

What Is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?

Are the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the filling of the Holy Spirit the same?

–Julie

This question arose in a Bible study a neighbor attended, and she passed it to me.

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Dear Julie,

Let's start by reviewing an important rule of biblical interpretation: the principle of progressive revelation. Just as the New Testament interprets the Old, so the epistles interpret the gospels and Acts.

The epistles deliver the final word on doctrine, which is a key reason they were written. The Gospels and Acts are background.

Some churches assume the book of Acts is the blueprint for the entire church age. They assume we should emulate what took place in Acts and base some of their doctrines and practices regarding the Holy Spirit on that supposition.

This presents a problem. In view of the rule of progressive revelation, the book of Acts cannot be normative for doctrine regarding one's experience with the Holy Spirit.

Acts is a transitional period between the Old Testament dispensation of law and the New Testament dispensation of grace. This conclusion is clear from the content of the book itself. It is questionable if we should apply to the entire church age the historical accounts of a transitional period.

These are two significant reasons to refer to the epistles for our *pneumatology*, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

What is the baptism of the Holy Spirit according to the epistles?

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:13

We become members of the body of Christ through a baptism in the Holy Spirit.

From this text, it is clear that conversion to faith in Christ is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is not a post-conversion experience. It *is* our conversion.

We find ourselves in an uncomfortable posture if we try to distinguish our conversion from the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Such a view would force us to say that Christians are not members of Christ's body until they have such a post-conversion experience. Scripture

consistently tells us that faith in Christ unites us to him and makes us members of his body.

Equally striking is Paul's affirmation in Titus 3:5-7,

... he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This tells us that baptism in the Holy Spirit regenerates us and results in our justification. If we distinguish between regeneration and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, then we must assert that we are only justified after a post-conversion experience with the Holy Spirit.

Justification means "declared righteous." That would imply we are not forgiven and accepted by God as righteous until we have this post-conversion experience. That would be heresy.

Regeneration and the Holy Spirit

From these texts, we must conclude that the biblical definition of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is regeneration, our conversion experience when we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

The epistles never distinguish between two types of Christians: those who have been *baptized with the Holy Spirit* versus those who have not.

What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

As for being filled with the Holy Spirit: Is it possible to be a Christian and not be filled with the Holy Spirit? Apparently so.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, Ephesians 5:18

The injunction, *be filled with the Spirit*, is in the present continuous tense. We are encouraged to ask God regularly to fill us with the Holy Spirit.

Christians will have post-conversion experiences with the Holy Spirit, perhaps accompanied by spiritual gifts. We are free to cherish such experiences of personal revival or those of others. What we call them does not invalidate their reality.

From this we learn...

- The epistles take precedence over the book of Acts for questions of doctrine.
- The term *baptism in the Holy Spirit* in the epistles refers to our conversion experience in coming to Christ. It does not refer to a post-conversion experience.

- Christians need to be diligent in continuing to be filled with the Holy Spirit.