

Spirit Baptism and Speaking in Tongues

There's Christians on Both Sides of the Fence

This topic is not directly controversial, but the way believers have interacted and approach it has been. Both charismatics *and* cessationists have mishandled their respective positions and truth claims regarding the Holy Spirit's baptizing work. Before we go any further in addressing Abundant Life's stance on the matter, we want to be clear in articulating that there are genuine, Jesus-loving, God-glorifying, and Bible-believing Christians on both sides of the issue—both charismatics and cessationists.

There may be some of you who are unfamiliar with the above terms—charismatic and cessationist. They commonly refer to the differing stances regarding the Holy Spirit's work in our present day. Charismatics are those who exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit—found in 1 Corinthians 12¹—and believe that God designates supernatural gifts to individuals through the power of the Holy Spirit. In simpler terms, charismatics believe that all we see the Holy Spirit doing in the Bible, is still being done today. Charismatic churches are likely to pursue and pray for divine healing, tongues and interpretation, miracles, words of knowledge, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and words of wisdom.

Cessationists hold and teach that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased to operate in the Church along with the death of the Apostles and the completion of the canon of Scripture. Because the Bible is complete, there is no need for the Holy Spirit to do such work in the Church. It is extremely important to understand that, although these two positions are in direct opposition to one another, those on both sides of the issue can (and should be) united in the family of God under the banner and hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ².

Some Very Public and Harmful Mistakes

Many have witnessed the very public errors³ that charismatics have made by turning the work of the Holy Spirit into an experience that steps outside the boundaries of Scripture and into something that is, at the very least, full of selfish human desires and motives. At the very worst, it could be outright demonic. It is necessary for charismatics to separate themselves from the heretical nonsense that many claim are manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, some have been wrongly taught that one needs to be baptized in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues in order to be saved. This position is not wise, loving, or remotely biblical. Although we believe that the Scriptures teach that a second and distinct Spirit baptism is available to all believers (and that all believers should desire and seek God for this outpouring), we do not hold the position that it is necessary for salvation. God's saving work comes through faith alone, by grace alone, and in Christ alone.

¹ Verses 1-11

² Although we view being baptized in the Holy Spirit as an extremely important doctrine here at Abundant Life, we do recognize it is a secondary issue compared to the primary issue of the gospel. Christians can differ in their opinion and interpretation concerning this topic and still be kind, gentle, and loving towards one another. With that being said, a cessationist would more than likely have trouble with several aspects of our corporate worship service. At ALAG, we boldly pursue and proclaim Spirit baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

³ A reference to the nonsensical laughter, behavior, and teachings that are associated with the 'hyper-faith' or 'word faith' movement. Those in the movement regularly tout experiences that are nowhere to be found in the pages of Scripture as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

Jesus promised his disciples, and all believers, that a helper would come after his ascension back into heaven. He goes on to reveal, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).” Jesus is referring to the third person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. All the truths that describe God’s character and nature are equally true of the Holy Spirit. He is God—just like God the Father and Jesus the Son.

The Holy Spirit is described in Scripture as a person having a mind⁴, will⁵, and emotions⁶. It is easy to wrongly view the Holy Spirit as a force or an energy rather than a person. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit does the activities of teaching⁷, witnessing⁸, testifying⁹, speaking¹⁰, and revealing¹¹. He is described as one who carries out the will of God¹², brings glory to Jesus, imparts holiness¹³, leads humanity to truth¹⁴, imparts grace¹⁵, fills believers’ hearts with God’s love¹⁶, convicts the world of sin¹⁷, brings us into the family of God¹⁸, and preserves both natural and spiritual life. The Holy Spirit is doing all this work in the Church and world today.

All Believers

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers. All who are saved can be filled with the Holy Spirit—with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues—and be given a Spirit-filled power to witness to a lost world concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter quotes the prophet Joel, Acts 2:17-21, when explaining the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit: *“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on **all flesh**, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; (18) even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. (19) And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; (20) the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, **before the day of the Lord comes**, the great and magnificent day. (21) And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*¹ Joel may not have understood that he was prophesying about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but Peter seems to instantly recognize that what the Old Testament prophet was talking about had just unfolded before his very eyes! These verses make it clear that Spirit baptism is for all believers. The word ‘all’ is even used. This passage also helps us see that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was not only for the believers in the 1st century. Joel writes that all this will happen, which we now know (thanks to Peter’s explanation in the book of Acts) is referring to the Spirit’s baptizing work, before the “Day of the Lord.” That phrase is commonly used to refer to the return of Jesus to the earth¹⁹. If Spirit baptism has ceased, it implies we are living in some age *after* the return of Jesus (since Joel is clear that all this will take place *before* the

⁴ Romans 8:27

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:11

⁶ Ephesians 4:30

⁷ John 14:26

⁸ Acts 1:8

⁹ John 16:13-15

¹⁰ Matthew 10:18-20

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 2:7-13

¹² Acts 8:29

¹³ Galatians 5:22-23

¹⁴ John 16:13

¹⁵ Romans 8:26-27

¹⁶ Romans 5:5

¹⁷ John 16:8

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:14-16

¹⁹ Isaiah 13:6; Malachi 4:5

Day of the Lord). Scripture makes no mention of such an age and almost all Christians would agree that Jesus has not returned to gather the saints and judge the world. Joel is revealing that God will continue his work of salvation *and* Spirit baptism until the return of Christ.

Scriptural Evidence for a Second and Distinct Work

Ephesians 1:13 tells us that the Holy Spirit *seals* our salvation. He is the one who regenerates our sinful hearts, reveals the truth of the gospel, and opens our blind eyes to see the glory of God. The Holy Spirit's work in our salvation is essential and glorious. Once we are saved, the Holy Spirit does come to live inside our souls, sealing our salvation, and begins to guide us to make much of Jesus and grow in holiness. But, like we have previously mentioned, there is a second and distinct work of the Holy Spirit—the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2,8,9,10, and 19 contain the biblical examples of the Holy Spirit's baptizing work in the lives of believers. In all cases, the ones who were baptized in the Holy Spirit were *already* saved; they had been sealed with the Holy Spirit and counted as heirs of salvation. If the baptism of the Holy Spirit referred to only his sealing work in salvation, there would be no need for those in the Book of Acts to be asked if they had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit²⁰ or to even be taught about this work. Yet, we find the Apostles asking believers if they have been baptized in the Holy Spirit. They even make some journeys with the expressed purpose of teaching those already saved about this second work of the Spirit²¹.

It is also important to note that, in the Scriptural examples listed above, the use of tongues accompanies the Spirit's baptizing work. The regularity suggests that the initial evidence of one being baptized in the Holy Spirit is the gift of tongues being exercised. Although tongues are significantly more than just evidence, they do serve as the initial sign that you are baptized and immersed in the Spirit's presence, work, and mission.

What are Tongues?

Critics of the Pentecostal understanding of biblical tongues have described tongues as meaningless sounds, a miracle of hearing, or foreign words and sounds that have simply been stored in one's mind. But Scripture teaches that tongues are actual languages inspired by the Holy Spirit and are willingly spoken by a believer. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:1, describes the languages that are being spoken as the "tongues of men and angels." There are also recorded instances, like what happened in Acts 2²², where someone who has never learned a particular language finds themselves speaking that language. But the strongest biblical suggestion is that tongues are primarily an angelic or heavenly language. If tongues are directed to God, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, a heavenly language seems more appropriate than another human language to address God.

The Uses of Biblical Tongues

Tongues as initial evidence. Like previously mentioned, the Pentecostal position of tongues as initial evidence of Spirit baptism is based on the five instances of the Holy Spirit filling believers recorded in the Book of Acts (2,8,9,10, and 19). Speaking in a Spirit-given language is clearly seen in three of the examples and implied in the other two²³.

²⁰ Acts 19:2-4

²¹ Acts 8:14-17

²² Acts 2:5-7

²³ Implied in Acts 8 when Simon the sorcerer expresses his desire to buy the 'gift of God' with money. Simon observes something happening when hands are laid upon a believer and they are prayed over to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. If nothing happened when Simon was observing this, he would not desire to try to purchase this gift. Because all the other examples of Spirit baptism involve tongues, and Simon surely witnessed some phenomenon in Acts 8, it is safe to say that Simon witnessed believers speaking in tongues after being prayed over.

Tongues as a prayer language. There are times when a believer faces such a serious circumstance in their lives that they find themselves struggling to know how to pray. Praying in tongues at such a time can be the Spirit himself interceding on our behalf (Romans 8:26) concerning the need or situation. 1 Corinthians 14:4 states that praying in tongues edifies, or builds up, the one praying. Our private prayer language is a way for us to offer God both prayer and praise when human words and intellect seems to fall short. A believer's prayer language is a means of grace that can help us overcome doubt, worry, stress, and anxiety. Just like physical exercise strengthens our bodies, spending time praying in tongues strengthens our souls and spiritual life (Jude 1:20).

The gift of tongues in corporate worship²⁴. This gift is not available to every Spirit-filled believer, but only to those the Spirit chooses to use in encouraging those attending the corporate worship service. Paul has words of caution to the church at Corinth about the use of tongues without interpretation in their public worship service. Paul did not tell the Corinthians that the gift of tongues was false or to be done away with in corporate worship, but rather seeks to bring order to the chaotic way they seemed to be practicing the gift of tongues. The abuse he sought to correct was everyone speaking in tongues at the same time without an interpretation. This would have been very confusing, especially to unbelievers, and not particularly edifying to the worshipping congregation. An orderly approach, where one person speaks out in a tongue and another gives the interpretation in the congregation's native tongue, seems to be what Paul is instructing believers to practice. It is also common for the person who delivered the tongue to provide the interpretation once the message in tongues has concluded.

A sign for unbelievers. 1 Corinthians 14:22 calls tongues a sign for unbelievers. We can understand what Paul is talking about by once again looking at the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit that is recorded in Acts 2. When the 120 disciples were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues, the crowd exclaimed and wondered how these men and women were speaking in languages they knew they had not learned. The Spirit enabled them to speak in languages that were native to many in the crowd. The crowd heard unlearned men and women extolling and praising God in their native tongue as the Spirit gave them utterance. As an unbeliever, if you hear someone that you know cannot speak your language speaking it and praising God, your heart is inclined to pay attention to what is being said and consider what God is speaking to you. Thus, tongues serve as a sign for the unbeliever.

Spirit Baptism is More Than Tongues

Although tongues are the initial evidence of the Holy Spirit's filling work, and a precious gift in the ongoing life of a believer, being baptized in the Holy Spirit is much more than speaking in a heavenly prayer language. Spirit baptism reveals significant truths and responsibilities to a follower of Christ. Just as we develop a relationship with the other members of the Trinity—the Father and the Son—we are to develop a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit deepens our relationship with him. Many think of Spirit baptism as an event or an experience. It would be better to view it as a deepening of an already existent relationship we have with the Spirit of God.

After Jesus' resurrection, he has an important message for the disciples—wait. He instructs them to wait in Jerusalem—before carrying out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20)—for what is soon revealed as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and their subsequent baptism in the Spirit. He clearly lets them know, in Acts 1:8, that Spirit baptism will enable them to have power as his witnesses. Being baptized in the Holy Spirit brings

Additionally, in Acts 9, it is implied that Paul speaks in tongues upon his Spirit baptism although it doesn't directly mention it. We can be assured it happened for Paul here because he regularly talks and writes about himself speaking in tongues in other books of the Bible.

²⁴ See 1 Corinthians 14 for Paul's instructions concerning the public use of tongues in a worship service.

boldness to a follower of Christ. The Spirit's work brings power to our gospel witness and assurance that we are not alone as we seek to spread the glory of God in a sinful, fallen world. The work our Lord has called his children to can be tough and emotionally, physically, and spiritually draining. But he has given us a great Helper in the Holy Spirit.

Common Misconceptions Regarding Spirit Baptism and Tongues

It is a sign of growth. Being filled by the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues is *not* a sign of spiritual growth. In the Book of Acts are believers who had just recently been converted who are baptized in the Holy Spirit²⁵. They simply had not had time to spiritually grow, let alone the proper teaching and instruction. So, Spirit baptism is definitely *not* a sign of spiritual growth or those recently converted believers would not have been baptized in the Spirit. Rather, the sign of a believers' spiritual growth can be measured by looking at the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22).

Speaking in tongues involves some sort of trance. The Bible is clear that *we* speak. We speak and trust the Holy Spirit to provide and guide our language into Spirit-led prayer. Many Pentecostals who regularly speak in tongues will tell you that sometimes it feels very unspectacular—like they seem to be reciting words from their memories. But there are other times that speaking in tongues has a much more dynamic feel to it and they can sense—with a deep conviction—that the Holy Spirit is helping them pray in a heavenly prayer language. In both cases the believer is the one who is speaking. They decide and use their will to open their mouth and submit to the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not, nor will he ever, take someone over and make them do something that they do not want to do.

Speaking in tongues makes you a superior Christian. Spirit baptism and our prayer languages are a gift. There is nothing we can do to earn it—just like our salvation. The glory belongs to the Lord and we cannot let pride take anything away from that glory. Speaking in tongues does not make someone more important, holy, or more loved by God than a believer who has not yet been filled by the Holy Spirit.

It is a one-time thing. Some churches have emphasized the initial experience and neglected to encourage followers of Christ to live an ongoing Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. Our relationship with the Holy Spirit, and his work in using us to pray in tongues, should be an area of growth in our lives just like any other spiritual discipline²⁶.

If you do not receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and tongues when you initially pray for it, then it is not for you. This work of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers. Many Christians have desired and prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit for an extended period of time before receiving the promise. Scripture teaches us to be persistent in prayer²⁷ and to pray according to God's will²⁸. We know that Jesus desires to baptize us in the Holy Spirit, so believers should continue to pray for it to happen until their prayer is answered.

Don't Compare

We are quick to compare ourselves to others. Often, we can hear someone's testimony regarding their Spirit baptism and think that it must happen the same way for us. In reality, in a church full of different people, you will hear varied testimonies regarding the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Don't expect that how and when it

²⁵ Acts 10:44-48

²⁶ We should exercise and grow in our use of tongues just like we grow in prayer, Bible-reading, giving, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines that contribute to our spiritual growth.

²⁷ Luke 18:1-8

²⁸ 1 John 5:14

happened to you is the blueprint for everyone. While there is no formula we can follow to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, all believers should earnestly desire the gift and seek the Lord for it.