

HOLY SPIRIT: The Promise of the Holy Spirit, the Gift of the Holy Spirit, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit

By Bob Young¹

Introduction

The challenges facing the church in the contemporary world call for a deeper understanding and a deeper appreciation for and affirmation of work of the Holy Spirit.

I share some principles to guide our study.

- The duty of every Christian is to find and enter into God's purpose in her or his life
- We can know and understand the purpose of God in the world and in our personal lives by reading, studying, and listening to Scripture
- The revelation of God's purpose should be discovered primarily in the didactic (teaching) portions of Scripture rather than in the descriptive (historical or narrative) parts
- The purpose of this study is practical and personal, not controversial. The study is not primarily designed to be academic, although understanding the teachings presented in Scripture requires thought, analysis, and sometimes "unlearning" what we think we have already established as biblical truth.

Understanding the "promise of the Spirit"

Summary of the importance and role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian

The Christian life is life in the Spirit. It is impossible to be a Christian, to live and grow as a Christian, without the presence and work of Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives the Holy Spirit from the very first moments of the Christian life, even if the presence of the Holy Spirit is not recognized. The Christian life begins with a new birth (cf. John 3) which is a birth of the Spirit. The Spirit of life imparts life to dead souls. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the Christian (individually, Acts 2:38; 5:32) and thus in the church (collectively, Eph. 2:22). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the possession of every Christian.

God makes it possible for Christians to be sons (referring to both males and females), he gives the Spirit of sonship, and because we are sons, he sends his Spirit into our hearts (Gal. 3:25-4:6). The sons of God, with the presence of the Spirit, live according to the Spirit and are thus led by the Spirit of God, which demonstrates that they are sons of God (Rom. 8:14-17). God has flooded our hearts with love through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Paul sums it up by saying that those without the Spirit of Christ do not belong to him (Rom. 8:9).

In Romans 8, several phrases — to be in Christ, in the Spirit, to have the Spirit in you, to have Christ in you — are synonymous. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in Christians individually and corporately (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19). God dwells in the church through the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). All Christians have access to God the Father through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:17-18).

The Holy Spirit works to reveal Christ to us and to form Christ in us; we grow in knowledge and in likeness (Eph. 1:17, Gal. 4:19, 2 Cor. 3:18). By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit evil desires are restrained and good fruit is produced (Gal. 5:16-25). The Holy Spirit unites us in the body of Christ, our fellowship is a fellowship of the Holy Spirit, worship is in or by the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:1, 3:3).

The presence of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee of the inheritance of the Christian (Eph. 1:13-14). Every Christian has received the promise of the Spirit (Eph. 1, Acts 2). In the last day, God will somehow act through his Spirit to raise our mortal bodies (Rom 8:11).

This summary of some of the activities of the Holy Spirit shows our dependence on him; he has been given to us (Rom 5:5; Acts 5:32).

¹ I am grateful to John Stott for suggesting a fresh approach to the study of this subject. In some points, this essay reflects his *Baptism and Fullness*.

How is the promise of the Holy Spirit to be understood? How is the promise fulfilled?

Who receives the promise? Summarizing the biblical texts cited in the previous section, the Bible clearly teaches that every person who is baptized for remission of sins becomes a Christian and receives the promise of the Holy Spirit -- the promise is universal. But what of Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to the apostles (e.g. Acts 1:5)? How are we to understand the promise to the apostles in light of the universal promise? Are there two different promises? Are these the same promise? Is the Bible describing the same promise but with different evidences in the life of various persons or groups? **My conclusion is that we must distinguish the promise Jesus specifically made to the apostles from the general promise that is to be applied to all Christians.**

In addition, we must analyze, compare, and understand the meaning of specific phrases that are applied to all believers: promise of the Holy Spirit, gift of the Holy Spirit, baptism of (in, with, or by) the Holy Spirit.² Do these phrases refer to the same thing? Are they different? Some say yes, some say no. Some connect them, some separate them as distinct promises followed by distinct experiences. **My conclusion is that these phrases are identical as they relate to the universal experience of every Christian; that is, to be baptized in (with, by) the Holy Spirit is a figure of speech for receiving the Holy Spirit that was promised.** This is something that all Christians experience. In this essay, I will present the biblical basis for understanding this important aspect of the Holy Spirit.

The connection of promise, gift, and baptism is important, for it has considerable impact on our understanding of the Christian walk.

Biblical context of the promise of the Holy Spirit: baptism in the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Holy Spirit

Bible study must honor context -- both the immediate context of paragraphs, chapters, and book, and the larger biblical context. Throughout Scripture, we should expect to have harmonious divine revelation. What does the Bible say about the promise, the gift, and baptism of (in, with, by) the Holy Spirit?

While baptism in (with, by) the Holy Spirit is exclusively a New Testament expression (used seven times), it is a fulfillment of Old Testament expectation. One task of any in-depth study of the Holy Spirit must be to harmonize the various references to baptism of (in, with, by) the Holy Spirit. An important principle, as described above, is the need to distinguish the occasional promise made to the apostles (to a specific group at a specific time for a specific purpose) from the general promise that applies to every Christian.

The Old Testament expectation is often expressed as a promise to "pour out" the Holy Spirit, which expectation Peter mentions in Acts 2 with reference to the promise in the Old Testament book of Joel. In Acts 11:15-17, Peter connects the experience of the apostles in Acts 2 with that which happened at the house of Cornelius in the last few verses of Acts 10. Peter describes the events at the house of Cornelius:

"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?"

² In the phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit," the construction in the original language does not include a specific preposition, but uses only the case to give the meaning. This results in ambiguity since the dative, locative, and instrumental cases all have the same form. The grammatical construction presents three possibilities -- baptism in (locative), baptism with (instrumental), and baptism by (dative) the Holy Spirit. In addition, it is not uncommon to see the phrase "baptism of the Holy Spirit." This uncertainty of translation is reflected throughout this essay by parenthetically noting one or more of the various translation possibilities.

Peter's use of the very "fell" suggests that the "pouring out" was significant because it was direct, without human instrumentality. Peter connects the Cornelius events with the promise of Acts 1:5 -- "baptism with (in, by) the Holy Spirit (and by extension, also connects the apostles' experience in Acts 2 with baptism with [in, by] the Holy Spirit, although the text of Acts 2 does not specifically connect the Pentecost events with the promise of Acts 1:5). Finally, Peter says the gift (of the Holy Spirit) received by those at the house of Cornelius was "the same gift" as that received by the apostles in Acts 2. In Acts 2, Peter equates the Joel promise with the coming of the Holy Spirit (as promised by John the Baptist and Jesus). The extent of the promise in the Joel text (sons and daughters, male and female servants) seems to point to something more than the Pentecost teaching and preaching of the apostles.

How can these observations be harmonized? What connections should be drawn between the prophecy in Joel, the apostles in Acts 2, and the events at the house of Cornelius in Acts 10? What connections should be drawn between the prophecy in Joel and water baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:38? The pouring out or coming of the Holy Spirit was to be a primary distinctive mark of the new era and the new pact, so that the new covenant can be described as a dispensation of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:8). The prophets foretold that in the days of the Messiah God would grant a new generous presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would be poured from on high according to Isa. 32:15; see also other references to the Spirit being poured out (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 39:28, 29; Joel 2:28).

John the Baptist was the last prophet of the old order. He summarizes the Old Testament understanding by connecting the Spirit and baptism. He describes baptism of (in, by, with) the Spirit as an action of Jesus (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8, Lk. 3:16, John 1:33). (The other NT occurrences of the phrase are in Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Cor. 12:13; to which we shall soon come.) Note that in John 1:33 the verb (baptize) is present tense, frequently an indication of continuing action. Whatever the phrase might mean, the grammar suggests that the verb is not to be limited to a one-time occurrence on Pentecost. (The continuing nature of "baptism in (by, with) the Spirit" is also obvious in 1 Cor. 12:13.) Despite the terminology of Acts 1:5, any reference to baptism of the Holy Spirit is conspicuously absent in Acts 2 in reference to the experience of the apostles. Baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit is the distinctive ministry of Jesus, he baptizes with (in) the Holy Spirit to accomplish his work. As John is "the Baptizer" so also Jesus is "the Baptizer"—because the baptism related to the Holy Spirit was characteristic of his ministry.

In John 1:29, in the same context of John's Gospel, we have a parallel description of Jesus' work. The nature of Jesus' work was twofold, a removal and a bestowal, taking away sin and baptizing with (in) the Holy Spirit. This description of his work is consistent with the teachings of the Old Testament prophets. The text in Ezek. 36:25, 27 connects being clean and walking in the statutes. Jeremiah 31 mentions forgiveness and new hearts (paralleled in Heb. 8:7-13 and 10:15-18 where the Jeremiah text is quoted). Peter connects the concepts in Acts 2 — forgiveness of sin and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Careful reading of Acts 1-2 and the larger context of Acts, connects the promise of the Holy Spirit with the gift of the Holy Spirit, with the baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit, and with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Some of these descriptions focus more on the giving, some more on the receiving.

In summary, the biblical context suggests that all believers under the new covenant received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which God had promised even in the Old Testament, when they were baptized in water in (with) the Holy Spirit whom God poured out beginning at Pentecost.

In light of this biblical testimony, the principle that can be established for every Christian is that the baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit is the same as the promise of the Holy Spirit is the same as the gift of the Holy Spirit, and is as much a part of the gospel as remission of sins.

Salvation is not merely negative (rescue from guilt, sin, and wrath); salvation includes the positive gift of the Holy Spirit to regenerate, indwell, and transform us. We proclaim a glorious gospel when we are true to Scripture. Jesus not only takes away sin in baptism, but the result of this baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit is the reception and continuing presence of the Holy Spirit. In Titus 3, Paul says

God saves (justifies) in a bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, from which one can understand that this outpouring of God's Spirit regenerates and renews.

Reconciling Scripture and Previous Understandings

As you read through this brief set of bullet points, consider how the understanding set forth above can help us reconcile many verses of Scripture and better understand what God was doing.

- We have to deal with the fact that there was an occasional promise made only to the apostles, and that there was also an Old Testament expectation which is described in the New Testament as a reality for all Christians.
- We have to deal with universality of the promise in Joel and the universality of the promise stated in Acts 2 – “to as many as the Lord will call.”
- We must deal with “outpouring” (fell) as a description in Acts 2 and again in the case of Cornelius in Acts 10.
- We must deal with “gift” in Acts 2 in one specific situation and “gift” in Acts 10 in another specific situation.
- We must harmonize Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 10-11, and Acts 19.
- We must study 1 Cor 12 where baptism in (with) the (Holy) Spirit refers to the baptism received by every Christian.

The Holy Spirit blessing and promise was universal

The outpouring (presence) of the Holy Spirit was in the new age to be both distinctive and universal. The emphasis in Acts 2 (based on the quotation from Joel 2) is universality. In the New Testament, all believers share the blessing of the Holy Spirit; all share the gift or indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This distinctive presence and work of the Holy Spirit relates essentially to Jesus Christ, revealing Christ and forming Christ in believers. The Holy Spirit in the new age does something he could not do before Christ came.

Peter clearly understood the Joel prophecy as promising what was fulfilled in Acts 2. The inbreaking of the Holy Spirit was occurring, “this is that...” We must be careful lest we limit “this” only to the first part of the chapter and the experience of the apostles. The entire proceeding fulfills the prophecy and describes the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter applies the Joel quote to receiving the Holy Spirit at baptism!

Pentecost

The Holy Spirit came, 3000 were baptized, received remission of sins and were saved, and received the Holy Spirit. The 3000 did not experience the initial evidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the first part of Acts 2. (Based on the antecedents – Acts 1:26 refers to Matthias and the Eleven, 2:1 uses “they” – the initial outpouring came only on the Twelve, possibly on the 120 using a less immediate antecedent). The initial outpouring is easily connected to the promise of Jesus to his apostles in Acts 1:5, as previously shown.

The purpose of the initial event was to introduce the new presence of the Holy Spirit and to make visible and evident to all that the new age was beginning (had come). The 3000 received forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit simultaneously. Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit are received together in baptism. Obviously, the 3000 are the norm for today, not the first group. There is no need to repeat the experience of the first group — the declaration that the new age of the Spirit has come. This declaration does not need to be repeated because now the Holy Spirit has come. That the Holy Spirit has come can be known to all based on the historical narrative of Scripture, and on the apostolic teachings concerning baptism and the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost has two distinct impacts. Failure to grasp this truth is the root of much confusion. The last event in the salvation work of Jesus was to send the Holy Spirit, to fulfill the long-promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, thus inaugurating the Messianic age, the age of the Spirit. This event is not repeatable, even as the death, burial, and resurrection is not repeatable. The sacrifice of Jesus was a once-for-all sacrifice, not to be continually repeated. In the same way, once Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit has come and is present as Comforter, the action is not to be repeated again and again. The blessings of the gospel (salvation) and the blessings of baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit — both works of Jesus—are for all who come to and belong to Christ.

But at the day of Pentecost also were fulfilled the promises Jesus had specifically given to his apostles in the Upper Room, to equip them for their work. The promises made to the apostles were specific and limited. The promise was to be fulfilled to the apostles in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus' ascension.

The example that is normative today is not the fulfillment of the promise to the apostles, but is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise to all believers, that all can in penitent faith receive both forgiveness and the Holy Spirit through baptism. Because the Holy Spirit is thus received, it is called a baptism in (with, by) the Holy Spirit.

Now we move to understand how this description of Pentecost helps us understand and harmonize other parts of Scripture, especially Acts 8, Acts 10, and Acts 19. Again, it is important to mention the principle that our understanding of the Holy Spirit must not be based on the descriptive sections such as narrative history -- only that we have to harmonize the narrative or descriptive sections with the teaching sections. We must work with the interpretation of the events which Peter gave in his sermon. The principle is fundamental—we begin with the general and understandable, not with the special and difficult. What does the Bible say about when and how the Holy Spirit is received? Galatians 3:2, 14 (consistent with Acts 2:28) make clear that the reception of the Holy Spirit is not a second post-conversion act, but that forgiveness and the reception of the Holy Spirit are connected. How does this impact our understanding of the descriptive or narrative parts of the Bible?

The Samaritans, Cornelius, and the Ephesian disciples

The gift of the Holy Spirit (promise, baptism in [with] the Holy Spirit) is universal to every Christian. The Holy Spirit is received when we are baptized to receive forgiveness of sins. How can we harmonize this clear biblical teaching with those passages which present irregularities? Three narrative passages stray from the expected pattern.

First, in Samaria Philip preached and many believed and were baptized. The first indication in the text that something is unusual is that those in Jerusalem sent Peter and John (8:14). Most probably, the trigger is that these new converts were Samaritans, and the fact that the Holy Spirit was now available to Samaritans was not totally clear to the Jews. Philip's decision to proclaim Christ to the Samaritans was bold and questions could easily be raised. Was Philip right to extend the gospel to the Samaritans? Can Samaritans accept the gospel? With the coming of John and Peter, the fact of the presence of the Holy Spirit among and within the Samaritans was made clear with signs. (Acts 8 – “they had not yet received the Holy Spirit” – should not be read as an exception to the promise of Acts 2:38, suggesting that the Samaritans had been baptized without receiving the promise.) The need for Peter and John to come, the need to make clear the presence of the Holy Spirit among the Samaritans – these matters in a certain sense parallel to the signs given to the Twelve at Pentecost. Acts 8 does not provide a normative model for us; the explanation of the exception is that we have the introduction of the gospel to a new group — half Jewish and half Gentile Samaritans. This understanding brings the Acts 8 narrative into harmony with the apostles' teaching, from which it at first seems to deviate, and sets it clearly and correctly in its historical context. It also helps us to understand better the situation of Simon the sorcerer.

Given the abnormality of the Samaritan incident, it is hard to understand why some modern-day Christian groups regard it as a norm, seeking a giving (or reception) of the Holy Spirit subsequent to baptism. It is also hard to justify that the Spirit is given only through imposing apostolic hands, since the giving of the Spirit in this case was exceptional to demonstrate God's acceptance of the Samaritans (and there is no imposition of apostolic hands in the case of Cornelius, to which we will turn next). With regard to the Holy Spirit, both the timing and the method for the Samaritans were atypical. The historical situation is unique and should not be considered repeatable. Such an abnormality can hardly be precedent for today.

Second, Cornelius' baptism in (with) the Holy Spirit (reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit, parallel to Acts 2 wording in the use of the singular "gift") included baptism in water as is the case in every New Testament conversion, but there is an abnormality. His initiation into Christ begins with hearing words of salvation (11:14), and when the gospel is preached, he believed (15:7), and having been baptized in (with) the Holy Spirit and in (with) water, he had received the word of God (11:1). The problem is the order. Why does the Holy Spirit part occur prior to water baptism? Again, the historical context must be understood. Here the gospel goes to the Gentiles for the first time (the eunuch was a Gentile, but was a Jewish proselyte, thus a Jew by religion but not by birth). In the Cornelius narrative, which is in some ways parallel to the case of the Samaritans, the fact that the Holy Spirit was available to the Gentiles was not clear to the Jews (think about subsequent questions, as in Acts 15). That God accepts Gentiles was made clear with signs parallel to those given to the Twelve at Pentecost, and the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 11:16) was given directly without the imposition of the apostles' hands. The signs were given to convince the Jews who had accompanied Peter. This is not a normative model for us, given the exceptional situation in which a new ethnic group of believers is receiving the gospel. Note carefully that the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit are linked. (The conversion of Paul in Acts 9:17-18 may present some parallels to the situation of Cornelius, but it should be noted that the reception of the Holy Spirit was again linked to water baptism, parallel to Acts 2.) This explanation of the Cornelius narrative is totally consistent with the teaching of the apostles and deals with certain difficult problems. For example, the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 and the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 10 are precisely parallel phrases, only that the historical context altered the order and required some external evidence for those present, not that there are two references to two totally distinct things.

Third, the Ephesian disciples also present a unique situation (Acts 19:1-7). When Paul learned that these did not understand water baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19), he knew that they could not have received Christian baptism since they did not know about the Holy Spirit. Paul baptized them in the name of the Lord Jesus, and such baptism in water in the New Testament always indicates also baptism in (with, by) the Holy Spirit. Paul then laid his hands on them so that the Holy Spirit came on them (to validate his teaching and show that the Holy Spirit was now present in their lives?). Again, this is not a normative model. In fact, it seems that Acts uses a method that builds the historical narrative by presenting unusual or new situations. For example, in the case of the sermons recorded in Acts, we read a fairly complete summary the first time a topic is presented in a sermon, but afterward only brief summaries. When a sermon has a new or distinct topic, we get another fairly complete summary.

The New Testament teaching on baptism, seen through the lens of 1 Corinthians 12:13

What the New Testament teaches about baptism is not negated by the exceptional cases of Acts 8, 10, and 19. The reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit is a universal, initial Christian experience. All Christians receive the Holy Spirit at the beginning of their Christian life, which begins at the point of baptism (in [with] water, and simultaneously in [with] the Holy Spirit). These are always connected. Apostolic teaching clearly connects the two baptisms (in water and in the Holy Spirit). This connection

explains Paul's teaching that there is only one baptism (Eph. 4:4-6). The New Testament writers take for granted that God gives the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32; Rom. 5:5; 1 Thess. 4:8; 1 John 3:24, 4:13).

To confirm this understanding, we turn to 1 Corinthians 12:13. Remember that we have four occurrences of the phrase which connects baptism and Holy Spirit in the Gospels, two occurrences in Acts 1:5 and 11:16, and one in 1 Cor. 12:13, all of which are parallel constructions grammatically. The reference in 1 Cor. 12:13 cannot be a reference to Pentecost. What is emphatic in the text is the use of the word "all." All participated in the baptism described, and unity was the result. The emphasis of the chapter is the unity of the church in the midst of a diversity of abilities. Our unity depends on our common experience as Christian believers in the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit himself and signifies unity (unity of the Spirit, Eph. 4:3); the gifts of the Holy Spirit represent diversity. The result is one body and one Spirit (Eph. 4:4).

Reading 1 Cor. 12:13 and taking it at face value, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that baptism in water is connected with baptism in (with, by) the Holy Spirit. Baptism in the Spirit is not a subsequent experience, nor is it an initial reality that can be separated from an eventual baptism in water some weeks or months later. A person of faith does not delay baptism in water, because such baptism begins a walk with (in) the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not given apart from water baptism. When we are baptized in water, we are all made to drink of one Spirit.

I know well the argument that all of the references other than this one in 1 Cor. 12:13 are references to the Pentecost experience of the Twelve, that this verse alone is the exceptional description of the baptism of all believers, and that it is therefore quite different. Such seems to me to be special pleading and inconsistent. The Greek construction is precisely the same in these texts. A sound principle of interpretation would see all as references to the same baptism experience. It is unnatural to make Jesus the baptizer in the other verses, and the Holy Spirit the baptizer in 1 Corinthians 12. Further, John 1:33 reminds that Jesus came baptizing in the Spirit, suggesting something more extensive and lasting than the events of one solitary day in history. Much more could be said about baptism—subject, object, element, purpose, but ultimately it seems that the passages and the baptisms we have noted in this study are parallel, and not distinct.

Conclusion

I have sought to explain various texts, and to reconcile problems that are common in the traditional interpretation. I do not seek to be dogmatic; I seek to study for my own personal benefit and application. Although this essay does not include a detailed treatment of every relevant passage, I hope I have presented with sufficient clarity a grid through which the passages can be understood in harmony.

Christian, if you are a Christian as described in the New Testament, you have been baptized in (with) water and in (with) the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament promise of the Holy Spirit, the promise of John, the promise of Jesus is for you. You received the Holy Spirit when you were baptized, for the gift of the Holy Spirit is a part of the new covenant. Jesus' work was to save and to baptize in the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Receiving both together, the presence Holy Spirit is the continuing sign and seal of forgiveness (baptism is not the sign). The Christian life is life in the Spirit following birth of the Spirit.

By uniting us to Christ and giving us the Holy Spirit in our baptism, God has given us everything we need—salvation, his continuing presence through his Spirit to empower and equip us, and unity with one another.