

The Meaning and Importance of Baptism in the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

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I'd like for you to think back, that is if you are out of high school, to days gone by when your high school had a big game against an archrival. Most schools see this as an opportunity to promote school unity, and what unifies a school more than a rousing school-wide pep rally? Most of us were more than happy to miss some class time, especially if it involved yelling and carrying on. You know the pep rally routine – lots of cheerleaders, because we all know that cheerleading is a sport and don't you dare suggest it's not – lots of screaming, the introduction of the team, words from the coach, stomping on the bleachers, great fun. At some point, at least back in my day, we would do some cheers like, "V-I-C-T-O-R-Y, Victory is our battle cry!" or, "We will, we will, rock you!"

One of the all-time cheer favorites would be shouted back and forth across the gym. The one side would scream, "We got spirit, yes we do, we got spirit, how 'bout you?" Then the other side would say, "We got spirit, yes we do, we got spirit, how 'bout you?" This would go back and forth a few times until one side would break into, "We got the most! We got the most!" The other side would try to outshout them, "We got the most! We got the most!" Good times.

It also serves as a snapshot of how churches and denominations and Christians have generally approached doctrinal issues related to the Holy Spirit. "We got the Spirit, yes we do, we got the Spirit, how 'bout you? We got the most! We got the most!" With various camps insisting that their viewpoint on the Spirit means that they have more of the Spirit's authentic blessing than other groups that don't agree with them. Rather than promoting unity, these shouting matches sadly have created division and rivalry among God's people. What is most ironic about this when it comes to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is that He is the one who unites us. See the irony? The doctrine about the Spirit who unites us, divides us. How the Spirit unites ethnically diverse, socially diverse, racially diverse believers into one universal Church is our subject today.

1 Corinthians 12 is about spiritual gifts, their purpose and their source in the Holy Spirit. We are not only learning about gifts but also about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. After explaining in verses 1-11 that all the spiritual gifts are from the same source, the Spirit of God, Paul now explains how the Spirit unites all believers.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 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 12:12-13)

Beginning in verse 12 Paul does what all communicators have to do – he illustrates what he is talking about. This illustration goes through verse 26 and his main point continues through the end of the chapter. What's his point? The church is like a human body. How many bodies does each person get? Anybody here have two bodies? We have one body. This body has many different parts. Look at your own body just for a moment and what do you see? Hands. Fingers. Legs. Feet. Head. There is incredible diversity in the human body, yet total unity of function and purpose. The church is like that, or it should be. There is incredible diversity in every category: racial, social, educational, experiential, and gender.

Yet there is total unity; a unity that overwhelms and overcomes the natural barriers that divide people around the world.

How does this happen? Where does this unity come from and how does God make hundreds of millions of people, stretching across centuries of time, into one Church? *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.* (Verse 13) A cursory reading sees the repetition of the word “one.” One Spirit. One body. One Spirit. The other repeated word is “all.” We were “all” baptized and “all” were made to drink. So whatever this is describing, it is true for every Christian, not just some. How does the one Spirit unite all the believers into one body?

How Does the Spirit Unite All Believers into One Body?

The simple answer is that in salvation all Christians go through the same spiritual work of the Spirit. We are all saved by the same gospel and the same faith in the person and work of Christ. *There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* (Acts 4:12)

We also see that our salvation is a work of the entire Godhead. The Father purposed and orchestrated our redemption. He sent the Son. The Son, Jesus Christ, fulfilled the will of the Father, willingly died as the perfect man, died in our place, took the punishment our sins required, and gained victory over our last enemy, death, in His resurrection. The Spirit was active in the incarnation of Christ, guided Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, and is God’s active agent on earth now applying Christ’s redemptive benefits to all who believe. The Spirit’s work includes:

- Conviction of sin (John 16:8-11)
- Testifies about and glorifies Christ in the world (John 15:26)
- Makes us spiritually alive/born again (John 3:7-8)
- Permanently indwells every believer (John 14:17)
- Actively works to make each believer’s life increasingly righteous (Romans 15:16)
- Empowers believers with gifts for service (1 Corinthians 12)
- Nourishes believers with truth, comfort, intercession, and guidance (John 14:26; John 16:13; Acts 9:31; Romans 8:26)

We see the Spirit’s powerful and essential role in salvation. Here is how Jesus summarized the Spirit’s work to the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3:

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:4-8)

We rightly emphasize Jesus’ unique position as Savior and Lord in our salvation. However, the Spirit’s role in the New Covenant of Christ and its application to all who believe is so dramatic, so new, so transformational that Jesus compares it to being born for the second time. We don’t remember the trauma of being born the first time and it’s probably just as well. If a baby could speak right after being born, what else could the baby say besides, “Wow!?” In salvation, the Spirit makes the spiritually dead spiritually alive. It’s like a birth; it’s like a resurrection; it’s called regeneration (Titus 3:5). “Wow!”

Paul's point is similar to Jesus' but different. Remember, he's trying to help the Corinthians overcome their division over spiritual gifts and see their essential spiritual unity. Their unity comes from their shared spiritual identity and location which this dramatic work of the Spirit has placed them in. It's so dramatic that he uses the word "baptism" to describe it. Vivid. To be baptized is to be engulfed by water. The water overwhelms us. Spirit baptism engulfs us in the spiritual life of the Spirit and relocates us spiritually into the body of Christ. The repetition of "all" shows that this is the experience of all the Corinthians. Not some of them, all of them; and all of us who have saving faith.

This is important to understand because Spirit baptism is a phrase used in different ways by different people and applied to all kinds of experiences. You probably know somebody who talks about being baptized *by* the Spirit. Notice the slight change in the vernacular. Baptized *by* the Spirit instead of baptized *in* the Spirit. *By* the Spirit makes the Spirit the baptizer. *In* the Spirit makes the Spirit the element into which we are baptized. It's like the difference between saying, "I was baptized *in* Lake Michigan" and "I was baptized *by* Lake Michigan." Like water in water baptism, we are baptized *into* the Spirit which unifies us in Him. Look at this chapter and it's not hard to see which of those two Paul is aiming at – Clearly it's unity *in* the Spirit.

So, what should we say about this phrase "Baptism by the Spirit" and its typical use by brothers and sisters in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions? What they typically mean is a Spirit-endowed "second blessing" subsequent to salvation that is a repeatable experience throughout the Christian life and is accompanied by ecstatic utterances like speaking in tongues. Let's dig in here a little. Here is every other use of this phrase in the New Testament:

- *"I baptize you with water for 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)
- *"I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* (Mark 1:8)
- *John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* (Luke 3:16)
- *I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'* (John 1:33)
- *"For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."* (Acts 1:5)
- *And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'* (Acts 11:16)

The first four are essentially the same quote from John the Baptist recorded in each of the four gospels. There is no description of what this is other than that Jesus will do the baptizing, and rather than the water John uses, He will baptize with the Spirit. We get no further definition or teaching. This leaves the two Acts references. The first is Jesus just prior to His ascension. The second is Peter reporting what happened at Cornelius' house and remembering what Jesus had said. What is true about all six of these is that Jesus is the person doing the baptism, and the Holy Spirit is the "element" into which Jesus will baptize His people. None of them refer to the Spirit doing the baptism (i.e. baptized *BY* the Spirit). Rather, the Spirit is the "water" into which the Christian is baptized.

This leaves us with 1 Corinthians 12:13, which is why this verse is such a battleground for those who believe it to be a second blessing at some point after conversion to Christ. The

Greek construction here is nearly identical to the other verses in the New Testament where Jesus is the "baptizer" and the Spirit is the "element" of baptism. There is no grammatical reason to interpret the preposition as "by." We are not baptized *by* the Spirit but rather *in* the Spirit. That little preposition makes a big difference. Further, the verb for "baptism" is in a form that means simple past action, not the one that means past action with continuing action.

What remains is the argument that is made from what happened at Pentecost. The classic charismatic position says that the disciples were already believers and when the Spirit came down upon them with the mighty rushing wind, the tongues of fire over their heads, and the ability to speak in languages they previously did not know, was baptism by the Spirit; a second blessing and a paradigm for what all Christians should experience at some point after faith in Christ.

What should we say to this? We have to understand what Pentecost actually was. As we look at the sweeping story of redemption, we see the Spirit of God active from the beginning. He was there in Creation (Genesis 1:2) and empowered people for specific tasks in the Old Testament (Exodus 31:3; 1 Samuel 16:13; Psalm 51:11). In the Old Testament, He is generally behind the scenes. However, prophecies said that someday He would step from behind the scenes to the forefront with a New Covenant and a more powerful role (Jeremiah 31:27-37; Joel 2:28-29). This New Covenant empowerment for ministry is what Jesus said would happen, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you*" (Acts 1:8).

Pentecost is the transitional moment between the Spirit's Old Covenant understated role to his New Covenant empowerment role. If there was ever a group that needed empowerment for a task, it was these disciples. How would weak and spiritually wishy-washy men fulfill the Great Commission? Clearly, not on their own. They needed empowerment and at Pentecost, the prophesied empowerment of the Spirit came in dramatic fashion.

Understanding this as a major moment of covenantal transition helps us see Pentecost for what it was. The Spirit couldn't come until Jesus was ascended and glorified (John 7:37-39). Pentecost is the dramatic moment when the New Covenant role of the Spirit was inaugurated. It is not a paradigm, nor is it the baptism in the Spirit referred to in 1 Corinthians 12. Spirit baptism is something else. It is the ***summary term for the dramatic work of the Spirit at conversion which all Christians experience and which unites all of us in the one body of Christ.***

Interestingly, I read three theologians who are non-cessationists who not only agreed 1 Corinthians 12:13 can't refer to a second blessing of the Spirit, but said Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars are abandoning this verse as supporting it. (Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 600-606. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 783. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 45.) That abandonment hasn't trickled down to the pews yet, so people continue to apply the term to their post-conversion spiritual experiences.

That said, we need to put experiences of the Spirit after conversion somewhere, in some theological category. If not baptism in the Spirit, where do we put them? I hope to speak next week on what filling of the Spirit is as the ongoing experience of the Spirit in the Christian's life.

"I have discovered that the argument concerning baptism in the Spirit usually comes down to a question of labels. Good medicine may be incorrectly labeled, which is probably true in this case. The Pentecostals experience of God I have discovered that the argument

concerning baptism in the Spirit usually comes down to a question of labels. Good medicine may be incorrectly labeled, which is probably true in this case. The Pentecostals experience of God is better than their explanation of it." (John Wimber in *Power Evangelism*, p. 145, quoted by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 783.)

There is so much about baptism in the Spirit to rejoice in that it's unfortunate its meaning has been clouded by controversy. Look at what is plain in the text, *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*. ALL Christians. To make sure we realize what he is saying, he chooses two of the oldest human divisions, race and social status, to emphasize his point. *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, [race] slaves or free [class]*. (Verse 13)

I don't have to tell you how divisive racism is across the world and in our own little community here. Contemporary examples are everywhere. As the World Cup comes to South Africa, it will highlight the terrible history of *apartheid* in South Africa. White vs. Black. In Rwanda, Hutu vs. Tutsi. 800,000 people killed in 1994 in a racial genocide. Racism permeates the human heart. It would take something really dramatic to unify people across racial divides. Or what about class warfare? The battle between the haves and the have-nots is exemplified in famous revolutions like the French revolution, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and the Chinese revolution under Mao. Millions killed in class warfare. These wars have shaped human history. What could possibly unite social classes?

That is the glory of this verse and others, *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*. (Galatians 3:28) The baptism of the Spirit is about real spiritual unity by virtue of our shared experience IN the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can do what government and education and social programs and any other human endeavor cannot do – make us one. The old divisions no longer define us nor divide us as our identity is now mutually found in Christ.

The challenge is to display relationally what is true spiritually. No wonder we are just verses away from the famous chapter on love. What is love but the relational expression of our spiritual unity in Christ? In love, I will serve my brother. In love I will use my gift for the common good. In love I will forgive, forbear, encourage, edify, uplift, give, and otherwise do all I can to ensure the unity of the one body of Christ and to do this across the old human barriers: racial, social, whatever. Avoiding attitudes like the one I heard on a trip sometime ago where a man described his view of evangelizing people of a different skin color from his: "You all reach your people and we'll reach our people."

I sure am glad Christ didn't have that attitude when He died for red, yellow, black and white. It's not them and us. In Christ it is "we," and that includes fellow Christians who define baptism in the Spirit a different way. It's not, "We got the most! We got the most!" Because of baptism in the Spirit, "We got the same! We got the same!" We are all one in Christ. One Spirit. One Baptism. One holy Church.

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