



BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT – a Biblical Perspective

by Frank Selch

In the Christian life the concept of Baptism in the Holy Spirit is frequently, if not mostly associated with the Gifts of the Spirit, prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, etc. However, a careful study of the New Testament shows that these things really have a very low priority in God's scheme of things.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM *per se*

It is with this term where our thinking tends to come adrift! What does baptism really mean? Does it mean to dip, dunk, sprinkle or spray? The word is an anglicized form of the Greek word *baptizo* – meaning 'to immerse or submerge'.

As with water 'baptism' the core meaning of '*Holy Spirit Baptism*' is one of total immersion – not sprinkling, or without a person's full cooperation and awareness. In modern Greek, the term refers to submarine activity, in other words to be totally submersed in [a] liquid [or something]. The simple logic of the word teaches us that one can only be immersed into something— not with something. The English word baptism, therefore, is an inappropriate and illogical word!

Where immersion in water is a symbol of repentance— since it is not about washing away dirt from a physical source, immersion or baptism in Holy Spirit is a vastly different matter altogether— though not unrelated.

The term is usually closely associated with prophecy and the 'speaking in tongues', etc., so for this reason we need to consider their total relationship. For example, in Acts 19:5-6 it says this, '*When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied*' (NKJV). These men had already gone through an immersion of repentance according to John, but Paul insisted on a 're-immersion' into the Name of the Lord Jesus. What Paul did with them, he made them undergo an immersion of commitment to the Risen Jesus – NOT for a better repentance. After they did that, Paul's laying on of hands – it says – brought about an '*infilling of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Holiness*'¹ and 'they prophesied'. There are two very important factors involved here in we should understand this passage. Firstly, the Greek word '*hagios*' pertains to '*being holy [separated from anything profane] in the sense of superior moral qualities and possessing certain essentially divine qualities in contrast with what is human—'holy, pure, divine.'*'² Secondly, we have the outburst of '*prophesying*'. What does the latter really mean? Although the word means to '*forthtell*', to speak of future events, it can also simply mean '*exuberant or ecstatic utterances*' as a consequence of having been loosened from the burden of guilt and sin through repentance. In Acts 8:14-17 we are told of a similar occurrence. However, on that occasion it says that those who had their hands laid on

¹ A parallel to this concept exists in Genesis 1:2, viz. '*The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*' This *Ruach Elohim*, or πνεύματος ἁγίου (Holy or Divine/God Spirit) is the

² Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (1:744). New York: United Bible societies.

them received the Holy Spirit— obviously a considerable time after their immersion [in water]. There are no miracles or prophetic utterances recorded in association with ‘that’ laying on of hands. Yet, something must have happened to them since Simon the magician wanted to buy ‘that’ power.

BAPTISM (IMMERSION) IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

I want to stress again the importance of using/understanding words correctly— and not falling prey to God-words or theological concepts the majority of Christians are impregnated with.

Let us investigate this for a moment from the perspective of this key passage on the matter; e.g. ‘*John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*’

Key to this passage is the word ‘with’. The subjects are *water* and *Holy Spirit*. In the Greek text both are in the dative form thus requiring the prepositions of *in, with or by*. Based on the Sacramental perspective of the early church (Augustinian period) Grace was always administered *to* the recipient. Since ‘*baptism*’ had come to be understood to be a Sacrament, it was something the subject received. However... this is not what the Greek text says. It gives us the option to choose our preposition. But how can we know, which is correct? Easy! When someone becomes immersed into something, he/she is *in it* – not with it or by it! To immerse something into something the object becomes surrounded and at times filled – if the submarine has a leak, or soaked – in the case of a sponge or similar material, etc. Therefore, it is impossible to be immersed with or by, but one becomes immersed **IN** – no further option! This is why Water Baptism (immersion) symbolizes actual death³ and Spirit Baptism (immersion) a total saturation.

THE CONSEQUENCES

The reality is that the ‘*Power of God*’, the ‘*Holy Spirit*’ are not resident facilities that come upon humans as permanent fixtures or possessions— whether we like it or not there are conditions that influence that; c/f. Rom.8:1-8.

Please bear in mind that Adam and Eve were FULL of Holy Spirit at their creation— they had the unadulterated image of God imprinted on them and they were clothed in the righteousness of God. Being made from the earth, and thus beings of flesh they also had a free will and were apart from their Creator in that sense. This separateness had also endowed them with the potential to seek an independent existence. When they enacted that independence, they discovered the consequence to which we can testify today with great pain.

The consequence of their action caused the [God] Spirit within them to die, thus losing their garment of righteousness. This action alone set the pattern for all time.

³ The death actually occurs through the giving away of the self in repentance, the immersion is more akin to our burial; it symbolizes the finality of the grave.

IMMERSION (BAPTISM) IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Most of the Holy Spirit theology (or more correctly Pneumatology) is based on Acts 2 and Peter's declaration that they were experiencing the fulfilment of Joel 2:28 ff. However, with the hindsight of 2000 years of history, it is impossible to say that the '*Joel Prophecy*' should be regarded as a 'final' fulfilment. Therefore, if that event was but a partial outpouring — and it is impossible to see it as more than that — then much, or most of modern Pneumatology, is misleading. However, it would not be incorrect to say, that a given number of people (in NT— as well as in more recent times) experienced a very powerful touch of God — akin to such events recorded in the Tenakh.

History shows however, that the euphoria of **that** Shavuot (Pentecost) did not last and by the end of the century the '*spiritual ekklesia*' showed signs of '*ekklesiastical autocracy*' - powered by ambitious (and largely Hellenistic inclined) men.

Have such (Holy Spirit) events happened again? Yes, I believe that whenever the Almighty did something unusual with Israel, it was an event experienced by the rest of the world; i.e. Christianity.⁴ I can personally testify that something out of the ordinary was happening to many people during the time of the Charismatic Renewal. Associated with it were extraordinary healings— though not all of them permanent (despite this I saw my own mother permanently healed from a chronic and most debilitating skeletal condition through the laying on of hands and prayer); there was also a desire for greater righteousness, for Biblical knowledge and for a deeper relationship with God. Nevertheless, despite attempts to keep the phenomenon alive by all kinds of crazy and artificial means, the 'Body' today is mostly a lifeless form on a respirator and devoid of divine activity.

Something is not right with our understanding!

WHAT DOES THE TERM SPIRIT MEAN?

As Paul told the Athenians, '*...He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being...*' (Acts 17:27-28). Christian theology maintains that the Creator is omnipresent, thus affirming that God cannot absent Himself from the world; He simply IS and there is no place in the Universe where He cannot be. However, it is us, humans, who chose to distance ourselves from Him. For this reason, all it takes is an act of heartfelt repentance to re-experience His closeness. In Romans 8:10 the Apostle declares that, '*...the Spirit is life because of righteousness!*' How does righteousness come about? A life of Repentance – or a transformed life! John 3:3 does not tell us to be born again, but to be born from above – please check the Greek for yourself!

Paul demonstrates the clarity of his understanding on this issues in his epistle to the Galatian Church, when he talks about the fruit of the Spirit— it is something to be cultivated; the believer must learn to walk in a manner that continues to produce those fruits, hence the prohibition in Gal 5:16. To 'walk' is an **imperative**, a demand for action, viz. '*But I say, walk in the spirit and you will not...*' — it is a call to walk faithfully before God with a transformed heart. Paul obviously does not regard the operation of the H.Sp. as an automatic function. So, it is not that God automatically propels us to good works, we have to decide— just as the reverse is also true. At the Fall of Adam, the human race

⁴ When God began to stir the Jewish people to return to their ancient homeland in the late 1800s (Theodore Hertzl, et al) revivals began to happen in Christianity. When Israel was formed into a State in 1948, revivals happened in the church. When Jerusalem was re-conquered by the Jewish people in 1967 – revival in the form of a global (unprecedented) Charismatic Renewal.

acquired twins: the good and evil inclinations, or otherwise understood as a knowledge of good and evil. The apostle Paul refers to these in terms of flesh and spirit; viz. ‘...for those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.’⁶ For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.⁷ Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.⁸ So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God...’ (Rom. 8:5-8).

On the surface these passages, in connection with others, give the appearance as if there was some force within us, automatically steering us. However, a more careful reading shows that this is not so and actually requires an active participation from us. V.6 – to be carnally minded vs. spiritually minded (lit. thought of the flesh vs. thought of the spirit) implies a heart disposition, as well as physical action. In Philippians 4:8-9 we read this, ‘*Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.*’⁹ *The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.*’

The entire NT points to an active participation in life according to the Scriptures. True spirituality, according to the Scriptures is practical piety; in other words, a spiritual person will demonstrate it by his/her way of life. 1 Corinthians ch. 12 allegedly speaks of spiritual gifts (v.1), but only a few translations have the word gifts in *italics*. The text actually says, ‘*Now concerning the spiritual ones, brothers, I do not wish for you to be uninformed [or ignorant]...*’. Paul is talking about, **and to**, those who consider themselves ‘*spiritual*’! He outlines that no-one can claim superiority over anyone through a ‘deemed’ super-spirituality, since all of us are interconnected and have need of each other!

Christian theology has done strange things with the Holy Spirit. On the one hand it is fairly clear that [at times] extraordinary things were accomplished through the power of God. Yet, at the same time a great deal of harm has also been done to the Honour of Almighty God through the sometimes extremely weird and wonderful, as well as through enforced speaking of tongues and other (many times contrived and false) phenomenon.

THE HOLY SPIRIT APART FROM ACTS

A careful study of the scriptures shows that the Holy Spirit ‘spoke’ and ‘guided’ many people quite likely dead by the time the events of Acts 2 took place. For example, Elizabeth was *filled with the Holy Spirit* and so was Zachariah (Lk 1:41, 67) and they prophesied. Yet, there had been no laying on of hands! Then there is Simeon (Shim’on) in Luke 2:25-27 who is granted prophetic insight by the Holy Spirit. Who had laid hands on him? Then of course in the Tenakh we also have evidence from the prophets who spoke messages by the Holy Spirit; there was Saul, King David and the other Psalmists, the Elders during the Wilderness Wanderings, etc.

What we need to bear in mind that God IS Spirit and cannot be separated from Himself. Therefore, the sum-total of all Holy Spirit study must come up with the conclusion that it is God Himself Who prevails upon faithful souls who turn to Him in faith for all their needs, be it healing or deliverance. Most certainly, however, He is NOT a vending machine that responds to hocus pocus.

LAYING ON OF HANDS

The act of laying on hands on someone in distress has often enormous ramifications for good. The very act of caring has the power to heal a heart broken by rejection. It is the evidence of one person's, or that of an entire group's caring for a lost, lonely and devastated individual. David, the king, says confidently of God that, '*...a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise...*' Ps.51:17. Such a brokenness and trust in God, coupled with the genuine care of [a] fellow human being[s] carries with itself a power beyond comprehension. There is nothing magic in a laying on of hands or in tender, caring words, rather the power of God made manifest through loving human agency from one to another. Look at the NT accounts and you will see that every single miracle of Yeshua contains these ingredients.

This, however, does not mean that the Almighty is prevented from pouring out His Spirit upon human beings for whatever reason He may desire, or whenever. Paul, so it seems, was filled with the power of Holy Spirit without human agency; and so were others as alluded to above....

CONCLUSION

Immersion in Holy Spirit, or Spirit of Holiness, is something every person should seek— be they Jewish or Gentile; it is not an option. Unless we are filled with that divine essence we cannot have fellowship with our heavenly father, nor shall we enter His Kingdom. The Presence of Holy Spirit is synonymous with [a] 'Living Repentance', which is renewed continually and a seeking after the Living God with our whole heart; c/f. Jer.29:13-14. There is NEVER a time when we are free to live a NON-REPENTANT life '*just for ourself*'. As the Sages tell us, we do not know the moment when the divine Presence will call us to Himself. Therefore, know three things they say, and you will abstain from [deliberate] sin:

1. Know from whence you came,
2. Know before whom you are standing and
3. Know to where you are going; the grave waits for you and me – not just the other man!

This pattern is so clearly observable in the life of Yeshua and should therefore become our pattern for life also.

An Immersion [into Holy Spirit] should see one's humbling before others and God –NOT our exaltation. As I said above, there is only one evidence of the presence of the Spirit of Holiness, which is His fruits (not just speaking in tongues)⁵— and that needs to be our daily test. Yeshua was FULL of Holy Spirit, but he humbled himself by learning obedience (Heb.5:8); he applied the Word of God to his life—so must we if the Spirit of Holiness indeed indwells us. The Son of God can only become evident to the world around us if we are motivated by the same Spirit that filled him.

Shalom!

⁵ As far as I am concerned the jury is still out on this phenomenon. I believe that it does occur (I was touched by it in a major way), however I firmly believe that it MUST NEVER be a measure of an indwelling of Holy Spirit.