

What is the Difference Between the Holy Spirit's Baptism, Sealing, and Filling?

Baptism of the Spirit

No other doctrine of the Holy Spirit has created more confusion than the subject of His baptizing of believers. Probably one of the greatest contributions to this confusion is that so many things happen the moment a person is born again. It was John the Baptist who foretold of Jesus coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1:33). Later, Jesus promised that "you shall be baptized into Christ's body." So what is all the confusion over? The issue is whether or not baptism in the Spirit is a post-conversion work. Some have confused facts recorded in Acts 2, and, as a result, they do not fully realize what the Holy Spirit did for them at conversion. The key to clearing up the confusion is in understanding the difference between the *Spirit's work* and the *believer's responsibility*. We must distinguish between the terms "baptism" and "fullness." Nowhere in the Bible is the Christian commanded to be baptized by the Spirit, but he *is* told to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). Instead of concerning himself with what he is not told to do, the Christian should apply himself to obeying the clear-cut command of Scripture, which is to yield himself to the Spirit's control in his life. He is to walk in obedience to biblical instruction. The Bible teaches that this baptism is our new position in Christ, whereas the filling of the Spirit is His power working through believers in Christian service. Paul defines baptism as the act of the Holy Spirit by which He places believers into Christ (Rom 6:4-6; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27).

John MacArthur, well-respected for adding clarity amidst confusion, said of baptism: "It is a sovereign, single, unrepeatable act on God's part, and is no more an experience than are its companions justification and adoption. Although some wrongly view the baptism with the Spirit as the initiation into the ranks of the spiritual elite, nothing could be further from the truth. The purpose of baptism with the Spirit is not to divide the body of Christ, but to unify it."¹

Filling of the Spirit

As previously mentioned, the baptism of the Spirit is a fact to rejoice in, whereas the filling of the Spirit is a command to obey.

There is no indication that this filling was open before Pentecost to anyone who yielded his life to the Lord. Though baptism is a one-time event, the Lord has provided the opportunity to be continually filled with the Spirit for effective service. The fullness of the Spirit is not about getting more of the Spirit, as the modern charismatic movement promotes, but it is a matter of the Spirit getting more of the believer. The believer is responsible to establish fellowship by confessing sin (1 Jn 1:9) and by yielding to Him (Rom 6:13).

Many sincere Christians today seek spectacular signs to accompany the filling of the Holy Spirit. It is not a dramatic, esoteric experience of suddenly being zapped by a second blessing following conversion.

The Bible, however, does make it clear that there are visible signs of one who is filled with the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23; Eph 8:18-20).

Dr. Elmer Towns offers this helpful insight: "Baptism means to immerse or totally surround something. Fullness, on the other hand, refers to placing something within another. It can carry with it the idea of control. On the day of Pentecost, the group in the upper room were both baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. At conversion the person is baptized or placed into Jesus Christ, 'For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body' (1 Cor 12:13). Then there is the filling of the Spirit which Paul commands for Christians, 'be

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians*, 248.

filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18). The baptism of the Spirit is our new position in Jesus Christ and the filling of the Spirit is His power working through us in Christian service."²

Sealing of the Spirit

"You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance" (Eph 1:13-14; cf. 2 Cor 1:21-22). Once a person is born again, his regenerated soul still resides in flesh that is unredeemed. This seal and pledge is a promise that the best is yet to come...that God will continue and complete His work of salvation in our lives in the future through the promise of glorification (Rom 8:29-30; Phil 1:6).

Notice the vivid metaphor that the apostle chose to use. A seal was an ancient device, usually a signet ring or cylinder seal engraved with the owner's name or with a particular design. It was used to seal goods, demonstrate ownership, attest a document's authenticity, or impress an early form of a trademark. The seal indicated ownership and security. It is the guarantee of future blessings. The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is God's promise of our inheritance in the future! What a wonderful assurance.

When buying a house or similar big object, it is customary to give a down payment. Or, when a man promises to marry a woman, he typically gives her an engagement ring as a symbol of his promise, that he will fulfill his desire to have her as his wife. Similarly, Christ has given the believer His Spirit of promise as a "down payment" or "engagement ring" of promised glory and ownership by God. There is no basis for the belief that a Christian needs more of the Spirit than He received at salvation. The Holy Spirit indwells (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:19) and with indwelling comes empowerment and equipping for service through the gifts He gives. He is our Helper, our Advocate, our Witness of salvation, and the Guarantee of our inheritance.

Further Reading:

The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, B.B. Warfield

The Divine Comforter, Dwight Pentecost

The Holy Spirit, Sinclair Ferguson

What the Faith is All About, Elmer Towns

Baptism in the Holy Spirit, James Dunn

Only One Baptism of the Holy Spirit, Peter Masters

The Silent Shepherd, John MacArthur

The Holy Spirit, Robert Gromacki

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² Elmer Towns, *What the Faith is All About*, 237.