

Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Conversion and experiencing baptism in the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

Is the baptism in the Holy Spirit normally an experience subsequent to conversion or at conversion? Why do I hold the view that I do and how do I answer objections to it? To answer those questions I will first define what conversion means and what baptism in the Holy Spirit means. Then I will explain my view on the subject and how I answer objections.

I am not going to address the work of the Holy Spirit, nor will I give a definition of this because of the limited word count given for this essay. However I think that the Holy Spirit works in such a way that he works in the believers and he strengthens them. This means through the Holy Spirit it is possible to believe in Jesus.

I will not give a complete exegesis of the bible texts used because of the limited word count. And I do not have any knowledge of the biblical languages such as Greek and Hebrew to explain the words or the sentences in their original language.

Definition of ‘conversion’

Conversion is the turning to God. It indicates a change. How is conversion defined in the bible? Conversion is defined as a turning to Jesus Christ, to believe that he died for your sins. 1 Thessalonians says “...and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...” Here the people of Thessalonica turned to God.

And after Peter’s sermon, on the day of Pentecost, people asked him what they should do because they want to turn to God. Peter responded that they should repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38). So part of turning to God is the repentance of sin and being baptised.

The Oxford Modern English Dictionary (1995, 227) gives the following definition: “The act or an instance of converting or the process of being converted, esp. in belief

or religion.” According to the dictionary conversion could be a process. Is it a process or a marking point? I think conversion is a process of turning to God. Looking at the people in Acts 2, they are in the process of turning to God when they listen to the sermon of Peter.

However in the context of the question of this essay I will define conversion as a turning point, the point someone says Jesus is Lord. This point could be the end of a (long) process wherein someone got to know Christ.

Definition of ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’

A few questions arise to define baptism in the Holy Spirit: What does baptism in the Holy Spirit mean in the bible?

The bible speaks about baptising in the Holy Spirit 4 times when John says that after him comes someone who baptises in Spirit (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16 and John 1:33). Where John says that after him someone comes who baptises with Spirit and fire. The phrase occurs two times in Acts, the first time in Act 1:5 when Jesus commands the disciples to wait for the baptising in the Holy Spirit, and the second time in Acts is when Peter remembers that Jesus said this (Acts 11:16). The phrase occurs once in 1 Corinthians 12:13 where Paul writes about unity and that baptism in the Holy Spirit unites the Christians.

In the New Testament Jesus commands his disciples to go and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). So the disciples baptise in the name of the Holy Spirit. Is there a distinction between baptising in the Holy Spirit and baptising in the name of the Holy Spirit? In Acts 8 the people of Samaria are only baptised in the Name of Jesus and not in the name of the Holy Spirit. So the disciples go back and lay hands on them and after that the people receive the Holy Spirit. The bible does not really speak about the details of baptism. It says that people get baptised and that the people receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it does say that people get baptised in the name of Jesus but it never says they get they baptised in the name of the Father, the name of Jesus and the name of the Holy Spirit. However the command of Jesus is quite clear and the illustration of acts 8 makes clear that baptism should be done in the name of the trinity.

In Mathew 3:11 John the Baptist says that after him comes someone who baptises with the Holy Spirit. Here another preposition is used. Not in but with. In Acts 1:5 Jesus says: “for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy

Spirit not many days from now.” Here the preposition ‘with’ is used again, which indicates that Jesus is the baptiser and the disciples are the subject of the baptism. So there is no big difference between the preposition in and with because basically they mean the same. This indicates that Jesus is the baptiser and it indicates that a believer received the Holy Spirit.

This verse also says that the disciples had to wait for the baptising with the Holy Spirit. It did not happen immediately. So the next question is what happened when they were baptised with the Holy Spirit? And that was on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2 Peter explains what happened at this day and that is the coming of the Holy Spirit. This is foretold by Joel, the outpouring of the Spirit. And Peter explains that what was foretold in the Old Testament had happened to Jesus. And at the end of his sermon he explains that what the people see, is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Acts 2:33). So what did the people see in Acts 2? They heard a sound of rushing wind and they saw divided tongues of fire (Acts 2: 2-3). And they all heard the disciples speaking in their own language (Acts 2:6). And Peter is witnessing Jesus Christ. And the people who heard Peter’s sermon were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37) and they asked: “Brothers what shall we do?” And Peter’s answer to this is:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. (Acts 2: 38-39)

Here the people have to show repentance and then they are baptised and they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Gift is in single form here and in the Dutch translation it says that Holy Spirit will be given¹. That means after repentance and after being baptised the people receive the Holy Spirit.

So with baptism in the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the actor, the baptiser. He will baptise the believers with the Holy Spirit. And the Bible shows us situations where the Holy Spirit came upon people before they were baptised with water in the name of Jesus (e.g. Cornelius, Acts 10:44ff.) and also after they are baptised with water (e.g. the people in Samaria, Acts 8:4ff.). Baptising in the Holy Spirit means then that the Holy Spirit came upon those people.

¹ The Dutch translation: “Dan zal de Heilige Geest u geschonken worden,” (Handelingen 2:37b, NBV).

Spirit Baptism at conversion

The next question is then when does this happen? As baptism in the Holy Spirit means that the Holy Spirit came upon or came into people and that he works and strengthens the faith. Through the Holy Spirit people start to get to know Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit we can say Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3) and through the Holy Spirit we are children of God and we can say Abba Father (Galatians 4: 6).

Stott (1975, 20) says, “It is impossible, indeed inconceivable, to have the Spirit without being a son or to be a son without having the Spirit.” So if someone is converted to Christianity how could he call himself a Christian, what means being son of God, with not having the Spirit? So being a Christian, saying that Jesus is Lord, and praying Abba Father are all done through the work of the Spirit. So to my opinion the experience of being baptised with the Holy Spirit is not something excited nor is it something which you can feel, nor is it something you have to seek after conversion. Being baptised with the Holy Spirit means that it is possible to say Jesus is Lord and the impact of this is that you start bearing fruit, which means love, peace, joy and patience. (Galatians 5:22).

Hoekema (1972, 11) says that “for Neo-Pentecostals, Spirit-baptism is an experience distinct from the reception of the Spirit at the time of conversion.” So that means that there is a receiving of the Spirit at conversion but not the experience of being baptised with the Spirit. So the question is then what is the experience of being baptised with the Holy Spirit? Bruner (1987, 61) says about the baptism in the Holy Spirit:

That the event is usually “distinct from and subsequent to” the new birth, that it is evidenced initially by the sign of speaking in other tongues, and that it must be “earnestly” sought. ... The major source of the Pentecostal doctrine of the subsequent baptism in the Holy Spirit is the Book of Acts. The Pentecostals, in fact, will concede that their data in this connection are almost totally confined to this book. The Old Testament and the Gospels, it is pointed out, contain only prophecies of the actual experience. And while the Epistles discuss the Spirit they do not treat his subsequent baptizing in any detail. Only Acts qualifies.

So that means that the experience of the baptism can be seen in the speaking in other tongues. I do not think that this is really true to what the bible says about being a Christian. I read in the bible that being a Christian and being part of the body is the same as having the full Spirit. It is impossible to have belief without having the Spirit. The Bible does not say that we have to seek for a second experience which is subsequent to conversion and which is the baptism with the Holy Spirit. And the book

of Acts has a narrative genre and the theme is that the apostles and the gospel are spread out to the end of the world. So it is difficult to say that we have to experience exactly the same as what the people experienced in the book of Acts. If that would be the case, I think Luke would have included a hint to that. He never says that we have to do the same. He only writes descriptively; he tells the Story. Also there is nothing in the Epistles which describes this doctrine. This would be quite logical if it was the case.

Conclusion

Is the baptism in the Holy Spirit normally an experience subsequent to conversion or at conversion? First the baptism of the Holy Spirit means receiving the Holy Spirit; it is the indwelling of the Spirit into a believer. Secondly conversion is a change to God, to Jesus. Conversion marks the moment when a believer confesses Jesus is Lord and that can only happen through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The experience is simple, not extraordinary; it is confessing that Jesus is Lord. Through the Holy Spirit we can say Abba Father. Through the Holy Spirit we are called the Children of God. Through the Holy Spirit we can believe in Jesus as our saviour. So to my opinion the baptism in the Holy Spirit takes place at conversion.

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