**An Analysis of Acts’ Portrayal**

**of Receiving the Holy Spirit**

Curtis Boozer

Dr. James Wicker NEWTS 3313-I

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# **Introduction**

Christians have consistently struggled to define the nature of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Old Testament clearly speaks of the majesty and sovereignty of the Father. The Son was foretold in the Old Testament and manifested in the incarnation of Jesus, who walked among mankind and gave men direction by His words. Jesus stated that He would send the Holy Spirit to help and minister to believers after Jesus went to be with the Father in heaven. The Holy Spirit showed evidence of His coming in the testimony of the writer of Acts. This paper will consider how the author of Acts described the “receiving of the Holy Spirit” which the apostles and other believers experienced and how theologians have interpreted the receiving of the Spirit.

# **The Holy Spirit’s Action of Coming to the Apostles in Acts**

Jesus spoke to His disciples after His resurrection and shared that He would leave them, but that the Father would send whom He had promised (Luke 24:49).[[1]](#footnote-1) Luke, he author of both Luke and book of Acts continues this conversation in Acts 1:4–8. Jesus asserted that the disciples would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). He also said that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). Jesus shared in the following sentence that they would be His witnesses to all of mankind (Acts 1:8), thus pointing out one of the reasons this power was being given to them. The disciples where told to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came to them (Acts 1:4).

The disciples waited in Jerusalem for ten days and then the Holy Spirit came upon them. The Spirit came with the sound of a rushing wind, and each person appeared to have individual flames settle upon them as they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3). The disciples began to speak of God’s amazing works in languages which other men from different regions understood (Acts 2:4–5).

Luke called the place where the disciples waited “the house” (Acts 2:2). It has been the common belief that this gathering occurred in the upper room of a house. This room would have been very large as the passage refers to one hundred and twenty people being affected by Holy Spirit. Dr. Victor Wierwille believed that this house was actually the temple where the disciples continued to gather and pray at the normal prayer times of the day. Wierwille contends that the passage in Acts 1:15 does mention that there were one hundred and twenty disciples, and that Peter stood up amongst them one day to encourage them to select a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Wierwille does not agree that this same gathering was in the “upper room.” He describes how men and women did not enter the sleeping quarters of the other gender during these times and it would not make sense that the two genders would be together as described in Acts 1:14. He believes this gathering would have happened in the temple courts. He completes this argument by referring to the words Jesus spoke in Luke 19:46 where He said, “My house is the house of prayer…” as Jesus referred to the temple. Wierville then argues that this is the reason so many other men were in attendance who spoke other languages. He believes they would have been at the temple for the Festival of Weeks (also known as Pentecost) and would have traveled great distances to attend from their homelands.[[2]](#footnote-2) This interpretation would elevate the impact of the Holy Spirit arriving like a violent wind that filled the whole house.

Wierwille also believes that only the apostles received the Holy Spirit at this time. These men were all from the region of Galilee and spoke with a distinct accent that was recognizable enough to solicit comment from the people who heard them speak.[[3]](#footnote-3) In Acts 2:7, the author records how the men who heard them speaking were amazed that a group of Galileans could speak so many languages.

In Acts2:38, Peter promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who repent and are baptized. Paul Elbert suggests that Luke’s intent is to communicate that this indwelling of the Holy Spirit will be given when the Lord decides to give it, and should not be understood to be a gift automatically conveyed upon repentance and baptism. Peter was communicating that the Holy Spirit would be given when the Lord decides to give it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

# **Baptism into the Body of Christ**

The concept of baptism was very familiar to the Jews of Jesus’ day and had been practiced for centuries. The common form of baptism was for an individual to be immersed in water as a ceremonial act of cleansing himself from the impurities of the world that might have contaminated him. This was required by the Jewish rituals so that Jews could be found acceptable to enter the Temple. John the Baptist changed this concept and called for men to repent of their sins (an inward cleansing), and then be baptized (Luke 3:3) as an outward indication of the cleansing of their hearts.

Jesus said that the apostles would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” in Acts 1: 5. Later in Acts 11:16, the apostle Peter referred to those same words as he described what had happened to the Gentile believers as they received the Holy Spirit. These two occurrences support the concept that the Holy Spirit had not entered the believers upon faith in Christ at this point. The time had not been appointed by the Father for the Holy Spirit to come and He did not come upon the apostles until the Day of Pentecost. Likewise, the Holy Spirit did not act upon the Gentile believers until Peter spoke to them as described in Acts 10:44, and he witnessed the Holy Spirit coming upon them as He had come upon the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. These actions were specific to the initial coming of the Holy Spirit to believers at that time.

Subsequent to this initial action of the Spirit, the Spirit came to all believers who accepted Jesus as Lord. The apostle Paul wrote, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (Acts 12:13). This spiritual baptism cleansed the person from the inside and changed their position with regard to Christ. Dr. John Walvood states that, “the believer is removed from his position in Adam, and he is placed in Christ. All the details of his salvation spring from this new position. His justification, sanctification, deliverance, access to God, inheritance, and glorification are actual and possible because of the believer’s position in Christ.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The work of Christ was accomplished upon the cross, becoming effective for all individuals upon salvation. The work of the Holy Spirit is not the same as the work of Christ, as it is the joining of a soul to the body of Christ at a singular point in time. Donald Madvig asserts, “We may confidently affirm that just as conversion is the work of the Spirit, so also the convert is a person in whom the Holy Spirit abides.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is important to recognize that spiritual baptism is universal among believers. It is not a question of spiritual maturity or yieldedness. Every believer is baptized by the Spirit as soon as faith is placed in Christ. The filling of the Spirit is an instantaneous act of God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This baptism has the purpose of uniting the believer to the body of Christ, known as the Church. This union with the body of Christ provides a common life among believers.[[8]](#footnote-8) It also joins the believer to Christ eternally.

# **Indwelling of the Holy Spirit**

Acts 8:14-20 presents a difficulty in the support of the doctrine of universal indwelling. This passage points out that the Spirit did not come to the Samaritans until Peter and John arrived and laid hands upon them. This delay can be understood when we realize that this appears to be a one–time event. Acts 10 describes how Peter was led to share Christ with the Gentiles, and how they received the Holy Spirit when they accepted Christ after he spoke to them. In Acts 19, Paul speaks to a group of John the Baptists’ disciples, who explained that they had not heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul explained their need to accept Jesus as Lord, and those disciples received the Holy Spirit after Paul laid hands upon them. Walvoord presents three thoughts regarding these delays; first, he surmised that the ministry of the Spirit began to spread gradually, and waited in order to establish the ministry of the apostles. Secondly, perhaps the Jews received the spirit immediately, and the Gentiles required an apostle’s assistance at first. Walvoord’s third option is that this represented a filling of the spirit, an outward phenomenon rather than an indwelling.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Later in Acts 19:1-6, we see that John the Baptists’ disciples had not been saved, and only after they accepted Christ did they receive the Holy Spirit. A study of references to the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; Acts 10:38; 2 Cor 1:21; 1 John 2:20, 27) reveal that every use of the word anoint in relation to the Spirit may be safely interpreted as the initial act of indwelling. The word anoint is used in to convey the act of applying and is especially appropriate in view of the fact that oil was used as a type of the Spirit.[[10]](#footnote-10)

# **The Filling of the Holy Spirit**

Christians are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a salvific action but the filling of the Spirit relates to the spiritual life of the Christian. Thus, the filling of the Holy Spirit, while possible only for the saved, is not a part of salvation itself. It is also evident that the filling of the Spirit is to be contrasted sharply to the baptism of the Spirit, the former being a quality of spiritual life, the latter the possession of every Christian by which he had become a member of the body of Christ.[[11]](#footnote-11) In view of the fact that Christians are commanded to be filled with the Spirit, it logically follows that a Christian can choose to not be filled.

A believer must willingly choose to actively seek God and yield all control to Him to be in the proper stance to be filled with the Spirit. The filling of the Spirit refers to the “power” of the Spirit being released to accomplish God’s purposes. As noted above, all believers have the Holy Spirit indwelling them from the point of salvation, yet being filled with the Spirit occurs as God moves and is predicated upon the believer being yielded to being used.

Peter was described as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" during his questioning by the Sanhedrin after his arrest, and as speaking boldly (Acts 4:8,13). Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit" prior to his stoning (Acts 7:55), and Saul was "filled with the Holy Spirit" during his confrontation with Elymas (Acts 13:9). After persecution in Pisidian Antioch, the disciples go their way "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). Finally, the Christian community, after an intense prayer while faced with persecution and with the need for bold witness, is "filled with the Spirit and [speaks] the word of God with boldness," evidenced by the shaking of their place of gathering (Acts 4:23-31). Therefore, the narrative in Acts portrays individuals and communities as being "filled with the Spirit" as God moved to accomplish His purposes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Accordingly, the filling of the Spirit is not a question of securing more of the presence of God, but of entering into the reality of His presence and yielding all control of oneself to the ministry for which He has come to indwell.[[13]](#footnote-13)

# **The Works of the Holy Spirit**

**Speaking New Languages**

One of the defining actions that can be observed in the arrival of the Holy Spirit among the believers at Pentecost was the granting of an ability to speak languages they had never spoken before. There is debate as to whether they spoke a heavenly language which each person understood in their own language (much like a universal translator that has been presented in science fiction television series and movies), or that each disciple spoke a different language which was understood by some in the crowd. It is interesting to consider that this miracle was an act that broke down barriers that God had erected when He scattered the people and confused them by giving them different languages during their prideful attempt to build the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9). God choose to use language as one way to signify His inclusion of all men into His kingdom by this act of the Holy Spirit.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Transformation**

Robert Morris asserts, “When a person receives a full release of the Holy Spirit’s power, he receives the empowerment to walk in love. In other words, you can’t walk righteously without the power of the Holy Spirit.”[[15]](#footnote-15) We see evidence of this when we read of Peter and John going to Samaria when they hear that the Samaritan believers there were not receiving the Holy Spirit. This action of putting aside their long–held Jewish prejudices against Samaritans and charging out in response to need reminds us of the heroic actions of “first responders” to crisis in our days. Theirs was a sacrificial act of love to serve the Samaritans.

**Empowerment**

The disciples who gathered to await the Holy Spirit seemed timid and concerned for their safety. It does make sense that they would have had concerns, as the Jewish religious leaders were still upset by the events following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Peter had been willing to deny Christ in order to preserve his safety and the other disciples scattered during that trying time. However, when the Spirit came upon them, their actions show that they were transformed and became bold in their witness for Christ. They spoke boldly in the temple courts and refuse to stop proclaiming the name of Jesus even when threatened by the same Jewish establishment. These disciples were willing to suffer in order to advance the Kingdom of God.

Several episodes in Acts suggest that the Holy Spirit acts among the believers especially as they pray, fast, and worship. Luke's summary in Acts 2:42-47 depicts the outpouring of the Spirit as the empowerment of an ideal, unified Christian community that worshipped together by breaking bread, praying, and praising God. Later, when the community prays intently in the face of opposition, the Spirit responds by shaking the ground and empowering them to speak boldly (4:23-31). The Spirit comes upon the Samaritans as a result of prayer (8:15). Finally, the Spirit selects Barnabas and Saul from a community that worships and fasts. The church responds to this action with more fasting and prayer and with the laying on of hands (13:1-3).[[16]](#footnote-16) Spiritual gifts are important for ministry and edification of the church. Believers should give priority to the Spirit’s sanctifying work in their own lives and to the lordship of Christ as the key to a victorious and Spirit-filled life.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**Healing and Resuscitation**

In Acts 9:17–19, Ananias was empowered by the Holy Spirit to heal Paul from the blindness that had struck him on the road to Damascus. Peter was able to heal Aeneas, a man bedridden and paralyzed for eight years (Acts 9:33–34). Peter was summoned by the disciples in Joppa when Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) died. Peter came to them as they were mourning and asked them to step outside. He knelt down and prayed, and told Tabitha to arise. She returned to life and Peter presented her to the other disciples (Acts 9:36–41). In each case, these mighty workings of the Holy Spirit brought glory to Jesus’ name and people were drawn to Him in faith.

**Guidance and Direction Provided**

The passage in Acts 16: 6–10 explains that the Holy Spirit was active in preventing Paul from traveling to certain areas to evangelize the region and in granting visions to direct Paul to go to Macedonia. The Spirit also disclosed the trials that Paul could expect as he served God. In Acts 20: 22, Paul shared that he was headed to Jerusalem where the Spirit had told him that chains and afflictions would await him. Later, in Acts 23:11, the Spirit revealed to Paul that he would testify regarding Jesus in Rome. These events showed how the Holy Spirit encouraged Paul to travel to specific places and gave him clarity about the kinds of things he would experience as he served God. Those revelations appear to have given Paul great courage and hope as he was threatened on a daily basis, yet he knew God was in control and his journey was not over. He was able to speak before King Agrippa and the Governor Festus, who had the power to have him executed; yet he argued well and appealed to Caesar. This appeal was granted and he was sent to Rome. While traveling, his ship was wrecked at sea. Paul encouraged his guards and the crew and let them know that the Spirit had told them that they would survive if they followed his directions. This proved true and Paul ultimately arrived in Rome where he was able to evangelize while he awaited his appeal date. In each case, the Holy Spirit provided wisdom and counsel as He supported Paul to achieve God’s purposes.

# **The Debate between Pentecostals and Other Evangelicals**

In 1970, James Dunn wrote a dissertation[[18]](#footnote-18) that attempted to refute certain assertions made by Pentecostal believers. He took particular exception to the concept that a second baptism of the Holy Spirit was required to be a true believer of Jesus Christ. Over the years, several scholars have responded to Dunn’s writing and argued in response to his assertions. William Atkinson studied the papers from the various parties and concluded that the discourse had led to a movement of the opposing viewpoints toward one another as the papers did a better job of clarifying definitions of the words that each author was using.[[19]](#footnote-19) The arguments moved to a point where both sides were able to agree that all believers are regenerated at the time of their confession of sin and submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. At that point, the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, who can be considered to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. As the believer continues to grow and seek to learn how to be a disciple, they can experience a filling of the Holy Spirit. This filling can manifest in many ways, such as the ability to speak other languages, the ability to heal, and the ability to speak with authority. These gifts are given to allow the disciple to minister to others and to bring glory to God. No particular gift is guaranteed to any believer, nor do gifts entitle a believer to special status amongst believers. Atkinson confirms that there is still debate regarding prayer languages and certain other issues, and that these are likely to continue to be a matter of study for future theologians.

# **Conclusion**

Jesus encouraged the disciples that He would send a helper to them who would be able to do greater things than He had been able to do for them. This helper was the Holy Spirit who comes to baptize the new believer into eternal membership into the body of Christ, who indwells the believer and never leaves them, and who brings transformation, empowerment, and guidance to a believer’s life. This Holy Spirit was active in the book of Acts and conducted miraculous works through believers as they were filled with His power. Those miracles included the sudden ability to communicate in languages that the disciples had not previously known, the ability to heal individuals by speaking or laying hands upon them, and even resuscitating those who were dead back to life. This work of the Spirit evidences His divine nature and participation as part of the Holy Trinity. Theologians have differed in their definitions of what it means to be “baptized in the Spirit” and it has led to divisive rhetoric between believers. As time allows theologians to consider others viewpoints, there appears to be a movement toward agreement and better definition of what it means to be “filled with the Spirit.” Believers should be able to unite in the purpose to share the gospel with a lost world and daily seek to align their hearts with God who indwells them to provide guidance, empowerment, and transformation to Christlikeness.

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1. I have used the Holman Christian Standard Bible translation, throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Victor Paul Wierwille.*Receiving the Holy Spirit Today,* New Knoxville, Ohio: American Christian Press, 1972, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid.*,* 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul Elbert. "Acts 2:38 in Light of the Syntax of Imperative--Future Passive and Imperative--Present Participle Combinations." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (/1, 2013): 106–107. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit... a Comprehensive Study of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.* Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1954, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Donald H. Madvig, "Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament." *The Covenant Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (/8, 1974): 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bernard J. Cooke. *Power and the Spirit of God: Toward an Experience-Based Pneumatology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A type is a real person, event, or thing which pictures something else and find fulfillment in the antitype. The Holy Spirit was referred to in Luke 3:22 as being “like a dove.” The releasing of a dove by Noah was a type of the Holy Spirit. Oil was often used in the Old Testament as a type of the Holy Spirit (Lev 2:1–16, Lev 14: 10–32, Psalm 45:7) and is also used in the New Testament (Matt 25: 3–8, James 5:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Danny Mathews. "The Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts: A Critique of Jack Deere's Surprised by the Power of the Spirit." Restoration Quarterly 41, no. 2 (1999, 1999): 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robert P. Menzies. *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*. London: T & T Clark International, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Robert Morris, *The God I Never Knew.* New York: WaterBrook Multnomah, 2011, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Danny Mathews. "The Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts: A Critique of Jack Deere's Surprised by the Power of the Spirit." Restoration Quarterly 41, no. 2 (1999, 1999): 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Archie Hui. "The Pneumatology of Watchman Nee: A New Testament Perspective." *Evangelical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (01, 2004): 3-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Originally a doctoral dissertation; published in 1970 in London by SCM; subsequently reprinted in 1977 as a Westminster Press “Classic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. William Atkinson. *Baptism in the Spirit: Luke-Acts and the Dunn Debate*. Cambridge, U.K.: The Lutterworth Press, 2012, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)