



Practical Implications of Terms Describing the Baptism in the Holy Spirit

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The experience received by the disciples on the Day of Pentecost and by many thousands of Christian believers since is most commonly referred to as the baptism in the Holy Spirit. John's prediction concerning Christ was, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). Christ repeated this expression as a promise: "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5). The term was used again in reference to the experience after its fulfillment (Acts 11:16). But the Scriptures do not limit themselves to a single term in discussing the experience.

In the description of that first Pentecost, for example, several different expressions are found: "Baptized with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 1:5); "the Holy Ghost is come upon you" (1:8); "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost" (2:4); "I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh" (2:17); "he hath shed forth this" (2:33); "ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (2:38).

A similar variety of expression is found in the account of Cornelius' household: "The Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word" (Acts 10:44); "on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost" (10:45); "these ... have received the Holy Ghost as well as we" (10:47); "then remembered I the word of the Lord, ... ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost" (11:16); "God gave them the like gift as he did unto us" (11:17).

None of the terms is without significance, and taken collectively or singly they offer practical insights concerning the nature of this marvelous experience. Several observations are suggested by these phrases:

The Suddenness of the Experience

Being baptized with the Spirit does not suggest attaining something by degrees over a long time. It does not mean a gradual process of sanctification or a growth in grace. Instead, it suggests an event at some fixed point in a man's history. John baptized Jesus in the Jordan at a particular moment of a particular day; Jesus might have marked it on the calendar as a memorable date. Forever afterward He could speak of having been baptized at a certain time and place, for a baptism is not a process but an event.

The idea of suddenness is further supported by expressions like pour out, shed forth, come upon, and fell upon. Each connotes something occurring at a particular moment of time.

Such was the experience of the disciples waiting in the Upper Room. The language of the passage leaves no doubt: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come ... suddenly there came a sound ... and they were all filled" (Acts 2:1-4). It was an event of magnitude on a certain day, such as to attract the attention of a multitude, and it is still commemorated among Christians on the third hour of that day. Let no man think his daily efforts to become more Christlike, however successful, are somehow equivalent to the experience of the disciples. The believer is not climbing a spiritual stairway with the top step marked "baptized" or "filled" with the Spirit. He is rather presenting himself submissively to the Baptizer until he is submerged in the Spirit.

The Impact of the Experience on the Individual

A baptism is an overwhelming experience. The Greek equivalent may be translated “to make whelmed.” One might well imagine the Holy Spirit’s impact when the Spirit engulfs a person even though he himself has not experienced it. But perhaps the impingement is more powerfully suggested in the passage concerning Cornelius’ household, in which it is said the Holy Spirit fell upon them (Acts 10:44; 11:15). It might have been said that He embraced them, violently seized them, or pressed upon them. Such phrases hardly suggest an encounter about which one might be unaware or unsure. The Jewish Christians observing the event knew both what was happening to the members of that Gentile household and what had happened to themselves. They exclaimed, “The Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). It is evident that the Holy Spirit suddenly entered their lives to change them. When the Spirit of God has a mighty encounter with a person, the trajectory of that person’s life is changed. A Christ-persecuting Saul becomes a Christ-preaching Paul. Cringing disciples become bold ambassadors of their Lord. Sorrowing saints become joyful and radiant.

Considered in its simplest form, perhaps the phrase, “fell upon them,” relates to the Old Testament promise of the Spirit being outpoured as rain (Joel 2:23ff; Zechariah 10:1). How refreshing are the welcome showers after a long drought. The farmer rejoices to hear raindrops falling on the brittle leaves and may in his joy even expose himself to the drenching shower. And on the soul dry and dusty in its long search for a lasting joy, the Spirit falls as the latter rain.

The Initiatory Nature of the Experience

Baptism signifies an initiatory experience. Thus, it becomes clear that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is not the culmination of Christian experience, but the beginning of a great adventure in Christian living that the New Testament calls “life in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25 and passim). The Spirit does not come briefly to place His stamp of approval on the believer by giving an utterance in other tongues. He comes to abide as a companion, helper, and source of strength. Paul promised exciting things for the one who walks in the Spirit. He found it a life without condemnation (Romans 8:1), a life of assurance and confident approach to God (Romans 8:15,16), a life in which human limitations are supplemented by the Spirit’s abilities (Romans 8:26,27).

The Experience as an Addition to the Christian

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you,” promised Jesus (Acts 1:8). The term means to supervene; therefore the verse might be paraphrased, “after the Holy Ghost is added to you.” Here is the plus of the Pentecostal believer. When a thorny problem threatened the young Church, they came together in council to find a wise solution. The answer was found and expressed in a letter bearing this preface: “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us ...” (Acts 15:28). The Church plus the Spirit constitutes an invincible entity.

It is no wonder then that the Spirit-filled believer is “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8,9, NAS). Why does he succeed for Christ where others fail? Why is he radiant when others are despondent? Why does he keep springing back into the battle of life after every blow? The plus quality is the abiding Holy Spirit.

The Adequacy of the Experience

“They were all filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:4). Thus the Scriptures speak of the disciples in the Upper Room; thus, they speak of Peter and of Paul (Acts 4:8; 9:17; 13:9).

Moreover, it is regularly stated that believers were full of the Spirit (Acts 6:3,5; 7:55; 11:24). Such passages testify to the liberality of God in giving of His Spirit. The term suggests repleteness, being crammed full (as a net), being leveled up (as a basket with grain), being satisfied. Joined with the phrase poured out, it gives a picture of water flowing from above into an earthen waterpot below, until the waterpot is filled to the brim.

Vacuums are contrary to nature and difficult to maintain. This is true also of the spiritual. Jesus’ parable suggests the impossibility of maintaining the heart a vacuum (Matthew 12:43–45). Swept and garnished, it needs to be filled with something. Cleansed of sin, the heart needs to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

God does not give sparingly; He gives fully. Every Israelite had enough manna. Every one of the five thousand had ample bread. He satisfies. “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (John 4:14). The “restless ones” of this age contrast with the Spirit-filled. One thing is clear — those who find it necessary to join the restless pursuit of questionable pleasures are not full of the Holy Spirit.

It would indeed be strange if in Acts it were written, “Seek ye out seven men whose lives reveal some measure of the Holy Ghost.” Rather, when God prescribed the kind of men He would use to minister to the needy of His Church, He insisted on men “full of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 6:3). He sought men whose lives fully manifested the Spirit’s control, whose character was defined by the “fruit of the Spirit,” whose ministering was through the power of the Spirit. God’s standard and wish for His people is not a mediocre or average life. He wills that they be entire, fully developed in character, radiantly alive.

The term full of the Spirit invites one additional observation. Other terms emphasize the act or occurrence of the Spirit’s coming — “came upon,” “poured out,” “shed forth,” “received,” “were filled.” In contrast, full suggests a state of being, a condition resulting from the experience itself. The initial impact is not to be lost. Be not content that once you were filled; the normal state of the New Testament Christian is “full of the Holy Ghost.”

The Origin of the Experience

The terms used to describe the Spirit’s coming upon the believers indicate that the experience originates with God. He pours out or sheds forth His Spirit. He baptizes or fills; He gives the gift. The Spirit fell upon men — obviously, the experience did not originate with them.

This suggests the necessity of complete submission to God’s sovereignty at the time of receiving the Spirit. As the candidate for water baptism submits himself to the minister, so the believer yields himself to Christ for the baptism in the Spirit. The believer’s own will, insofar as it may conflict with God’s will, must be surrendered. He cannot be baptized with the Spirit while dictating to God how he must receive, or defiantly withholding certain areas of his life from God’s control. At that moment, he wishes only what God wishes for him.

The Scriptures record that “God gave them the ... gift” (Acts 11:17), and they were to “receive the gift” (Acts 2:38). These two phrases spell out man’s prerogatives in the experience. Man does not merit the baptism in the Spirit; he cannot earn it. It is the gift of God. However, the term receive implies taking the gift in contrast to having it offered. Therefore, the believer should not imagine that he cannot do anything to receive. He does not wait passively for the magic moment to arrive. Having submitted himself to God’s sovereign will for himself, he by faith must take — receive — the Holy Spirit. “Receive ye the Holy Ghost.”

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