

Baptism: What's the point?

Sermon 4: Baptism and the Holy Spirit

Passages: Eph 4:1–6
John 14:15–20

Today we come to the fourth sermon in our series on baptism. The key question that we want to discuss concerns the connection between water baptism and Spirit baptism. Or, to put it another way, **“Do you need to be baptized in water to receive the Holy Spirit?”**

Before we tackle that question, however, let's do some preliminary thinking about the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be **“baptized with the Holy Spirit”**. What did John the Baptist mean when he said, in Mark 1:8, **“I baptise you with water, but he (Jesus) will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”** What is this “baptism with the Holy Spirit” and how does it relate to water baptism?

Baptism with the Holy Spirit began on the day of Pentecost. This was in fulfillment of Jesus' words in Acts 1:5, **“...but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”** As a result of being “baptized with the Holy Spirit”, the Apostles became empowered to proclaim the Gospel and lead thousands of people to faith in Christ.

Since that day, everyone who turns to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, salvation and inclusion into His church experiences baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paul made this clear when he said to the believers in Corinth-- **“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body... we were all given the one Spirit to drink”** (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul makes no exception. He doesn't say “Some of you have been baptised by one Spirit”-- he says “all”.

Of course, the confusing thing about the book of Acts is that, in two instances, the baptism with the Holy Spirit was temporarily delayed. This delay was simply an anomaly of history—you can't make a theology of “second blessing” around it. In both cases, there was need for the Apostles to verify the inclusion of non-Jewish ethnic groups as believers in what was formerly only a Jewish religion. And so, in Acts 8:14–17, the Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to check out the fact that Samaritans were, indeed, true believers. Once this was ascertained, they laid hands on these new believers and they received the Holy Spirit. There was a delay, it is true. But the delay was circumstantial to the historic situation. The second delayed “baptism

with the Holy Spirit” comes in Acts 19, in Ephesus. There was a group who believed in John’s baptism. Paul arrives and asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They answer that they’ve never heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul preaches about Jesus, and then he lays his hands on them. At this point, the Spirit comes upon them all. Again, this seems like a second-blessing experience, until you recognize the fact that it is a historical anomaly. You see, from that point on, the Bible continually indicates that everyone who believes and turns to Christ receives the baptism in the Holy Spirit immediately. The time factor is eliminated.

So, why do we need the baptism with the Holy Spirit? To give you just a brief summary, baptism with the Holy Spirit does two things.

First, the baptism with the Spirit of God brings us into union with the triune God. By the Spirit, our hearts come to know the unbelievable truth about the Son’s Selfless love for us in the glory of God the Father. In John 14, Jesus is talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. In verses 20, He tells the disciples that, **“On that day (the day of your Spirit baptism) you will realise that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.”** In other words, it is only by the Spirit that we can enter into this union with the Triune God. As the Spirit penetrates us, we are brought into full union with God.

Second, the baptism with the Holy Spirit brings us into union with each other as Christ’s body and marks us out as God’s family. Paul makes this point in all of his letters, insisting that God’s Spirit both brings us to Jesus and grafts us into His church. Of utmost importance to this unity is the fact that, through the Spirit’s baptism, we receive a variety of spiritual gifts to keep the body functioning. As we read in Ephesians 4:5, our baptism with the Holy Spirit also makes it possible to **“keep unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”**.

Neither of these two things could happen without our baptism with Holy Spirit! It’s no wonder why Paul tells the Christians in Romans that **“if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ”** (Rom 8:9). In other words, baptism with the Holy Spirit is not an added extra. God has given it to us because there is no way humanly possible for self-centred people to become integrated into Christ and into His bride, the church. Only by baptism with the Holy Spirit can we be sealed together as the family of God.

Now, with all that in mind, let’s go back to our earlier question about water baptism: **“Do you need to be baptized in water before you can receive the Holy Spirit?”**

There is at least one verse in the NT, Acts 2:38, which seems to indicate this pattern: Peter said, “**Repent and be baptized... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**”

But, we have to question whether this is really the only pattern that we see throughout the book of Acts. I don’t think so. Here are some examples:

- On the day of Pentecost, at least 120 men from all parts of the Roman Empire received the baptism with Holy Spirit at the same time. Tell me, which of them had already been baptized? Maybe some, but certainly not all!
- In **Acts 9:17–18**, we read how Ananias laid his hands on Paul and he receives the Holy Spirit. Only after this does Paul get baptized in water.
- In **Acts 10:44– 48**, Cornelius and his friends all receive the Holy Spirit. After this, they all get baptized in water.

As you can see, in so many cases Spirit–baptism came 1st, then water baptism followed. And so, the formulaic/legalistic answer to our question is, **No!—you don’t need to be baptized in water first to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**

Having said that, however, I think there’s a problem with our question. You see, from what I read in Acts, I get the feeling that the real issue is that God doesn’t want us to construct patterns and formulas around water baptism and baptism with the Holy Spirit. The fact that there seems to be a great deal of stress on both of these baptisms as well as a great deal of latitude in how and when they are done indicates that perhaps we’re meant to see **both of these baptisms as integral parts of a much larger whole.** In other words, by focusing on the individual trees, we have missed the forest!

To explain what I mean, let me take you to Ephesians 4.

In Ephesians 4, verse 5, Paul mentions **baptism**....but which one does he have in mind? Let me read the passage again to you to remind you of the bigger context:

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one

baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

So, tell me, which baptism was Paul talking? As we saw, historically-speaking, there are two baptisms: one with water and the second by the Spirit. In this verse, however, Paul insists that there is only one baptism. Why does he do this? (It's funny, but commentators will go to great lengths to argue that either Paul was talking about water baptism or Spirit baptism. Some will say, "On the grounds of this verse, you can never be water baptized twice!" Or, on the grounds of this verse Paul is making water baptism obsolete—his only focus is Spirit baptism!")

Rubbish! I mean, isn't it more likely that Paul, who fully endorsed both water and Spirit baptism, doesn't want to separate the two historic baptisms or draw distinctions between them but, rather, **bring the two together into one?**

This is because, the more you understand what **baptism** is essentially about, the more you see how the two baptisms actually meld into one. In fact, they cannot exist without each other. They form the two halves that make up the whole.

On one hand, baptism in water is about Jesus death. Baptism with the Spirit is about His resurrection. The first takes place as a way of defining one's death to self, while the second takes place as a way of defining one's new life in Jesus. The first is a physical immersion into a material substance (water) emphasizing our bodily humanity, whereas the second baptism is an invisible immersion into a spiritual Being (Spirit) emphasizing our spirit.

I know that some try to minimize water baptism by saying that it's only a symbol of Spirit baptism. But if that was the case, why would Jesus command his disciples to water baptize (Matt 28:18–20)?

Clearly, **Jesus saw how the two baptisms work together to complete the picture of His death and resurrection, of old life and new life, of the union between body and the spirit.** One alone is inadequate to tell the whole story. And it really doesn't matter what order they come in, since the overall picture is still the same!

This is also the best way to make sense of Ephesians 4. In this chapter, Paul is talking about 'oneness'—**the union of the many into one.**

- In verse 4, Paul talks about **one Body**...even though it is made up of many members. **The union of the many into one.**
- In that same verse, he talks about the **one Spirit**... even though the Spirit manifests herself in a wide diversity of ways and places at once. **The union of the many into one.**
- Also in verse 4, Paul mentions **one hope**...even though we all carry that hope in slightly different ways and with different understandings. **The union of the many into one.**
- In verse 5, Paul talks about **one Lord**...even though His Lordship is not a “one size fits all” style but it’s one that enters personally into every heart in a slightly different way. **The union of the many into one.**
- In that same verse, Paul mentions **one faith**...even though we all carry that faith in varying degrees and to varying intensities... **The union of the many into one.**
- In verse 6, Paul says that God is one ...even though He is Father, Son and Spirit. **The union of the many into one.**
- Quietly sitting at the end of verse 5, Paul speaks about **one baptism**. What does he mean by that? Is he talking about water baptism or Spirit-baptism? As I said, I think he’s talking about all of our baptisms...water and Spirit... all of our immersions into the ever-present God who, by His Spirit, inspires, leads, convicts, motivates...us all...until we all are maturely saturated in Christ. **The union of the many into one.**

In fact, later on in Ephesians, Paul talks about a third baptism...one that is yet to come! In Ephesians 5:18, Paul encourages the Ephesian Christians, saying, “**And do not get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit.**” (Ephesians 5:18) He was telling them to keep on being filled over and over. In other words, “Let the baptisms continue to flow. For, in the end, they all meld into one.”

Here’s some good advice whenever we start trying to approach baptism from a legalistic or duty bound rulebook. It’s essential to stop and simply ask the Holy Spirit some questions:

- Holy Spirit, do you have a baptism for me that I have not yet received?
- Can I have a greater depth of intimacy with you, and through you with the Father and Son, than I currently have?
- Am I filled to the brim with you or are there places where you need to come in greater ways?

As we open ourselves in this way, it will be wonderful to watch just how many baptisms He thinks are enough! All of which, of course, are just part of the **one baptism!**

Let's pray.