

Baptism and the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts

Water Baptism vs Baptized with the Spirit and Power

The book of Acts begins with Jesus' parting words to His apostles before His ascension to the right hand of God the Father. In His opening statement Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, and He does this by distinguishing the coming of the Spirit from the baptism of John. "For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:5) John had testified the same of his baptism, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matthew 3:11, also in all the other Gospels: Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33)

St Peter takes note of this distinction, and uses it to explain the very amazing events at Cornelius's House. "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" (Acts 11:16)

So there are two types of baptisms in the book of Acts, what the old theologians called *baptismus flaminis* (the outpouring of special gifts of the Holy Spirit) and *baptismus fluminis* (the Baptism of water which is a Sacrament of the remission of sins). (See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.289, note 53)

Water Baptism: John's, Jesus' and the Church's Baptism (*baptismus fluminis*)

Of these two types of baptism, the first is the baptism of John, and then commanded (and expanded) by Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20) and given to all the converts on Pentecost, etc. (This is the normal baptism that continues today. We see many of these in Acts, including Acts 2:41; 8:12-16, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16). This Baptism is by water and the word for the forgiveness of sins, and it comes with (what theologians call) the 'common' gifts of the Holy Spirit: faith, trust in God, confession of Jesus, etc. So the Holy Spirit is certainly given in this water baptism.

Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

1 Corinthians 12:13 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.

Titus 3:5 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...

Also Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3) in which the Holy Spirit descends in the form as a dove.

We note, then, that the Holy Spirit is certainly present in 'normal' Christian baptism. But there is a unique baptism of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the Apostle's preaching.

Baptism in the Spirit and the Book of Acts (*baptismus flaminis*)

The baptism of the Spirit is a different type of baptism that, while connected to water baptism, occurs in a few unique instances in Acts and the apostolic churches (as seen in the epistles, etc.). It is the baptism promised by John and Jesus, and occurs, for the first time, on Pentecost.

Pentecost, Acts 2

As noted above, the promise of the baptism of the Spirit is found in Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33, and especially note Acts 1:5. Jesus expands on this promise:

Acts 1:7-8 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

These are the last words of Jesus recorded by Luke. This promise is fulfilled first on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-4 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

A few things to note: first, while all the disciples were gathered together (about 120, see Acts 1:15), it seems clear from the text that the Holy Spirit fell on the Apostles (the 12, without Judas and with Matthias). Second, all the Apostles who, on Pentecost, were baptized by the Holy Spirit had all been baptized before (presumably by John or one of the other Apostles). Also, they all had possession of the Holy Spirit *before* Pentecost. For example, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them in John 20:22, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In fact, their very confession of Jesus is an indication that they have the Holy Spirit. "No man can say 'Jesus is Lord' apart from the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3) So, the baptism of the Holy Spirit *does not* mean that the Holy Spirit was not already present. Third, this baptism of the Holy Spirit is manifest with signs, and especially the speaking in foreign (and previously unknown) tongues. (Please note how this speaking in tongues fulfills Jesus' promise that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, Acts 1:8). Finally, notice that those who saw the baptism of the Holy Spirit and hear Peter's sermon were themselves *not* baptized by the Spirit, but with water. Acts 2:41: So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit in Samaria, Acts 8

The second incident of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is in Acts chapter eight. After the martyrdom of Stephen the disciples scatter from Jerusalem. Deacon Philip goes down to Samaria, preached Christ and performs miracles (Acts 8:5-7). Many were believed and were baptized (with water), Acts 8:12-13, including Simon the sorcerer.

The disciples in Samaria send a note to Jerusalem, and the Apostles Peter and John hear the good news, are sent down to Samaria, and baptized the new believers with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:15-17 [Peter and John] came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for He had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Note, first of all, the distinction between water baptism in the name of Jesus and the reception of the Holy Spirit, and, second, that the Holy Spirit comes through the laying on of the Apostle's hands. Simon notices this:

Acts 8:18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money.

What follows is a controversy about a wicked and false desire for the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit at Cornelius' House, Acts 10 and 11

The third incident of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is at Cornelius' house. Cornelius lived in Caesarea, and was a centurion, that is a soldier in the Roman Army. This is important to remember, for until this time the church consisted of Jewish and Samaritan converts (even if the Jewish converts were from all over the world), but no Gentiles, and even though Jesus had commanded that the church would extend to all nations (Matthew 28:19), His command was yet to be kept. *And*, let it be noted, the disciples were slow to include the Gentiles in the church. (This is really the central conflict in the last two-thirds of Acts.)

What then unfolds in Acts 10 and 11 is a series of events orchestrated by the Holy Spirit to bring the Sacrament of Baptism (i.e. water baptism) to the Gentiles. First, God speaks to Cornelius by an angel in a vision and tells him to send for Peter (Acts 10:1-8). Second, the next day Peter is praying on the roof and has a vision of a sheet descending with all sorts of unkosher animals, which the Lord commands Peter to kill and eat. "No, Lord, I've never eaten anything unclean." To which the Lord replies, "What God has made clean, do not call common." (Acts 10:9-16) Third, as Peter is trying to sort out the meaning of the vision, the dispatch from Cornelius arrives and asks for him. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them. (Acts 10:17-23a) Fourth, the next day Peter travels to Cornelius' home, and reports that while this visit would be illegal under Jewish law, the vision of the unclean animals is the Lord's teaching that this visit is good. Peter says, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection." (Acts 10:23b-29) Cornelius tells Peter about his vision of the angel. (Acts 10:30-33) Sixth, Peter preaches the Gospel, beginning with his understanding that "God shows no partiality," and continuing with the life, death, resurrection and coming of judgment of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 10:34-43) Seventh, the Holy Spirit falls on all who hear Peter's sermon. (Acts 10:44-48)

This is a very unique event. The Holy Spirit falls on the believers before they were baptized with water. This is the only time that things unfold in this order, and as we see this astonishes the Jewish believers. "And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles." (Acts 10:45) Peter responds to this baptism of the Holy Spirit by calling for the gift of water baptism. "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47) And all who believed were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

What we see in all of this is that the Lord is pushing through the Jewish inclination to keep separate from the Gentiles, and showing them that even the Gentiles have a part in the Lord's kingdom. The

Lord teaches this to Peter first by the vision of the unclean animals, and second by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentile believers. (As was noted before, this tension between the Jews and Gentiles in the church will be a major theme of the last two-thirds of the book of Acts as well as much of Paul's epistles.) This is seen when Peter returns to Jerusalem and is criticized for eating with Gentiles. (Acts 11:1-3) Peter recounts these events and concludes "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:15-18)

This, by all accounts, is a unique event in the history of the church. The Lord overcomes the Apostle's reluctance to go to the Gentiles by pouring out His Spirit on the unbaptized Gentiles. Water baptism quickly follows the baptism of water and fire.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit of the Twelve Ephesians, Acts 19:1-7

This account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus is the fourth and final time we hear of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts. It is a difficult text in this regard: some have seen in this text the teaching that John's baptism was incomplete, and that those who were baptized by John were later baptized in the name of Jesus.

But what is not difficult from the text is to see that they twelve Ephesian disciples were baptized with water, and then, through the laying on of the hands of the Apostle Paul, the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs. "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying." (Acts 19:5-6) Here again we see that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs through the hands of the Apostles (in this case St Paul), and that it is accompanied with signs and wonders to validate the apostolic preaching.

These four instances are the cases of the baptism of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts which fulfill the promise of John and Jesus that He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. There were, apparently, other cases of the baptism of the Holy Spirit which are not recorded in Acts, but are seen in the letters of Paul, especially 1 Corinthians 12-14. The question that remains is of great importance: while we know that the church still baptizes with water, does the baptism of the Holy Spirit occur as it did in the Acts of the Apostles?

Still Today?

Is Jesus still baptizing with the Holy Spirit and with fire today? It is certain that the Holy Spirit is given in water baptism (see again Acts 2:38; John 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5), and that the Holy Spirit dwells in the church. But the following four considerations indicate that the unique baptism of the Holy Spirit which accompanied the apostle's ministry is *not* normative for the Lord's church.

- First, not everyone who was baptized (with water) later received the baptism of the Spirit.

In fact, of the (at least) nine occurrences of water baptism in the book of Acts, two are followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and one is *preceded* by the Holy Spirit precedes baptism by water (Acts 10). Pentecost is a unique instance where three-thousand are baptized with water after the Apostles

were baptized by the Holy Spirit. So we see that already in the book of Acts that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not the normal and regular form of baptism.

On the other hand, every convert to the Holy Church in Acts is baptized with water. This is why the church has taught that the baptism of water in the name of the Holy Trinity is a sacrament which works faith and gives the forgiveness of all sin, while the unique baptism of the Holy Spirit is not a sacrament, but a sign of the unique office of Jesus (ascended to the right hand of God) and of the apostles (sent by Jesus to teach His Word).

- Second, as just mentioned, the signs that accompanied Jesus' ministry also accompany the apostolic preaching, showing that their word was pure. (See Acts 2:22; Hebrews 2:4)

St Peter preached in his first sermon, “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know--” (Acts 2:22) The signs that Jesus accomplished are an attestation that He is sent by God. “It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.” (Hebrews 2:3b-4) The signs Jesus performed, and especially the giving of the Holy Spirit, are the Father's witness to the Lord Jesus' divinity and the marvel of His work (see also John 5:36).

- Third, the baptism of the Spirit is connected (in at least in two instances) directly with the Apostles (and their hands).

Especially, here, see Acts 8:18 and 19:6. The Lord now has His Apostles before His face, and not here on earth. With them have gone the signs that accompanied their ministry. What is left, of course, are their words, especially the apostle's John, Peter, James, and Paul. Their signs continue to testify of the authority of their writing.

- Fourth and finally, the prophet Joel prophesied the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:30-31, quoted by St Peter in explanation of the Pentecost miracle in Acts 2:16-21). Especially on the limited nature of the unique outpouring is Joel 2:23-24.

Here is the text of Joel 2:23: “Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD your God: for he hath given you the former rain moderately, and he will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain, and the latter rain in the first month.” (Joel 2:23) A close look at the context of this passages indicates that the Lord would pour out a “double-dose” of His Holy Spirit together in the first month, that these gifts come altogether at the beginning of the Church.

In this regard, it is also useful to consider the promise of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.” (1 Corinthians 13:8)

Conclusion

The book of Acts stands as a marvelous testimony of the Lord Jesus' continued goodness and mercy on His church. He did (as does) indeed keep His promise that He would be with us, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). His baptism continues to wash away sins and bring His kingdom in our midst.

So also the signs that accompany the Apostles and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, by this testimony we know that their doctrine and teaching is given by God. Like the prophets before them and even our Lord Himself, the miracles performed by the prophets point to the truth of the Scriptures. We, like all our brothers and sisters who witnessed the miracle of Pentecost and were baptized that day, we continue to devote ourselves “to the apostles' teaching and fellowship [in] the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42) May the Lord continue to keep us in His gifts until He comes again in glory. Amen.

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Addendum: Jesus' Ascension and the Giving of the Holy Spirit

There are a few things to note on the connection between the giving of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Ascension. These are all part of a reflection on John 7:37-39:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John 7:37-39

- (1) The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.
- (2) In the beginning, man was created in the image of God. This includes bearing the Holy Spirit.
- (3) This gift of the Holy Spirit is lost in the Fall.
- (4) This does not mean that the Holy Spirit is absent from sinners (see Psalm 51), but that the Holy Spirit does not dwell with man as He did before the Fall.
- (5) Jesus, the Christ (Anointed One), is the perfect man, and as such is the bearer of the Holy Spirit *par excellance* [sic?]. Note that this is the “Man” Jesus who bears the Spirit. The Son eternally possesses the Spirit, it is the Man Christ, united with His divinity, that is given the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- (6) When Jesus ascends to the right hand of God, He takes up the full use of His Divine Nature through His assumed human nature (*genius maeistaticum* [sic?]).
- (7) At the ascension, then, the Holy Spirit proceeds through the assumed human nature of Christ!
- (8) Because the Holy Spirit now proceeds through the man Christ, part of the new testament is that the Holy Spirit is given again to redeemed mankind. A gift had by faith.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit may not be limited to the signs and tongues because (1) Peter uses Joel to explain Pentecost: “I will pour My Spirit upon *all* flesh.”, and (2) St John preached that Jesus would baptize “you” i.e. all the people gathered “with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11).