

Baptism in the Spirit - What's That?

Andy. Come in pastor. My friend Terry is already here and he's eager to start our discussion! I'd better warn you that he seems pretty clued-up so you'll have a hard job changing his mind. He's got his Bible texts ready and he really does seem to have had an experience of some sort. I have to admit he's a far easier person to work with in the factory, and he certainly seems to love Christ more.

Pastor. Well, that's all good news, and I'm certainly not here to knock any genuine experience that anyone has of God; if it brings someone closer to Christ and creates a longing for holiness, that's great. But I came at the joint invitation of you and Terry, so let's not stand here in the hall talking, he'll think we are hatching a plot! Introduce me.

Andy. Terry, this is my pastor. I don't think you have met before.

Terry. Not directly; I heard you preach once. Hello.

Pastor. Hi Terry. I understand from Andy that you would like to discuss this 'baptism in the Spirit' you experienced recently. Let me say from the start that I'm really pleased to hear that you feel it has helped you to love Christ more. I don't want to argue against your experience Terry, but shall we just have a look at that New Testament phrase 'baptism in the Spirit'? Suppose you kick off and tell me what you mean by it.

Terry. Gladly. In Matthew 3:11 we read that John the Baptist promised that Jesus would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire', and Jesus underlined the promise to his disciples just before he left them. I've got it here in Acts 1:5, 'John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' Then, of course, on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit kept that promise and came in great power to change the lives of the disciples. That was their baptism in the Spirit; it was a great and powerful experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those already converted to prepare and empower them for Christian service. One moment the disciples were scared and weak and the next they were preaching with power. Now, since Jesus in Luke 11:13 encouraged us to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and since Peter in Acts 2:38 told the Jews in Jerusalem that they too could receive this gift, we should all pray for this, and expect to receive it.

Pastor. Thanks Terry; that sounds like a pretty good summary of your view. So you think that after our conversion we should all have a second experience when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives - a kind of second blessing - before we can really be effective as Christians?

Terry. Yes, that's right. The same thing happened to the Samaritan converts in Acts 8, and to Paul in Acts 9, and to Cornelius in Acts 10, and then to the Christians at Ephesus in Acts 19.

Pastor. We'll come back to those four examples in a minute, but so that I've got it clear, would you say the normal Christian experience is something like this:

repentance and new birth, then baptism in the Spirit, then water baptism, in that order. Is that right?

Terry. Yes, I suppose so.

Pastor. Could I just ask you two things about Pentecost in Acts 2? First, are you really sure this was the disciples' first experience of the Holy Spirit? I'm thinking of John 20:22 where we are told Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' What was that all about?

Terry. Well, of course the true Christian already has the Holy Spirit even before the experience of the baptism.

Pastor. You mean at conversion?

Terry. Yes.

Pastor. But surely the disciples were born again before John 20:22? After all, they had been out preaching, healing, and so on.

Terry. Yes, of course, but the disciples were a bit different from us weren't they? They were the start of the church.

Pastor. That's very true. We agree then that Pentecost was not their first experience of the Holy Spirit after conversion. Pentecost was at least their third blessing! Anyway, it leads to my second question about Pentecost. Are you really sure it wasn't a very special occasion in the life of the church, one that was unique and could never be repeated? You have just admitted that the disciples were a bit different from us because they were the start of the church, so perhaps Pentecost is not the model upon which we should pattern every Christian experience. After all Terry, *your* experience wasn't accompanied by tongues of fire or a rushing wind; and you didn't speak in a foreign language you had never learned before did you?

Terry. No, but not everything has to be exactly the same does it?

Pastor. Why not Terry? You told me John promised a baptism 'of the Holy Spirit and fire'. Where are the tongues of fire today?

Terry. I don't see your point.

Andy. No, neither do I.

Pastor. I'll spell it out for you. There are many things about Pentecost that make it a unique, never to be repeated experience in the history of the church. The promise of John the Baptist and Jesus did not mean that every Christian has to have an experience just like Pentecost.

Andy. But what about those four examples Terry listed in Acts - the Samaritans, Paul, Cornelius, and the Ephesians. Weren't they the same as Pentecost?

Pastor. No, not the same, just similar.

Andy. Doesn't that amount to the same thing?

Pastor. Not at all. When Peter in Acts 8:17 laid his hands on the Samaritans, we are told, 'They received the Holy Spirit', and in Acts 19:6, 'The Holy Spirit came on them.' Paul, in chapter 9:17, was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' Notice each of these experiences took place sometime after conversion, but not one is called a baptism.

Terry. But you left out Cornelius' experience. In Acts 11:15-16 Peter says that when he saw the effects of the Spirit coming upon Cornelius and his friends it reminded him of Pentecost; then he quotes the Lord's promise in Acts 1:5. Surely that was a baptism of the Spirit wasn't it?

Pastor. Yes Terry, but you'll see in a minute that you have just scored an own goal.

Andy. What do you mean?

Pastor. Well, take another look at the story of Cornelius. When he sent for Peter he was clearly not a real Christian. He was a sincere convert to the Jewish faith, and a good living, God-fearing man, but he didn't know the good news of Christ. It was as Peter was sharing the gospel, and had spoken of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and of judgement, faith and forgiveness of sins, that 'the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.' We have it there in 10:44. Terry, what had happened to Cornelius and his friends?

Terry. They got converted!

Pastor. Exactly. This is confirmed in Acts 11 by the reaction of the Christians in Jerusalem when Peter reported the news to them. Verse 18 tells us that they praised God because he had 'granted the Gentiles repentance unto life.' There was no laying on of hands was there? So the only time in Acts that any experience is deliberately linked with Pentecost is when Cornelius and his friends were converted.

Andy. You mean that baptism in the Spirit is more like conversion than anything else.

Pastor. You've got there fast Andy! The experience of Pentecost is called a baptism of the Spirit because it was the birth, the new birth if you like, of the church. After the unique, one-for-all experience of Pentecost, the word baptism with reference to the Holy Spirit is never used of someone who is already a Christian. Do you see the point Terry?

Terry. Yes, I see what you are saying.

Pastor. But you are not fully persuaded? All right, let's leave Acts for a while because we must be careful not to rely only on the book of Acts on this issue. Let's see if the New Testament letters tell us anything more about this baptism in the

Spirit. Terry, if it's so vital to our Christian life, where do the New Testament letters urge us to pray for this great baptism experience?

Terry. I don't think I know.

Pastor. Take my word for it, the answer is, nowhere! Surely that's a very strange omission for an experience that you say is so important. In fact, and this may surprise you both, do you remember our Lord's words to the disciples in Luke 11:13, 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!?' Well, that is the only occasion in the New Testament where we are told we can pray for the Holy Spirit to come to us.

Andy. Didn't Christ also say that we could ask the Father and he would send us another Counsellor, the Spirit of truth?

Pastor. You are thinking of John 14:16, and our Lord actually says, 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth.'

Terry. Whoops! You canned that one Andy.

Pastor. Yes, but that's a very interesting point isn't it? Only once in the entire New Testament is there any encouragement to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit and then it does not specifically refer to a baptism of the Spirit or any other experience for that matter . . .

Andy. If you look at it carefully, even Luke 11:13 may not be encouraging us to pray for the Holy Spirit to be given to us.

Terry. How do you make that out Andy? It looks like it to me.

Andy. Well, we need to bring the silence of the rest of the New Testament to bear on this verse and admit that we may be reading it wrongly. The context is the importance of persistent prayer with God so that we may be better equipped to serve him. So, perhaps we should read it simply that the Father will give his best of all gifts, the Holy Spirit, to those who sincerely pray to him for help in service.

Pastor. That's very perceptive of you Andy, and you could be right. Interestingly, when our Lord gives the same teaching on a different occasion in Matthew 7:11, he changes the words 'Holy Spirit' to 'good gifts'. The facts are that nowhere in the New Testament are we encouraged to pray for a baptism of the Spirit, and Luke 11:13 is the only possible encouragement to ask for the Holy Spirit at all. So, where will we find help in the New Testament on this subject of baptism in the Spirit?

Andy. You tell us.

Pastor. Let me turn you to the only two places where spiritual baptism is referred to. You see, the New Testament very rarely refers to a baptism in the Spirit. I think you will both be surprised to learn that after we've looked at these two verses we will

have covered, in our discussion so far, every reference in the Bible to the 'baptism in the Spirit'. From the way some Christians talk you would expect the Bible to be packed with verses about it. The first passage is in Romans 6:3-4. Let's turn to it. Andy, could you read these verses for us?

Andy. 'Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.'

Pastor. Thank you. Paul has just been writing about the guarantee we can have of justification by faith and the righteousness that is ours through the death and resurrection of Christ. He has emphasised our security and complete forgiveness in Christ so much that he expects someone to say: 'Well if all that is true you can go on sinning as much as you want to, knowing that God's grace will continually forgive you.' So Paul has to answer that challenge, and he does so by reminding us of what happened when we became a Christian.

Andy. I see. He describes it as being baptised into Christ; so conversion is a baptism into Christ.

Terry. But that doesn't talk about baptism of the Spirit. So it's not the same thing.

Pastor. All right Terry, let's take it one step at a time. We all agree that Paul is talking here about the experience of spiritual new birth or conversion. He can't be talking about baptism in water because that would in no way prove his point that the real Christian will not go on sinning in order to take advantage of forgiveness. Paul is trying to prove that the Christian has had such a tremendous conversion experience that he just can't willingly go on sinning. He calls it baptism into Christ because we die with Christ and rise with him in new life. The important word is 'baptism'. Conversion is like a baptism. Now we can turn to the other verse. Terry, will you read 1 Corinthians 12:13 please?

Terry. 'We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.'

Pastor. Here Paul is writing about the church as the body of Christ and he tells us how we became members of the true church: by being baptised by the Spirit. You will notice he says 'all' not 'some'. Once again, baptism is Paul's way of describing conversion, but this time it's called baptism by the Spirit . . .

Terry. . . . yes, but Paul there says 'baptised by one Spirit'. I am talking about a baptism in the Spirit. That's a different thing.

Pastor. Sorry, Terry, but there's no mileage in that argument. The Greek preposition used by Paul here and by John in Matthew 3:11, and Jesus in Acts 1:5, can mean 'by', 'with', or 'in'. So you just can't make a point based on that distinction, not from the Bible anyway. I know that many Christians say John's promise, recorded in Matthew 3:11, that Christ will 'baptise you with the Holy Spirit' is a different experience from 1 Corinthians 12:13 which reminds us that we have all been

baptised 'by one Spirit into one body'. They say the first reference is to Jesus the baptiser and the second to the Spirit as baptiser. But, quite honestly Terry, those are artificial distinctions made up to defend a particular doctrine. As I have said, the preposition can be translated 'by', 'with', or 'in', so 1 Corinthians 12:13 could just as easily be 'we were all baptised *with* one Spirit' and that doesn't tell us who the baptiser was. We can never build a distinctive doctrine on an uncertain translation, least of all on a preposition!

Andy. So the baptism in the Spirit and conversion is all the same thing?

Pastor. Yes it is.

Terry. But it isn't conversion in Acts 2 at Pentecost is it?

Pastor. No, Terry, but we all agreed a while back that Pentecost was unique. Nothing quite like it has happened since. This was the very first occasion when the Holy Spirit came in power upon the gathered church. It was the spiritual birth of the church and for this reason could be rightly called a baptism with the Spirit. From then on, as we have seen in the story of Cornelius and then in Romans 6:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:13, baptism in the Spirit is a description of conversion, and what a tremendous description it is.

Andy. Why do you say that?

Pastor. In the New Testament baptism is always a picture of initiation, or starting something. Whether it is 'in Christ', 'in the Spirit', or 'in water', it always refers to something never to be repeated. But more especially baptism in the Spirit is a great description of conversion because God wants us all to realise what happens when you become a Christian. The incredible fact is that becoming a Christian is a spiritual new birth when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives in his power and authority to give new life and to conquer our rebel hearts. At conversion we don't receive just a little of the Spirit, but all of him; and once in, he can never be driven out. Twice in the New Testament this is described as being 'sealed with the Spirit'; you will find the references in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and Ephesians 1:13. That sealing, says Paul, is a guarantee that our salvation can never be lost.

Terry. So you don't believe the 'sealing' by the Spirit is a special experience after conversion when God gives us real assurance.

Pastor. Certainly not! If it is, according to those two verses I have just referred to, you need a special experience before you can be certain of your salvation and before you can be guaranteed to stay the course. On the contrary, Paul's clear teaching is that every true Christian is sealed and baptised by the Spirit when they receive the new birth. This is God's seal of ownership and his guarantee that every Christian is secure for salvation. You see, it depends upon God not us. Fantastic isn't it?

Andy. If I can change tack for a minute, I know of some Christians who use the phrase 'baptism with the Spirit', not in the way Terry and his church does, but to refer to the outpouring of the Spirit in revival. Is that right?

Pastor. You're right, that is what some Christians believe. I certainly understand the point they are making, but they are not using 'baptism with the Spirit' in a New Testament way. In the New Testament it is always used in the sense of once for ever, unrepeatable experience and that, as we have seen, is conversion. The Christians you refer to, Andy, are using the phrase in a loose and general way. When we sing: 'Baptise the nations far and near . . .', and when we pray for God to bring 'Pentecostal showers', we are asking for a powerful out-pouring of the Spirit similar to the way he came at Pentecost. That would be revival, but I think you will agree that it's a little confusing to use the word in this way, though I can understand what these Christians mean.

Terry. You showed us earlier that the Bible never encourages us to pray for the Holy Spirit to come to us, apart from possibly that one verse in Luke's Gospel, why do you think that is?

Pastor. Any ideas Andy?

Andy. Perhaps because when we become a Christian the Holy Spirit comes to live within us, and since he is God himself we can't have just some of him - we have all or none.

Pastor. That's right Andy. We may be able to grieve him by our disobedience, or even quench his work within us by our sin, but we can never drive him away. He is with us for always. That's why in 2 Peter 1:4 the apostle describes our conversion as sharing 'in the divine nature'; and in John 14:23 our Lord told the disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes it will be as if the Father and the Son had made their home with them. There is nothing bigger or better than that is there? But there is another reason I think. You see when Christians are feeling defeated, or powerless, or disobedient it's too easy just to pray for more of the Holy Spirit. But that can be a cop-out. The Bible would tell us to look at our lives and discover *why* we are like that - and then put things right. Of course the Holy Spirit will help us to do this, but it's action he wants, not experiences.

Andy. But if all you have been saying is true, you have demolished Terry's recent experience, which meant so much to him. How can you say he didn't have an experience of the Spirit that has changed his life as a Christian?

Pastor. Andy, I haven't demolished or denied Terry's experience. I just want us to start with the Bible and think and talk biblically. There is a very important phrase that we have not yet looked at; it's found in the Bible but has nothing to do with the baptism in the Spirit.

Terry. What's that then?

Pastor. The New Testament talks about being 'filled with the Spirit'. If you turn to Ephesians 5:18 you will see that Paul gives his readers a command: 'Be filled with the Spirit'. But what you will not easily discover from your English translation is that Paul uses a verb in what is called a 'present continuous' tense in the Greek. That means you can translate it: 'Go on being filled with the Spirit'. This refers to our

spiritual growth as the Holy Spirit has more and more authority in our lives. Every Christian can and should be filled with the Spirit as an ongoing experience. But it also refers to special times of spiritual power. Remember, baptism is once for all at conversion, whereas filling is a repeated experience. We are never told to pray for the baptism of the Spirit or commanded to be baptised with the Spirit, but we are told to go on being filled. The two things are entirely different.

Terry. You said this filling refers to special times of spiritual power in our lives. Where do we read about that?

Pastor. Paul was baptised by the Spirit at his conversion and then three days later was 'filled with the Spirit'. That was a particular anointing by the Spirit for service. Peter in Acts 4:8, was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when he stood before the Jerusalem Council and the disciples in Acts 4:31 were 'filled with the Holy Spirit' after their prayer meeting. But we need to stress that you cannot separate this filling from holiness of life, that's the context of Ephesians 5:18. That's why the New Testament emphasis is upon Christ-likeness and maturity, not spiritual experiences. The more closely we walk with Christ, the more freely and powerfully the Spirit will work through us.

Terry. Surely the use of the word filling implies that the disciples were only partly filled before this experience.

Pastor. Not necessarily Terry. Unfortunately people tend to think of water when the word 'filling' is used, so they imagine the disciples like a bottle only partly filled. But it is better to think of the Holy Spirit as wind.

Andy. Like Jesus did in John 3 when he was talking to Nicodemus.

Pastor. Yes, you see there is a big difference between the pictures of water and wind. If you open the window you may let the rain in, but it may just trickle over the floor. On the other hand when you let the wind in, it comes into every part of the room. You can't say, 'Oh I'm sorry, it's blowing a gale out there and I opened the window and let the wind in, but never mind, it's over there in the corner, we can soon get it out.' You see, the wind, whether a soft breeze or a howling gale penetrates every part of the room.

Andy. So that's like the Holy Spirit in our lives, he comes into every part, but he may sometimes be like a breeze and sometimes like a gale - and filling is like the gale. So being filled with the Spirit is not that we have more of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but that he works more powerfully.

Terry. So you are saying the Bible language for my experience is filling, not baptism?

Pastor. Actually Terry, I didn't say that either! It certainly can't be baptism, that's for sure; but it may not fit the Bible description of filling either. Clearly this experience in Acts was a powerful and almost overwhelming experience that gave special boldness and power, authority and joy for service. If you read the five instances in Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17 and 13:9, you will see what I mean. On one occasion the room

they were in was literally shaken! These are not common experiences; they are very special and very powerful, and can be repeated any number of times.

Andy. So what do you call Terry's experience?

Pastor. Nothing! I don't mean that disrespectfully Terry, but we all have times in our Christian lives when the Lord draws near to us and leads us on. Why give it a name? You know, Andy and Terry, we don't expect enough from God today because we have settled for so little. Christians have some sort of spiritual experience and they call it 'baptism in the Spirit', so the next experience they call: 'being filled' - and there's nothing left to have! What a tragedy. Actually very few Christians know the experience of being filled with the Spirit today, but we should continually long to know God's blessing in this way. Meanwhile, if God meets with us by His Spirit, and Christ becomes more real and precious to us, please don't give your experience a name and urge every other Christian to have the same experience. God doesn't make all Christians out of the same jelly mould; he is a God of the individual.

Terry. But isn't there a danger that the view of baptism in the Spirit you have described just looks back to conversion and has no interest in our present spiritual experience?

Pastor. On the contrary, I am very concerned to know whether or not a Christian longs to be filled with the Spirit. It is actually your position, Terry, that is in danger of always wanting to know whether or not a person has had a particular experience in the past. In other words, you want to know about yesterday's experience, but I want to know about today's experience.

Andy. Does the distinction about baptism and filling really matter? Perhaps we are just quibbling about words.

Pastor. To use Bible words in the way the Bible uses them is actually very important. Paul claims in 1 Corinthians 2:13 that the words he uses are 'not taught us by human wisdom but by the Spirit.' If we don't give Bible words Bible meanings, the result is confusion.

Terry. To be honest Andy, my church does lay a lot of stress on this baptism in the Spirit. We do expect every Christian to go for it.

Pastor. Of course, and because I don't 'go for it' many will consider me a second-class Christian. Some have told me that I only preach half the gospel, so for some people it's as important as half the gospel. This view of baptism in the Spirit which, as we have seen, is not justified by the Bible, actually leads to division among Christians. Those who hold it tend to judge the value of the lives of other believers by whether or not they have had this experience.

Terry. But I wouldn't want to be divisive.

Pastor. I'm sure you wouldn't Terry. But if you insist on your view of baptism in the Spirit you can't help being divisive, because you must think that Christians like Andy and me are missing the big thing. What I do, Terry, is to praise God for the mighty

baptism of the Spirit I received at conversion and then I daily long to 'keep in step with the Spirit', which is an expression Paul uses in Galatians 5:25. I also long to be 'filled with the Spirit'. Any special experience I have along the way I refuse to give a name, because the Bible doesn't. I certainly don't insist that other Christians must have the same experience.

Terry. I can see all that now.

Andy. This will certainly help me when Christians ask, as they do, 'have you received the baptism yet?' I never know what to say.

Pastor. Well, now you do know what to say. You simply reply: 'Of course I have; I'm a Christian.' But you know Andy, when you think of it, to ask any Christian if they have been baptised in the Spirit, in the sense Terry meant, or even to ask if they have been or are being filled with the Spirit, in the way I use it, is a quite unnecessary question.

Andy. Why?

Pastor. Simply because in either case if the evidence is not obvious then the question is superfluous. If there is no evidence in my life and character of a powerful work of the Holy Spirit then why bother to ask the question? It's a bit like asking your friend: 'Have you been born?' The answer to that question should be staring you in the face! Would you have needed to ask the disciples in Acts 4 whether they were filled with the Spirit? Just look at their lives and listen to their preaching! If you have to ask the question you already have your answer.

Andy. I never thought of it like that before.

Terry. But hold on. Didn't Paul, in Acts 19, ask the Ephesian Christians if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed? Are you saying he shouldn't have asked them that question?

Pastor. That was a completely different situation. Paul knew very well they had received the Holy Spirit 'when they believed', that is, when they were converted. He knew there is no other way of becoming a Christian than by receiving the Holy Spirit.

Terry. So why did he ask the question?

Pastor. For the sake of those young converts. He was testing their knowledge of the Holy Spirit. They had never heard of the Spirit, so Paul had some vital teaching to get across.

Terry. I've really found this helpful. I can see things much more clearly now.

Andy. Me too.

Pastor. Let me add one more thing before we break up. We must never try to box in the Holy Spirit to some special kind of experience. That probably grieves him more

than most things. Here's a big verse to close with. It's in Romans 15:13, and it just shows how living and active is the work of the Spirit. Read it to us please Andy.

Andy. 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Pastor. It is important to realise that the verbs 'trust' and 'overflow' are both in that present continuous tense we spoke of earlier. God wants our hope, joy, peace, and trust to be continually overflowing in our lives. How? By the power of the Holy Spirit who baptised us with himself at our conversion. Don't let anyone hi-jack this glorious experience of baptism with the Holy Spirit at conversion; it is the solid foundation upon which all other Christian experience is built.