christian life, alongside the other saving works of God such as new birth, justification, adoption, and union with Christ. Second, it is universal: every true Christian receives the Spirit. Third, it is purposeful: the Spirit unites believers to Christ and to his people. Fourth, it is lasting. A Christian does not need to keep being baptized with the Spirit again and again.

How Should We Understand the Book of Acts?

Some passages in Acts seem at first to show people believing in Jesus and then receiving the Holy Spirit later. Because of this, some Christians have taught that Spirit baptism is a second experience after conversion. The article argues that this is not the normal pattern the New Testament gives us.

Acts records a unique period in church history as the gospel moves from Jerusalem to Samaritans, Gentiles, and others. In some unusual moments, God made the Spirit's arrival

especially visible so the church would recognize that these new groups were truly included in Christ. Those exceptional cases should not become the rule for every Christian.

The broader pattern is that people receive the Holy Spirit when they believe the gospel. At Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out as the promised gift of the risen Christ. When Gentiles later believe, Peter describes their experience as the same gift the Jewish believers had received. When Paul meets disciples in Ephesus who have not received the Spirit, their lack of the Spirit shows that they had not yet understood and believed the full Christian gospel. The normal expectation is therefore simple: to belong to Christ is to have the Holy Spirit.

Baptism and Filling Are Different

Although every Christian is baptized with the Spirit at conversion, the New Testament also describes believers being filled with the Spirit many times afterward. Peter was filled with the Spirit when he spoke boldly before religious leaders. The church was filled with the Spirit when it prayed for courage to proclaim the gospel. Other believers were filled with the Spirit for particular acts of ministry or were described as people who were generally full of the Spirit.

This gives us an important distinction. Spirit baptism happens once, at the beginning of the Christian life. Spirit filling can happen repeatedly throughout the Christian life. A believer does not need another Spirit baptism, but every believer needs the Spirit's ongoing work and power.

What Does It Mean to Be Filled with the Spirit?

Ephesians 5:18 commands Christians to be filled with the Spirit. The command is ongoing: believers are to keep being filled. The idea is not that Christians must somehow obtain more of the Holy Spirit, as though the Spirit were a substance that could be measured out in portions. Every Christian already has the Spirit. Instead, Christians are called to yield themselves more fully to his influence, guidance, and power.

A Spirit-filled life shows itself in practical ways. In Ephesians 5, it produces worship, gratitude, loving relationships, and humble service. In Galatians 5, walking by the Spirit

means resisting the desires of the sinful nature and displaying the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In Acts, being filled with the Spirit often produces courage and effectiveness in ministry.

Being filled with the Spirit is therefore not mainly about a dramatic emotional experience. God may give powerful experiences of his presence, but the deeper evidence is a life increasingly shaped by Christ: greater holiness, love, courage, gratitude, and usefulness in God's work.

A Needed Balance

Christians sometimes fall into one of two errors. One error is to divide believers into two classes: ordinary Christians and Christians who have received a special baptism with the Spirit. The New Testament does not support that division, because all Christians have received the Spirit and have been brought into Christ's body.

The opposite error is to react so strongly against abuses connected with the Holy Spirit that we barely speak about him at all. The Christian life cannot be lived through willpower, knowledge, or discipline alone. We need the Spirit for holiness, prayer, worship, unity, courage, understanding Scripture, resisting temptation, and fruitful ministry.

The right response is to hold both truths together: every Christian has already received the Holy Spirit, and every Christian must continually depend upon the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Spirit baptism is Christ's once-for-all work of giving the Spirit to new believers and joining them to his church; Spirit filling is the Spirit's repeated work as believers yield to him for holy living and faithful service. The Christian life therefore begins and continues through the Spirit's gracious power, calling every believer to walk by the Spirit and depend on him continually.

Source: Gregg R. Allison, "Baptism with and Filling of the Holy Spirit," Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 16.4 (2012): 4–21. This handout is a simplified summary of the article's argument, not the original text.