

Holy Spirit Baptism

Holy Spirit baptism is a Biblical concept, but a review of the evidence reveals that it had a special purpose and limited application. No one experiences it today.

“I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mk. 1:8).

“John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Ac. 1:5).

“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’” (Ac. 11:16).



“Baptism” is an immersion, the act of being submerged or completely overwhelmed by something. So, to be baptized with water is to be submerged or “buried” in water (Rom. 6:4). Likewise, to experience a baptism of suffering (Matt. 20:22) is to be overwhelmed with affliction.

The Holy Spirit is that aspect of Deity that embodies God’s power in the physical world. The Spirit “moves” (Gen. 1:2), “speaks” (Matt. 10:20), and empowers human beings to do things they ordinarily could not do (Judg. 14:6; 1 Cor. 12:7-11).

“Holy Spirit baptism,” therefore, is an experience in which the Holy Spirit totally overwhelms a person with His power, providing convincing evidence of God’s presence. John the Baptist promised that Jesus would extend that experience to some.

There are many references to the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit among the believers in the first century church (Ac. 8:6-7, 13; 1 Cor. 12-14; Gal. 3:5). But these widespread “spiritual gifts” were limited in scope and were conveyed only through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Ac. 8:17-18; 19:6). A major part of the Spirit’s work in these gifts was to reveal the message of salvation that the apostles and prophets preached (1 Pet. 1:12; Eph. 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:3). However, there are only two cases in which a *baptism* with the Holy Spirit is said to have occurred. A study of these two cases yields some useful insights.

The first case involved the apostles, shortly after Jesus’ resurrection. Repeating John’s promise, Jesus had told them that they would “be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Ac. 1:5). His promise was fulfilled a few days later at Pentecost, when “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” and began to speak in other tongues (Ac. 2:1-4f). The supernatural events of that day led several thousand Jews to respond to Peter’s message.

The second case occurred several years later with the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the first Gentiles to obey the gospel. As Peter preached to them, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word” and they began to “speak with tongues and magnify God” (Ac. 10:44-46). Later, he explained to his colleagues in Jerusalem that “the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 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’” (Ac. 11:15-16). Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost to find something similar to what he had witnessed. This event demonstrated that the Gentiles were accepted by God through the gospel without first becoming Jews.

To summarize: Holy Spirit baptism occurred when the gospel was first offered to the *Jews* (at Pentecost), and when the gospel was first offered to the *Gentiles* (the household of Cornelius). Years later, Paul wrote that there is “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5), an obvious reference to water baptism (Ac. 2:38; Ac. 8:36-38; Ac. 10:47-48; Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:22). We conclude, therefore, that Holy Spirit baptism was a temporary phenomenon with a targeted purpose: to open the gates of the kingdom to the Jews and to the Gentiles. Once that purpose was fulfilled, it never occurred again.

— David King