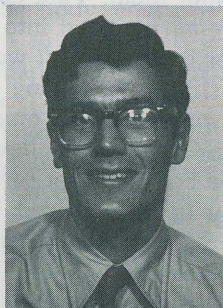


Baptism in the Holy Spirit  
by Vern S. Poythress

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# BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT



VERN S. POYTHRESS

Dr. Vern S. Poythress, a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, is presently pursuing graduate study at Cambridge University. The Summer issue 1974 Westminster *Bulletin* states that he "completed an honors course for the M.Div., also earned the Th.M., and made a clean sweep of the competitive prizes." May 18 is Pentecost Sunday, thus making Dr. Poythress' article timely for this month's issue.

"For John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). So Jesus promised His disciples after the resurrection. A few days later, on the day of Pentecost, His words were wonderfully fulfilled: the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to spread through the whole world the news of Jesus' work (Acts 2:1-39).

Yet the words of Jesus in Acts 1:5 have stimulated much controversy between Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Protestants. What does Jesus mean by this mysterious "baptism with the Holy Spirit"? Should we understand this term to refer to a second transforming experience, subsequent to becoming a Christian? Do many Christians today still need this "second baptism" in order to have the power to live victoriously for Christ? And what does this baptism consist in? Power for witness? Boldness? Holiness? Miraculous gifts? New life? All five of these?

These questions are hard for two reasons. First, in Acts 1 Jesus does not fully explain what He means; He does not answer all the questions we might have about the "baptism." Instead, He sits down at the Father's right hand and *gives* the Holy Spirit. He moves directly to the *reality*. Secondly, it is not clear from the immediate context in Acts how far the disciples' experience is a model for our own. The disciples were presumably regenerate *earlier* (Matt. 16:16;

John 20:27-29), and then, *later*, were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Are we to expect the same chronological order today?

## Pentecost not repeatable

To begin with, note that Luke does not explicitly *teach* that the chronological order of the disciples' Pentecost experience is a model for ours. He simply describes the events. And, in a certain sense, our experience will never duplicate Pentecost, because the day of Pentecost is a historical watershed that cannot be repeated.

The New Testament church can have only one beginning. Jesus describes this fact by saying, "Lo, I am with you *always, to the close of the age*" (Matt. 28:20). Having once given His Spirit and thereby come to be with His people, He does not intend to withdraw *ever*. His special presence with the church began at Pentecost and continues "to the close of the age."

Let's look at Matthew 28:20 and at Pentecost more closely. (a) Both Matthew 28 and Acts speak of a presence of Jesus in power. (b) Both passages see this presence of Jesus as a gift of deriving from His exaltation to the right hand of God: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18); "Being therefore exalted at the right of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:33). (c) In both passages Christ commissions the disciples to spread the gospel to all nations by His power (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

Clearly, then, Jesus' promise in Matthew 28:20 begins to have its fulfillment at Pentecost. The Spirit given at Pentecost remains "to the close of the age" because this is the manner that Jesus Himself has chosen to be "with" them to the close of the age. The water of the Spirit which "flowed over the falls" at Pentecost need not go over it again in order to irrigate the whole valley of church history below.

The once-for-all nature of Pentecost is confirmed by the Apostle John. He observes that the gift of the Spirit has an intimate connection with Christ's ascension. "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit *had not been given, because* Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:37b-39). The *definitive* (once-for-all) giving of the Spirit is no more "repeatable" than the glorification of Jesus.

## The meaning of Pentecost

In coming this far we have already begun to explore the Biblical meaning of the events of Acts 2. As in the rest of the Book of Acts, so also in Acts 2, the ultimate focus of attention is on the risen Christ (cf. Acts 1:1-2). As exalted Lord, He pours out His own Holy Spirit on the church. Thereby He comes to dwell with them in a new way (cf. John 14:18-23; 16:7-10). Then He begins to manifest Himself as



Lord by the preaching to all nations (Acts 2:8-11) and the building of His church (Acts 2:41-47).

Furthermore, the Pentecost in Acts is intimately connected with the Old Testament feast of Pentecost. In the feast of Pentecost or feast of first-fruits (Lev. 23:15-20), Israel offers to the Lord the first-fruits of the harvest. This symbolic feast finds fulfillment in Acts, when the "first-fruits" of all nations begin to be gathered into the church (cf. Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:15; Jas. 1:18) as an "offering . . . sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:16). Thus Pentecost is the birthday of the church in its specifically New Testament, post-ascension form.

### Baptism in the Holy Spirit

Still, we have not yet determined what Scripture means by "baptism in the Holy Spirit." In Acts 1:5, does "baptism in the Holy Spirit" refer to the events of Pentecost in all their uniqueness? In that case it is not repeatable. Or does the term "baptism in the Holy Spirit" refer more broadly to a transformation of all believers, a transformation for which Pentecost is the unique and definitive foundation?

**I Corinthians 12:13** — The second explanation is the right one. The easiest way to see this is by comparing the language of Acts 1:5 with the doctrinal teaching in the epistles. Only one place in the epistles, namely I Corinthians 12:13, speaks of "being baptized in the Holy Spirit." If Acts 1:5 and I Corinthians 12:13 turn out to be talking about the same thing, we can use I Corinthians 12:13 to help understand Acts 1:5.

Let's look carefully at the language in Acts 1:5 and I Corinthians 12:13:

Acts 1:5: you shall be baptized in (*en*) the Holy Spirit.

I Corinthians 12:13: For by (*en*) one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.

The great similarity of the two texts tends to be concealed in the KJV, NASB (text), and RSV by the fact that two English prepositions "with" and "by" both translate the single Greek preposition *en*.

Actually, both Acts 1:5 and I Corinthians 12:13 should be translated using "in the Spirit" or "with the Spirit," not "by the Spirit." The Greek *en* is occasionally used to mean "by"; but in connection with the verb "baptize" it always indicates either the geographical region (Mk. 1:4; John 3:23) or the name (Acts 2:38; 10:48) or the element in which a person is baptized. Thus a person is baptized *in* the Jordan River (Matt. 3:6), or *in* water (Matt. 3:11), or *in* the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16), or *in* the cloud and *in* the sea (I Cor. 10:2). On the other hand, if a person is baptized *by* someone else, the preposition *hupo* is used. Since I Corinthians 12:13 has *en*, not *hupo*, it should be translated, "For *in* one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Now, if we neglect the fact that Paul puts the phrase "in one Spirit" first for emphasis, the two clauses come out:

Acts 1:5: you shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit;

I Corinthians 12:13: we all were baptized in the one Spirit.

The similarity of language implies that we are dealing with the *same* concept in both verses.

What can we learn from I Corinthians 12 about the baptism in the Holy Spirit? I Corinthians 12 does not define this baptism, but it does give us some clues about its nature. The church at Corinth had been seriously torn by party spirit, jealousy, and strife (I Cor. 1:10-17; 3:3-4). Hence Paul sets out to teach them how the diversity of their gifts ought to unite them rather than split them. Paul emphasizes that "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" (12:13). This saying excludes the possibility that there was *more* than one body at Corinth, or that some of the Corinthian believers were actually left outside the one body, or that some got in by some other way than by being baptized in the one Spirit. Therefore, to say that some believers today have *not* been baptized in the Holy Spirit is to rend Paul's argument. More than that, it rends the church itself by destroying its foundation for unity: the one Spirit.

That, I believe, is the reason why the Pentecostal issue frequently causes church-splits in our day. Not that the gifts of the Spirit are inherently divisive. We should approve of and be zealous for all kinds of gifts of the Spirit (I Cor. 1:5-7, 12:31, 14:1, 12; II Cor. 8:7). But if some people are regarded as *not* baptized in the *one* Spirit, it not only *may* but *must* logically follow that they cannot be treated as part of the *one* body. If "baptism in the Holy Spirit" is a "second experience," it necessarily divides the "haves" from the "have nots."

How different is Paul's view! From I Corinthians 12:13 we see that "baptism in the Holy Spirit" is the *initial* experience which places a person in the body of Christ. All Christian believers share in it. *No one*, apostle, prophet, Jew, Greek, slave, freeman gets into this body by *any* other means than "baptism in the Holy Spirit." No wonder the disciples had to wait until the day of Pentecost for this to happen to *them*! Christ's *psysical* body must be removed from earth in order that, by sending the Spirit, He might constitute the people of God into His *mystical* body (John 7:39; 16:7).

From I Corinthians 12 we can learn one more fact about the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This baptism equips a man to function in the body of Christ: by it he receives gifts of the Holy Spirit. How does that follow from our passage? Well, in the one Spirit men are baptized into one body, the body of Christ (13). By baptism they become "members" of the body (14, 27). And Paul points out that each member has a definite necessary function (15, 17), so that no member may be despised (21-26). God determines

Scandal is a monster queer,  
With twenty tongues and half an ear.

S.C.W.



each member's function (18, 24) by distributing different gifts to each (11, 27-30). Thus the giving of gifts is held in the closest connection with incorporation into the body of Christ.

Of course, all this does not exclude the possibility that a man may improve his gifts (II Tim. 1:6; I Pet. 4:10-11) or receive new gifts (I Cor. 12:31; 14:1, 12-13). It *does* exclude the possibility that at the beginning a man should have no gift at all; for then he would be of no use to the body, contrary to 12:21. Baptism in the Holy Spirit must include distributing gifts to each one who is baptized. (I mention this point over against a tendency among Pentecostals not only to separate Acts 1:5 and I Corinthians 12:13 into two distinct baptisms, but also to link the giving of spiritual gifts exclusively with the Acts-baptism. Emphasis on spiritual gifts is proper. But such emphasis should recognize that *each* member has a gift (I Cor. 12:7).

**Galatians 3:27** — We can get further insight into the "baptism in the Holy Spirit" by careful attention to the exact language of I Corinthians 12:13: in "one Spirit we were all baptized *into one body*." Being baptized "into one body" is very nearly equivalent to being "baptized into Christ," an expression occurring in Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27. Turning first to Galatians, we find the same emphasis as in I Corinthians 12 on the unity of the church: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). In both Galatians and I Corinthians this baptism abolishes the distinctions and privileges of special parties. Hence we can conclude that "baptized into Christ" in Galatians basically refers to the same experience as "baptized in the Holy Spirit" in I Corinthians.

In Galatians Paul traces some consequences of being baptized into Christ. He concludes that we "are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise," that we "are all sons of God, through faith" (29, 26). Being united to Christ, we share in Christ's blessings. Most important, Paul comes near to giving a definition of this baptism: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ *have put on Christ*" (3:27). Baptism in the Holy Spirit means "putting on Christ."

**Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10** — At this point the reader may well protest that we are no nearer to our goal. The idea of "putting on Christ" is perhaps no less mysterious than "baptism in the Holy Spirit." But once again similarities of language come to our rescue. In Colossians 3:10 Paul speaks of having "*put on the new man, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*." He concludes in verse 11, "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all."

Clearly we are moving in the same circle of thought as in I Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:27. All three passages argue for the unity of believers on the basis of their vital union with Christ. This union

finds its inception in "baptism in the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13), or "baptism into Christ" (I Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27), or "putting on Christ" (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:10, Eph. 4:24). True, Ephesians and Colossians speak of "having put on the new man" rather than "putting on Christ," but this new man is "after the image of its creator" (Col. 3:10), "created after the likeness of God" (Eph. 4:24), one new man created in Christ (Eph. 2:5), growing up "to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

All these expressions are describing, from one side or another, one unified experience. When a man becomes united to Christ through faith (Gal. 3:26), "he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17). He is, by union with Christ, a new man, definitively free *from* the power of sin (Rom. 6:12, 20-23), and free *for* the service of God (Rom. 6:10-11, 13, 22; 7:4; Col. 3:12-4:6). The new man is "created after the likeness of God in *true righteousness and holiness*" (Eph. 4:24). *Because* we are new men, the exhortation comes to live lives consistent with this. We are to "put on" good deeds. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:12-13). Observe how Christ Himself is the model for Christian behavior. If you have put on Christ, you must also put on His deeds. So the argument goes.

**Romans 6:3** — A final confirmation of this interpretation of "baptism into Christ" is found in Romans 6:3: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" This "baptism into his death" results in the crucifixion of the sinful body (6:6), and freedom from slavery to sin (6:6-11). The once-for-all breach with the power of sin then forms the basis for exhortation to righteous living: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might *walk in newness of life*" (6:4). "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions" (6:12).

To be "baptized in the Holy Spirit" is to be "baptized into Christ," to "put on Christ." This is the initiation into a new life characterized as "walking in newness of life," "walking in Christ" (Col. 2:6), or "walking in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25). Christ and the Spirit are always closely allied in this work.

### Summary

In summary, we may define "baptism in the Holy Spirit" as "that work of Divine grace" in which, according to the Father's plan for the fulness of time (Eph. 1:10), Jesus Christ, on the basis of His finished work of death, resurrection, and ascension, grants His resurrection Spirit to us (Rom. 8:11), thereby uniting Himself to us, incorporating us into His body, and giving us a share in His death and resurrection; in



such a way that we become new men in His likeness, set free from sin and slaves of God (Rom. 6:22), each one equipped with gifts of the Spirit for ministering to the whole" (I Cor. 12:11, 27-30; Eph. 4:12-16).

It must now be all the more clear why "baptism in the Holy Spirit" begins only at Pentecost. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is based on Christ's death and resurrection. It must wait until Christ has completed His work. True, the saints in the Old Testament tasted the benefits of Christ's work by anticipation. But receiving those benefits in fulness must *follow* the actual accomplishment of redemption. *Before* Pentecost, the benefits *could* not be full. Now, *after* Pentecost, to *deny* to some Christians those benefits is to turn back the clock, to act as if He had not said, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

#### Answer to some objections

**Acts 8 and 19** — Acts 8:4-25 and 19:1-7 are frequently cited as cases where people were baptized in the Holy Spirit *subsequent* to becoming Christians. For several reasons, these passages cannot rightly be used to derive a general principle of two baptisms.

1. We are dealing with material of a once-for-all nature, since the whole Book of Acts traces the *founding* of the church.

2. Acts 8 and 19 both described events of *epochal* significance to the church: the entry into the body of Christ of special groups, the Samaritans (8:5, 14), and the disciples of John (19:3). Thus these incidents are not parallel to normal church growth today.

3. Acts 8 and 19 can rightly be seen as "little Pentecosts," echoes of Acts 2. The Pentecostal "earthquake" is followed by two or three "after-shocks" that readjust the ground. Strictly speaking, Pentecost is irrepeatably, yet there had to be a "mopping up" of the significant special groups left out of Acts 2:7-11, 41.

4. Remember that baptism in the Holy Spirit is the only (I Cor. 12:13!) means of incorporation into the body of Christ. Hence the Samaritans and disciples of John cannot rightly be called "*Christian* believers" before they received the Holy Spirit. It is a mistake to think that the disciples of John were Christian believers; Paul felt it necessary for them to be "baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (19:5). Equally, it is a mistake to regard the Samaritans as such. True enough, they were "baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (8:16). But the account shows that their "belief" may have been more attached to Philip's miracles than to his message. Thus, "the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and *saw the signs* which he did" (8:6). This is exactly how they had earlier treated Simon because of his magic (8:9-10). Then the account says that "they believed Philip" (not "they believed in Christ") and "even Simon himself believed" (8:13). Clearly we cannot assume that their faith at this point rose any higher than Simon's, who afterwards proved false (8:18-24).

The point of Acts 8 is rather the opposite of what Pentecostals want to make of it. Without the Holy

Spirit, the Samaritans could not be *considered* full-fledged members of the Christian community; with the Spirit, they could not be *denied* such membership.

Even apart from these considerations, we must note as a matter of general principle that:

5. It is precarious to derive doctrinal norms from historical events *alone*;

6. It is precarious to build a doctrine of "baptism in the Holy Spirit" from passages which do not use this phrase.

#### Does present charismatic experience of a "second blessing" prove Pentecostal doctrine?

I say "no" for the following reasons:

1. Doctrine can never be "proved" from experience, but only from Scripture.

2. Undoubtedly some cases of "second experience" are really *conversion* experiences of people who had previously confessed Christ with their lips but not with their heart.

3. Some cases of "second experience" should be described as "being filled with the Holy Spirit" in the manner of Acts 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5, 8; 7:55; 11:24; 13:9; Eph. 5:18. Growth in the faith can come gradually or in spurts of insight and commitment ("second experiences"). Paul's teaching on the decisiveness and power of baptism in the Holy Spirit in no way degrades the reality of this growth. Rather it forms the only true basis for growth: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too *might walk in newness of life*" (Rom. 6:4). Unlimited possibilities for growth arise from the unlimited riches of the life given in Christ and His Spirit.

Or, to put it in other words: by baptism in the Holy Spirit we have had the veil removed from our hearts. Hence "we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, *are being changed into his likeness* from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18). Our being "created after the likeness of God" (Eph. 4:24) in baptism once-and-for-all is the foundation for "being changed into his likeness" in gradual growth.

4. Identifying "baptism in the Holy Spirit" with Christian conversion in no way challenges the reality of Spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12).

5. Even if we could find *no* way to account for "second experience" in Biblical terms, it would be better to say, "We don't know" than to misapply the term "baptism in the Holy Spirit" to such experiences.

#### If all Christians have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, why don't they display more life in the Spirit? Why is the church so dead?

1. Again, remember that doctrines are derived from Scripture, not from the state of the church.

2. Some people in the visible church are not true believers.



3. In a sense, the question "Why don't Christians live more like Christ" mystified Paul as much as it does us. He is continually surprised to find Christians unaware of their calling: "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2; Compare I Cor. 5:1, 6; 6:1-6, 9, 15-19; Gal. 3:1-5; 1:6.)

4. Even men baptized in the Holy Spirit can fall very short of living spiritual, Christ-centered lives. The church at Corinth was plagued with dissensions, jealousy and strife, arrogance, immorality, lawsuits, lack of love, drunkenness, dishonoring of the Lord's Supper, ignorance, disorder, false doctrine (I Cor. 1:10; 3:3; 4:18; 5:1-2; 6:1; 8:1-3; 11:21, 29-32; 12:1-3; 14:26-40; 15:12). Remember also the churches in Revelation 1-3. Such disobedience to the Lord is much more serious, and brings the church under much severer censure, than does having "little power" (Rev. 3:8).

5. It would be better to say, "We don't know what's wrong," than to misapply Scripture in a false explanation of the deadness in the church.

6. The Bible *does* say that Christians need very much to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) and to be "filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:19; compare 4:13). It does *not* say that Christians "need to be baptized in the Holy Spirit." Every Christian, if he is a Christian at all, *has been* baptized in the Holy Spirit into one body (I Cor. 12:13).

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## EDITORIALS

# "GOD BLESS AMERICA"— BUT HOW? BY PROSPERITY OR BY ANOTHER DEPRESSION?

JOHN VANDER PLOEG

Prosperity or another depression?

What an odd, absurd, even asinine question! But is it really?

Of course, a Gallup poll would settle that question in a hurry, once and for all, with a whopping, landslide majority in favor of *prosperity*. One would have to be crazy to ask God to bless America with *another depression*.

But just a minute. Wouldn't we agree that what was once good for Israel as God's chosen people would be good for America also?

Remember Elijah? He was a prophet of God in the days of wicked King Ahab and his even more wicked Queen Jezebel. A man of God who dared to lay his life on the line to say what God wanted him to say.

And do you remember what this "oddball" prophet once prayed for? Of all things, *a famine!* Imagine how the fury of wicked Ahab and heathen Jezebel was stirred up against him. Anyone eccentric enough to pray that for his own nation would have to be eccentric, a foe within the gates, a traitor, public enemy number one.