

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

Issue #46

May/June 1998

The Baptism in the Holy Spirit

by Bob DeWaay

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”
(1 Corinthians 12:13)

All evangelical Christians believe in being baptized in the Holy Spirit; but how and when one is baptized in the Holy Spirit is disputed. Since the advent of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century, some have maintained that the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace, or the “second blessing.” Other Evangelicals have maintained that all Christians are baptized in the Holy Spirit at their conversion. If this was the only disputed point, the job of deciding which position is Biblical would be easier. Pentecostals also teach that the gift of tongues is the only valid evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Other Evangelicals have claimed that tongues and all other supernatural gifts of its kind ceased when the last apostle died nearly two millennia ago. Obviously these two positions cannot be easily reconciled, if at all.

Those who arrive at these positions do so by finding patterns in the five places in the Book of Acts that recount incidences of people being filled with the Holy Spirit. One side shows that in each case, tongues can be shown to accompany the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the other that apostles were present when the gift of tongues was manifested. Is the gift of tongues a sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a second blessing for certain Christians or a sign of the apostles? Since the same texts are used to teach doctrines that are at odds with each other, further study is required.

Having graduated from North Central Bible College of the Assemblies of God, I know the Pentecostal position intimately. I was blessed to be taught by godly men who honored the authority of Scripture and warned of errors and excesses. They refused to accept any “revelations” that went beyond God’s word and rejected any

claims that there are latter day apostles and prophets. It was they who urged me to learn Greek, hermeneutics, and to avoid a mystical approach to my Christian life. Everything was to be tested by Scripture. I owe a debt of gratitude to these teachers and want to thank publicly John Phillips, Wesley Smith, William Snow and Ray Levang. The godly influence of these teachers and their words of wisdom are still with me. I am particularly indebted to Reverend Smith whose influence on me during the first years of my Christian life was profound. These men hold a high regard for the authority of Scripture and stand for godly living that comes from a commitment to Christ and work of the Holy Spirit.

I disagree, however, with some elements of both the Pentecostal position and of those who teach the cessation of the gifts. I disagree with the idea that the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a second blessing placing those who receive it into a higher order Christian experience, and that one must have spoken in tongues to have any claim to it. I also disagree with the teaching that the gifts have ceased and speaking in tongues was only to show that true apostles were present. Teachers whom I love and admire are on each side of this issue. Let us look to the Scriptures and seek a Biblical answer that avoids two problems: (1) a two tiered “have and have not” understanding of the body of Christ, and (2) a denial the validity of gifts that Christ has given to his church.

The Evidence from Acts

The pattern in Acts is the movement of the Holy Spirit to bring people into the church beginning with Jews in Jerusalem and ending with Paul preaching in Rome. Clearly, Christ’s prediction in **Acts 1:8** of the spread of the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit is fulfilled as Acts unfolds. The Messianic age is encompassing diverse and unexpected people by the mercy and power of God. God goes from saving Jews in Jerusalem who had previously rejected Christ and His claims (**Acts 2**), to saving Samaritans who were considered religiously impure (**Acts 8**), to saving a Pharisee who hated Christianity and

stood in agreement with the stoning of Stephen (**Acts 9**), to saving God-fearing Gentiles (**Acts 10**), to saving Jews and Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean basin (the rest of the book of Acts). This process showed that Christ is truly the Messiah and that His commission to His followers was being fulfilled through the power of the Holy Spirit. God was saving the most unexpected people by His power and grace.

It is sad that we take these accounts out of this context and try to prove things that Luke was not telling us. Luke was not teaching that the church consists of ordinary Christians and elite super-saints who have an experience that common Christians lack, that one must speak in tongues to have received the Holy Spirit, or that tongues would cease when the apostles died. These teachings involve Christians of later centuries seeking to define or validate their own experiences. Those Christians who received the gift of tongues and come under criticism from those who have no such experience find in Acts support for a second blessing. Those Christians whose traditions include no spiritual gifts find in Acts support for the gifts being linked to the Apostles only.

Acts 2

The first incidence of speaking in tongues in connection with the in filling of the Holy Spirit is Acts 2:4. Christ had promised that after He ascended to the Father He would send the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹ On the day of Pentecost (one of the three annual pilgrim feasts which Jews traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate) the promise was fulfilled that Christ would baptize His followers in the Holy Spirit (**John 1:33, Acts 1:5**). Was this a sign of the presence of apostles or was it a sign of the “second blessing”? Apostles were present, this is clear. The whole assembly in the upper room received this gift, including the apostles. Concerning signs, we need to ask, “what was signified, and to whom?” The purpose of signs is to signify something. Those in the upper room already knew that they were to receive the Holy Spirit, but they did not know how or when.

Peter’s preaching explained the significance of the sign. The Jews from the diaspora who witnessed this event were amazed (**Acts 2:5-7**) to hear their own dialects. Yet the sign was unclear (**Acts 2:12**) until explained by Peter. What was signified was the fulfillment of Biblical

prophecy. The last days had begun! In the past, the Holy Spirit had come upon prophets, priests, and kings in particular situations. The prophets predicted a day when the people of God would truly **know** Him (**Jere. 31:31-34**) and that the Holy Spirit would fall on all of mankind (**Joel 2:28-32** quoted by Peter). Even Peter did not realize the full significance of the passage he quoted until later as recorded in **Acts 10** — God would even save Gentiles! Joel mentioned the young, the old, slaves and women. Clearly this went far beyond the expectation and experience of the Jews. What was signified by tongues in **Acts 2** was the fulfilment of prophecy about the end times. God was doing the new thing He promised long ago through the prophets. This is a Messianic work that Jesus predicted before His ascension. He promised to send the Holy Spirit. This was far more than a sign that apostles were present, it was a sign of the Messianic age.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit as described in **Acts 2** did not take ordinary Christians and place them onto a higher spiritual plane. Pentecostals argue that the disciples were born again earlier in **John 20:22**: “*And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’*” This symbolic action took place when Christ commissioned his disciples after His resurrection (**John 20:21**). The text does not say that they were born again just then. We know from **Luke 24:49** that they were told to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit. Also, there was a somewhat different group of people in the upper room. The **John 20** account primarily concerned the twelve, (though others may have been present) but there were a hundred and twenty (**Acts 1:15**) who were gathered on Pentecost. What happened on Pentecost clearly was not a “second blessing” for those not present at the John 20 incident. The idea that being baptized in the Holy Spirit is a secondary and subsequent experience is not supported by **Acts 2**.

Further evidence that these were receiving the Holy Spirit for the first time is the amazing transformation of their understanding of God’s word. Previous to this they were still confused about Christ’s purposes for them and Israel (**Acts 1:6**). In **Acts 1:8** Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit’s coming upon the disciples as yet future. There is no reason to think that it had already happened in the **John 20:22** incident. Jesus had told them that the

Holy Spirit was with them and would be in them (**John 14:17**). This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Furthermore, Peter connected the sending of the Holy Spirit to the ascension of Christ. He said, “*Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear*” (**Acts 2:33**). What happened on Pentecost was not a second blessing for born-again Christians, it was the pouring out of the Spirit that Christ promised and it was subsequent to His ascension. **John 7:39** also connects the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Son’s glorification.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit in **Acts 2** was a sovereign act of God. It fulfilled prophecy and began the church age. The gift of tongues that accompanied it was a sign to Jews in Jerusalem that God was fulfilling prophecy that related to the Messianic age. Peter’s preaching about the resurrection of Jesus convinced them that He was indeed the Jewish Messiah and that they ought to repent and believe in Him. To “prove” from this passage that tongues only verify the presence of apostles or that they verify that certain people have received a second blessing that puts them in a higher category of Christian experience is to miss much of its profound impact. During the Messianic age God’s Spirit will fall upon unexpected people, “as many as the Lord shall call to Himself” (**Acts 2:39b**). As Joel prophesied, “whoever will call upon the Lord will be saved” (**Acts 2:21**).

It is true that the people who were baptized in the Holy Spirit in **Acts 2** spoke in tongues and it is true that true apostles were present. Both of these facts are incidental to a greater truth that Messianic prophecy was fulfilled and that people should turn to God by repenting and trusting the resurrected Messiah. There is no need to adopt either of the contradictory theories based on Acts 2.

Acts 8

Acts 8 is about God’s word coming to the Samaritans, and many being saved. Jesus had promised his disciples that they would bear witness to Him in Samaria (**Acts 1:8**) and Philip was doing just that. We should bear in mind the traditional dislike of the Samaritans by the Jews and the historical significance of the gospel spreading to this new people group. It is further evidence of the fulfilment of Messianic prophecy that began on Pentecost. God was saving unexpected people and

including them in His eternal purposes! They had been under the spell of an occultist named Simon (**Acts 8:9**), who eventually sought to buy the power to impart the Holy Spirit and was condemned by Peter for doing so (**Acts 8:20**). In this syncretistic, pagan environment the Holy Spirit sovereignly worked to draw people to Jesus Christ.

This section of scripture works well as proof for both the Pentecostal position that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace subsequent to salvation and the position that tongues are a sign of the apostles who died long ago. The unusual thing that happened was that after the Samaritans believed Philip’s preaching and were baptized (**Acts 8:12**), Peter and John were sent by the apostles in Jerusalem to pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (**Acts 8:14,15**). Interestingly, here both Pentecostals and their critics find support for their beliefs. It appears that the Samaritans were receiving a second work of grace and that after receiving the gospel more was necessary. Since Simon saw something he thought worth buying, both sides of this debate assume that gifts such as tongues were present at this occasion.

This passage does pose difficulties, as has long been acknowledged. Some have thought that an apostolic rite of “confirmation” was performed here.² It is better to see this as an incident of the general spread of the gospel to divergent people groups and the need of the apostles themselves to accept that this is what God intended to do. As in the case of the Gentiles in **Acts 10**, a new group had been called by God into saving relationship with Himself.

Though predicted in the Old Testament prophets and by Jesus, it was nevertheless outside of the expectations and experience of the Jewish apostles. For the early church to understand and embrace the purposes of God, it was crucial that the apostles see for themselves that God was saving Samaritans. Likewise the Samaritans needed reassurance that they were accepted by their traditional enemies, the Jews. F.F. Bruce comments:

In the present instance, some special evidence may have been necessary to assure the Samaritans, so accustomed to being despised as outsiders by the people of Jerusalem, that they were fully incorporated into the new community of the people of God. It was one thing for them to be bap-

tized by a free-lance evangelist like Philip, but not until they had been acknowledged and welcomed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church did they experience the signs which confirmed and attested their membership in the Spirit-possessed society.³

I believe that God chose to pour out His Spirit upon the Samaritans in the presence of the apostles from Jerusalem for the benefit of both parties and the unity of the church. We ought not to assume from **Acts 8** that people who believe the gospel and are baptized are lacking the Holy Spirit, especially since Peter preached in **Acts 2:38** that those who repented and were baptized received the gift of the Holy Spirit. This passage does not prove that apostles must be present for there to be spiritual gifts nor that the in filling of the Holy Spirit is a higher-order experience for certain elite Christians. It seems to me that both sides of the debate are reading their pre-conceived theologies into the passage.

The theme that was begun in **Acts 2** is continued in **Acts 8**. God is creating His church by pouring His Holy Spirit upon unexpected people who hear the gospel and repent. The Messianic age is at hand and Old Testament scripture is being fulfilled. This theme will continue throughout Acts.

Acts 9

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus who becomes Paul is recounted for us in **Acts 9**. The passage also mentions the in filling of the Holy Spirit. After striking Saul with blindness, the Lord called a believer by the name of Ananias to pray for him (**Acts 9:11,12**). Ananias was hesitant because of Saul's reputation of persecuting Christians, but was reassured that God had called Saul to Himself. Ananias told Paul that God would fill him with the Holy Spirit: "*And Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he arose and was baptized*" (**Acts 9:17,18**). The timing of the filling of the Holy Spirit in connection with Paul's conversion is difficult to establish here, but clearly the general pattern of **Acts 2:38** is evident. Paul repented, was baptized in water and received the Holy

Spirit. This all happened within a short period of time and the whole of this was Paul's conversion from a persecutor to a follower of Christ.

Paul's conversion does not help the case of those who teach the gifts as signs of the apostles, since gifts are not mentioned here. Neither does it help the position that the in filling of the Holy Spirit is a later, second work of grace and is always accompanied by the gift of tongues (or some other supernatural gift as charismatics teach). It was clear to Ananias that since God had chosen Paul, that Paul ought to be baptized and that God would fill Paul with the Holy Spirit. The order of these events was hardly the key issue for Luke. As the next chapter of Acts will show, there was not a hard and fast order to the events that accompany salvation, at least as they are evident to human observers. Logically, the prior activity of God is necessary for anyone's salvation.⁴ People must turn to God in faith and repent of their self-centered life of rebellion. Those who, by God's grace, believe the gospel and repent are called to be baptized. Baptism in water is not sufficient in itself and having been baptized in water does not cause anyone's salvation, as the case of Simon the magician in **Acts 8** shows. Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Thus believers in the book of Acts were promised this baptism in the Holy Spirit as concomitant to their reception of the Gospel by faith. Whether it happened before or after they were baptized in water was not of primary importance as **Acts 10** will show.

We do not know if Paul spoke in tongues when he received the gift of the Holy Spirit, though later he said that he did have this gift (**1Corin. 14:18**). We should keep the main thing the main thing, which is that God apprehended Paul and filled him with the Holy Spirit as was promised to those who received Christ. This much is clear from **Acts 9**. Again, God sovereignly worked to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to an unexpected person, a persecutor of Christians.

Acts 10

The next case of individuals being filled with the Holy Spirit is in **Acts 10** where the gospel is spread to Gentiles. In **Acts 10**, God brought together a series of supernatural circumstances to get Peter to preach to Cornelius's household. He was a God-fearing Gentile. Such persons were attracted to Judaism but had not become proselytes, often because of the require-

ment of circumcision.⁵ Once Peter was convinced that it was appropriate to preach the gospel to Gentiles (**Acts 10:28**), he preached the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (**Acts 10:38-43**). The results were startling. The Holy Spirit fell upon these Gentiles while Peter was still preaching, with the Gentiles speaking in tongues (**Acts 10:44-46**). They were then baptized in water.

The key issue here was the salvation of Gentiles. This can be seen by the debate that resulted: "*Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them'*" (**Acts 11:1-3**). The deciding factor that Peter used to convince the others that this was God's will was that God had baptized the Gentiles in the Holy Spirit and that Jesus said that people would be so baptized (**Acts 11:16,17**). Signs signify something to someone. In this case, the gift of tongues given to Cornelius' household signified to the apostles that God had saved Gentiles and accepted them into His church. Therefore, they ought to baptize them and accept them as fellow believers. In this case, rather than spiritual gifts being signs to others that true apostles were present, they were signs to apostles that true Christians were present! This does not fit the pattern for those who claim gifts are only signs of apostles, though an apostle was indeed present. Yet God supernaturally gave the gift of the Holy Spirit while Peter spoke. Note: Peter did not use any supposed ability to produce signs to validate his ministry.

Neither does this incident fit the pattern taught by Pentecostals. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was not a secondary experience and the gift of tongues was not in this case a sign to the believers that they had become Spirit-filled, but a sign to the apostles that these Gentiles had become Christian. The supposed pattern that proves the second blessing doctrine or conversely the doctrine that the gifts are only to validate apostles is not really a pattern after all. The true pattern is that the Holy Spirit is at work to fulfil the promise of Christ in **Acts 1:8**. God is saving unexpected people in a larger and larger social and geographical circles. Christ truly baptizes people with the Holy Spirit as He promised, and not just Jews in Jerusalem.

Acts 19

In Acts 19 Paul encountered “disciples” in Ephesus and asked them about the Holy Spirit (**Acts 19:1,2**). They had never heard of Him, but had been baptized into “John’s baptism.” There must have been a reason why Paul asked them about the Holy Spirit. Evidently, these disciples had even a more defective understanding of Christianity than had Apollos (**Acts 18**).⁶ Somehow Paul sensed something lacking. Paul clearly expected that baptized people would also have received the Holy Spirit. They probably knew something about Jesus or they would not likely have been called “disciples.” The text does not tell us how or where they heard about John the Baptist’s baptism and accepted it.

The book of Acts emphasizes the fact that Christ baptizes in the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was only preparatory (**Acts 1:5; 11:16; 19:4**). There is reason to believe that these people had no encounter with the Holy Spirit at all, and were in a different category than Apollos because they were baptized in water again and Apollos was not. The apostles themselves, who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost were never re-baptized after having received John’s baptism.⁷ Since the apostles and Apollos were not re-baptized and these twelve were, there must have been a difference. The difference was that these did not have the Spirit — that is they were unregenerate. They were baptized by Paul “into the name of the Lord Jesus” and received the Holy Spirit with attending manifestations.

Pentecostals see an analogy here with people who are in evangelical churches and believe the gospel, but to not have spiritual gifts (particularly do not speak in tongues). They assume such individuals are not “Spirit-filled” Christians, though truly born-again. This was not the situation in Ephesus. Paul had them baptized with Christian baptism because they did not have the Holy Spirit at all (something he must have known, thus his question). They evidently knew a few things about Jesus and more about John the Baptist.

I think a better analogy would be with “Christians” who have been baptized, usually as babies, in Catholic or main-line Protestant churches. During the 1970’s, many such people received the baptism of the Holy Spirit during the Charismatic renewal. I know many people who came to the Lord in this way. Most of them were not born-again in their moderate to liberal denominations, but knew many

things about Jesus. They had not really met the Lord. The message about the Holy Spirit, like what happened in **Acts 19**, caused many to respond to the Lord and receive a vital walk of faith. Many of these people (not all) ended up leaving their previous denominations, being baptized as adults, and joining Bible-believing fellowships. In my opinion, what they received was not the “second blessing,” but regeneration and salvation. It turned out to be a workable strategy when speaking with people who thought they were “disciples” and already gave mental assent to the facts about Jesus and the Bible. Speaking to them about baptism in the Holy Spirit filled in what they were lacking and brought about changed lives through Christ’s supernatural intervention. This is what happened in **Acts 19**. They already believed in Jesus (in the sense of mental assent), now they met the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.

Like **Acts 8**, **Acts 19** seems to “prove” the point of both parties in this debate. Tongues is a sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit which is a secondary experience for born-again Christians and tongues is a sign of the apostles. Paul’s apostolic authority was validated. However, it is better to understand this from the perspective of Luke’s theme of the spread of Christianity through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, beginning with these twelve, was to be an important landmark in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. God was using Paul in Ephesus and Asia minor much like He used Peter in Judea. John baptized with water, now the ascended Christ is baptizing people with the Holy Spirit and sending them throughout the world to be His witnesses. This is Luke’s theme.

Conclusion

The passage cited at the beginning of this article (**1Corinthians 12:13**) says that all Christians have been baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. Christ’s body is not divided up into two camps, the ordinary Christians and the privileged “Spirit-baptized” Christians. Paul wrote, “*However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.*” (**Romans 8:9**). The book of Acts says nothing that disagrees with Paul in these two passages.

Using induction to prove a point surely does not work when the individual

cases that make up the inductive sequence do not match. The passages we studied in Acts do not show a pattern of people becoming born-again Christians at one point and then having a subsequent, secondary experience called the baptism in the Holy Spirit. For sure this was not the case for some people in the upper room and probably all one hundred twenty. It was not the case for Paul in **Acts 9** and was not the case in **Acts 10** for Cornelius’ household. The evidence suggests that those Paul encountered in **Acts 19** were not previously born-again, though some may dispute this. The so-called “pattern” is only found in **Acts 8** under unique circumstances. The “signs of the Apostles” teaching has similar problems. The signs in these cases were not to others to prove that apostles were present. Sometimes the signs were to the apostles to show Christians were present. In both cases the inductive procedure fails.

Much more needs to be said. Are the gifts of the Spirit for today, and if so for what purpose? If all Christians are baptized in the Holy Spirit as **1Corinthians 12:13** suggests, then what explanation is to be given to the experience of Pentecostals and others who are touched by the Holy Spirit and receive supernatural gifts? In the next issue I will show that it is Biblical for Christians who are filled with the Spirit to be urged to “be filled with the Spirit.” The apostles were said to be filled with the Holy Spirit on more than one occasion. I will examine the arguments of those who say the gifts have ceased and disagree with them based on Biblical exegesis. Things also will be said in agreement with the teaching that the canon is closed, the apostles had a unique role, and that there are no new revelations.

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End Notes

1. John 14:16,17,26; John 16:7,8, 13; Luke 24:49.

2. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* in NICNT, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1988) 169, Bruce discusses this theory and disagrees with it.

3. *Ibid.* 170.

4. see **John 6:44**: “*No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.*”
5. see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 436.
6. see Op. Cit., Bruce 362, 363.
7. Ibid. 364 for a good discussion of the 12 in Ephesus.