

Baptism & Receiving the Holy Spirit: How Does it Work? Who Does it?

by Norman Edwards, Jan 2003

When people seek to obey God, they can see the command in the Scriptures to repent of their sins and to be baptized in the name of Jesus (or in His Hebrew name, Yashuah). They can read the many biblical descriptions of sin, find that the result of sin is death, and see that eternal life is available in Christ. They can see the biblical examples of mature people—not infants—coming to be baptized; and they can see that baptisms are done where there is water to cover a person. Everyone should understand these points and there is much good material on them.

So when one is ready for baptism, to whom do they go to receive it? How does one receive the Holy Spirit? If one desires to belong to a church denomination, they will usually have a method that they must follow and people who are specifically designated to carry it out. In many groups if one does not follow their method, he or she cannot be considered a member of that church group. But there is no biblical example of being baptized into a Church organization. The Apostle Paul specifically taught believers not to align themselves with a particular servant of God (1Cor 1:12–15).

How then, can one be baptized into the body of Christ and receive the Holy Spirit? The Bible does not have a single section explaining what is “necessary for salvation” and if there are “optional extras” that can be added on if one wants to. It has a few commands that were given to different individuals at different times, and it has lots of accounts of how God actually worked with people like you and me. The purpose of believers is to accomplish as much as they can, not as little as they can (John 15:8; Matt 25:14–30).

Read All of the Scriptures

Fortunately, it is possible to read all of the Scriptures about baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit in a somewhat long article such as this. This is probably the best approach to understand God’s mind on the subject. Many baptism articles will start with scriptures that support the author’s position, go on to “explain” (sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly) the scriptures that appear to differ from the author’s position and to sometimes ignore the scriptures that contradict it.

To make learning easier we have arranged the scriptures into the following categories:

- Commands to Baptize



Just before baptism in Lake Huron at Port Austin, Michigan

- Scriptures Explaining Baptism
- References to Old Testament “Baptisms”
- Baptism of the Holy Spirit
- Baptism for the Dead?
- Ten Baptism Stories
- Observations: Who Can Baptize and How
- Receiving the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament
- Receiving the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (Before Acts 2, Acts 2 & beyond, and via laying on of hands.)
- Laying on of Hands to Impart the Holy Spirit
- Laying on of Hands for Other Purposes
- Observations: Receiving the Holy Spirit
- What Happens If We Do It Wrong?

Yes, this article is rather long, but after reading it, you should feel that you *know* what the Bible says about this very important subject. Scriptures about John the Baptist and his baptism **have been excluded** as his work and his baptism was clearly replaced by that of Jesus Christ (John 3:30; Acts 18:24–19:5). These verses are valuable in helping us understand how God uses human instruments to prepare people for what He intends to do, but they do not tell us much about baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit today. The Holy Spirit was not given with John’s baptism.

Commands to Baptize

Several scriptures command the Christian to be baptized and to baptize. Please read the full text provided here even though the verses may be familiar:

“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of [1] repentance from dead works and of [2] faith toward God, of [3] **the doctrine of baptisms**, [4] **of laying on of hands**, of [5] resurrection of the dead, and of [6] eternal judgment” (Heb 6:1–2).

Even though believers were being told to go beyond the “elementary principles of Christ”, 2,000 years later it is nice to have a list of those elementary principles. It is interesting to note that the first two things a believer must do himself, the next two things must be done in conjunction with other believers and the last two things God must do. Even so, there is no mention here of whom in the church can or should baptize and lay on hands.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20).

The Apostles were commanded to teach others everything that Christ taught them. That means they would also teach others to make disciples and baptize them. It appears to be a continual, self-replicating operation.

“And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. **He who believes and is baptized will be saved**; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:15-18).

Baptism is for the purpose of becoming a believer and doing a work empowered by Christ. These verses do not say that everyone will do every one of these things—elsewhere the Bible shows that spiritual gifts are distributed among believers (Rom 12:6; Eph 4:11–12). But these verses strongly imply that some miracles would follow true Christianity.

“Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call”... Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles” (Acts 2:38–39, 43).

Baptism is available to all people of all generations, “as many as the Lord our God will call”. It is very important to understand that God does the calling, not a church group. Baptism or the laying on of hands should not be refused to someone who appears to be called of God, even if they have no connection with any religious group

Scriptures Explaining Baptism

The following three scriptures show there is one baptism into the Body of Christ. There is no baptism into a particular church organization.

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by **one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13).

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were **baptized into Christ have put on Christ**. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26–28).

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, **one baptism**; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph 4:4–6).

Baptism is a symbol of our own death—that our own ways die as Christ died and that we now live to let him live His life in us.

“...**buried with Him in baptism**, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Col 2:12–13).

“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were **baptized into His death**? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so **we also should walk in newness of life**” (Rom 6:3–4).

Sometimes, the Bible just refers to “water” or “washing” to convey the idea of baptism. The analogy of personal cleansing of sin is still there:

“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of **water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

“...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the **washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit**” (Titus 3:5).

References to Old Testament “Baptisms”

Two Old Testament events are specifically listed as being a type of baptism—picturing a sort of death and resurrection:

“...when God waited patiently in the **days of Noah**, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And **baptism, which this prefigured**, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an

appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1Pet 3:20–21).

"Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were **baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea**" (1 Corinthians 10:1–2).

The ceremonial washings required by the Old Testament Priests were also a kind of "baptism". The word used for the ceremonial washing of hands and dishes in Mark 7:4, 8 is the same one used below, and in Hebrews 6:2. Other Bible translations will say "washings" here instead of "baptism", but it is important to understand that the first century believers would see them as similar. The washing/baptism was a ceremonial cleansing—a removal of dirt/sin—that which defiles.

"This is a symbol of the present time, during which **gifts and sacrifices are offered** that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but **deal only with food and drink and various baptisms**, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right" (Heb 9:9–10, NRSV).

Baptized with the Holy Spirit

There are six references to baptism "with the Holy Spirit". All are about the comparison of John's baptism with water—where the Holy Spirit was not given—to the baptism by Christ where the Holy Spirit was given. This baptism is something that Christ does—it is not something that one believer can arrange for another.

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire**" (Matt 3:11).

"I indeed baptized you with water, but **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit**" (Mark 1:8).

"John answered, saying to all, 'I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire**'" (Luke 3:16).

"I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is **He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit**'" (John 1:33).

"...for John truly baptized with water, but **you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit** not many days from now" (Acts 1:5).

"And as I [Peter] began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them [Cornelius and his household], as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, **but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**' If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:15–17).

This last verse shows that this baptism of the Holy Spirit was experienced by the Apostles and by Cornelius and his household—the first Gentiles to receive the Holy Spirit. This was the fulfillment of the words spoken by Christ and by John. Whether or not this process was ever repeated with other believers is not clear from the Scripture. Since it is Christ who does it, he can do it as little or as often as He wants. There is no command for a believer to be "baptized in the spirit". However, the original disciples are examples to us of how Christ works—so we might expect Him to work similarly with others. There are several different expressions used in the scriptures that seem to indicate different amounts of the Holy Spirit: "filled with the spirit", "spirit upon me" "receive the spirit", etc. Since the word for baptism means "immerse", a person baptized with the Holy Spirit would be "immersed" in it.

Baptism for the Dead?

One baptism verse that is sometimes greatly misunderstood is 1 Corinthians 15:29:

"Otherwise, what will they do who are **baptized for the dead**, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead?"

Some Bible teachers have used this verse to encourage believers to get baptized on behalf of unbelieving dead relatives. They probably mean well, but repentance must precede baptism and it just isn't possible for living people to repent for dead relatives. To repent means to change and dead people do not change. To understand this verse, read all of chapter 15. Some false teachers were preaching that there was no resurrection of the dead (v 12–13). They thought that believers would simply live on until Christ returned. Paul had to remind them that in spite of the many miraculous healings, some believers had died (v 18). He goes on to explain the need for a resurrection in verses 35 to 58. In verse 29, Paul reminded them that if there is no resurrection ("otherwise"), then what good does it do to be baptized and then later die—become dead? The Greek is difficult here, but it certainly does not imply being baptized for "someone else" who is dead. *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* is fairly good here:

"Otherwise, what will they do who are being **baptized for the purpose of *being* dead ones?** If the dead are not to be raised up at all, why are they also being baptized for the purpose of *being* such?" (1Cor 15:29, NWT.)

But in any translation, it should be clear here that issue here is whether or not the dead are raised—there is nothing at all in the Bible explaining what good could be accomplished by being baptized for a dead person.

Ten Baptism Stories

All of the rest of the scriptures about baptism are case histories of people who were baptized—sometimes many, sometimes just one. We can learn a lot from what God thought was important enough to include in these 10 stories. It is also helpful to think about what was not included.

Baptism #1: Pentecost

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about **three thousand souls** were added to them” (Acts 2:41).

This verse follows the famous Acts 2:38: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized... and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” It is important to see that this was done with one day’s teaching. Those baptized were probably already knowledgeable of God from the Old Testament, and some may have heard the teaching of Jesus before. But they were from many different countries, so many were certainly hearing the teaching of Jesus for the very first time—but they were baptized that same day.

Who baptized these 3,000 people? If only the 12 Apostles did the baptizing and laying on of hands, each one would have had to baptize and lay hands on 250 people. That would give them less than 2 minutes for each person working steady for eight hours. If all 120 disciples (Acts 1:15) participated in the baptism and laying on of hands, they could devote 15 minutes to each person and finish in 6¼ hours.

Baptism #2: Philip Baptizes, Peter and John Come to Impart the Holy Spirit and Confront Simon the Sorcerer

This is the longest story, but it contains many elements not in any other story, so it is well worth studying, in Acts 8:9-11

“But there was a certain man called **Simon**, who previously practiced **sorcery** in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.

But when they believed **Philip** as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, **both men and women were baptized**. Then **Simon** himself also believed; and when he **was baptized** he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.

Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent **Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they**

might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, **he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”** But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. **Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you**” (Acts 8:9–22).

This is the only Biblical instance where, after baptism in the name of Jesus, other brethren had to be called to impart the Holy Spirit. Some people will claim that an apostle, or at least a “church leader of a certain rank”, was necessary to impart the Holy Spirit. Yet the scripture does not say that.

This is also the only place where someone is baptized who was not really a believer. Simon the Sorcerer was baptized—he must have convinced Philip and the others that he had genuine interest. If the Holy Spirit was given right away, many people would have accepted Simon’s false miracles as works of the Holy Spirit—he would have deceived many. When Peter and John came, Simon showed his true colors. This may be the very reason why the Spirit was withheld, so that Simon could be “weeded out”. But again, the scripture does not say that is the reason. We do not know for sure why Peter and John had to come to lay hands on the people. This does not occur in any of the other stories.

Baptism #3: Philip Baptizes the Ethiopian Eunuch

“And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and **had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning.** And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet...

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”... So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both **Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.** Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; **and he went on his way rejoicing.**

But Philip was found at Azotus. **And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea**” (Acts 8:27–28; 36, 38–40).

This scripture says nothing about receiving the Holy Spirit, but it is clear that the man from Ethiopia was headed back home and if he did not receive the Spirit here, it is unlikely that he did elsewhere. (Peter and John had returned to Jerusalem—verse 25.) Afterward, Philip preached from Azotus to Caesarea—about 70 miles of coastline full of cities. This is truly the first “missionary journey” in the New Testament, though we have few details about it. There is nothing about whether Philip baptized or imparted the Holy Spirit on this journey, but it is difficult to imagine that he would only partly fulfill the commands in Matthew 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15–18.

Baptism #4: Paul’s Baptism

“And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and **be filled with the Holy Spirit.**” Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was **baptized**” (Acts 9:17–18).

Here, Ananias was specifically told to baptize Paul. Verse 12 said that Ananias laid hands on Paul to receive his sight. It does not say how Paul received the Holy Spirit. The account was retold by Paul in Acts 22. It is interesting that Ananias is not identified by “apostle”, “evangelist” or any other title, but simply “a devout man according to the law”.

“Then a certain Ananias, a **devout man according to the law**, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him.

Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be **baptized**, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord’” (Acts 22:12–16).

Baptism #5: Cornelius and Family

This entire story spans most of Acts 10 and 11. The most significant verses are here:

“While Peter was still speaking these words, the **Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.** And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. **For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.**

Then Peter answered, ‘Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he **commanded** them to be **baptized in the name of the Lord.** Then

they asked him to stay a few days... Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but **you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit**’” (Acts 10:44–48; 11:16).

Important points to be learned here:

1. The Spirit came before baptism in this case.
2. It was the first time that Gentiles received it.
3. “Speaking with tongues and praising God” are given as the evidence of the **baptism** of the Holy Spirit.
4. Peter commanded that they be baptized—even though this was a ground-breaking event, he did not do the job himself.

Baptism #6: Lydia Baptized

“One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. **The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. And when she and her household were baptized,** she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ So she persuaded us” (Acts 16:14–15).

Lydia was obviously a very competent woman. Even though she was newly baptized, the brethren met in her house (Acts 16:40). There are cautions against giving too much responsibility to a new convert (1Tim 3:6), but Lydia shows that a capable, newly-baptized person can do a lot.

Baptism #7: Roman Jailer

God caused a great earthquake that loosed Paul and other prisoners in the jail. The jailer was about to kill himself (he would have been severely punished for letting prisoners get away), but Paul told him that they were all still there.

“And he [the jailer] brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ So they said, ‘**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,** and you will be saved, you and your household.’

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately **he and all his family were baptized.**

Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, **having believed in God with all his household**” (Acts 16:30–34).

This story is probably the best Biblical evidence for baptizing someone even though they are just learning about God. Before Paul, the jailer did not appear to believe in God. But he had just witnessed a powerful, life-saving miracle, and he was probably very committed. This does show that there is no “minimum time” that a person must study or attend a congregation before they can be baptized.

Baptism #8: Crispus & Others

“Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

This is a great example of the ruler of a synagogue—a man with great knowledge of the Old Testament—being baptized along with some Corinthians—most of whom knew little about the true God. But they would both worship together. Paul taught them all for a year and a half (v 11).

Baptism #9: For With Only John’s Baptism: Rebaptism and Laying on of Hands

“And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’ And he said to them, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ So they said, ‘Into John’s baptism.’

Then Paul said, ‘John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. **And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied**” (Acts 19:1–6).

Even though these people believed in Jesus, God apparently did not put His spirit on them until they were baptized and had hands laid upon them. Many times the Church is described as the body of Christ, and the tasks of baptism and the laying on of hands seem to be a function that God wants the church to do. God could have just put the Holy Spirit in these people like he did to Cornelius and his family, but He left the job for His human instruments.

Baptism #10: Crispus, Gaius and Household of Stephanas

“Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? **I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.**

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect” (1Cor 1:12–16).

Two very important points can be learned from this.

1. Who baptizes people is not important. Paul told them that it was not a consideration, and he personally did not baptize much at all.
2. Paul does not specifically remember who he baptized, nor does he refer to any kind of baptismal records. If such records existed, he could have used them to prove his point, but there is no biblical mention of the church keeping “baptism records”.

Observations: Who Can Baptize and How?

In all these instructions and examples about baptism, there is not one sentence that says anything like: “these **are** or **are not** the people who can baptize.” We simply see the commands to do it, and see that people did it. Some were apostles, but many were not, and Paul was glad that he personally had not baptized many, even though he preached to thousands. Baptizing or laying on of hands is not in any of the Biblical lists of spiritual gifts (Rom 12:6–8; 1Cor 12:7–11, 28–31; Eph 4:11–15, 1Pet 4:8–11), rather it is in the list of basic doctrines (Heb 6:1–2) that **all** believers should have mastered. If God has set limits on who is allowed to baptize, He failed to state the rule or clearly illustrate it by examples.

Someone might ask, “if anyone can baptize, won’t a lot of people be baptized falsely? Don’t we need a trained ministry to do it right?” The answer is that God never expected believers to be able to perfectly discern who is really repentant and who is not. God determines that. Philip’s group baptized Simon the sorcerer when he was not sincere. Seminary-trained ministers have baptized untold thousands of people who turned out to have no serious commitment to God. Even worse than this, ministers of church denominations frequently baptize people into their denomination. Even though they may not actually say this, their actions show it in that they insist on rebaptizing someone previously baptized in another denomination, and they tell members that they may lose the Holy Spirit if they leave their denomination.

A Bible student who does not represent a denomination will certainly know that baptism is into the Body of Christ, and that a believer must be guided by the Holy Spirit to find other believers with which to fellowship.

The Bible does not contain a specific “list of minimum requirements” for baptism, but by putting multiple scriptures together we can see that a person should: believe in God, repent, be willing to die to themselves and to live their life in Christ. There are several examples of people being ready to do this the same day that they are taught about these things.

The Bible never explains the role of the “baptizer”. Religious leaders frequently assure the

person coming up out of the water that “on behalf of Jesus Christ, their sins are forgiven”. But the Bible gives them no such authority. Only God has the ability to determine if someone is really repentant. When an unrepentant “Simon the Sorcerer” is baptized, his sins are not forgiven. The person being baptized simply needs to be assured that God will do what he has promised, and if they have repented, then God will forgive their sin.

We can learn about how to baptize from scriptural clues and history. The Greek words for *baptize* imply a total immersion. Every scriptural instance that mentions where a person was baptized describes a place with a lot of water. There simply



Mikveh — ancient Jewish ritual stone bath tub

is no mention of pouring or sprinkling water.

Since the words used for Christian Baptism and Jewish ritual immersion are sometimes the same in the Bible, we can be relatively sure that the procedure was similar. The Jewish teaching of the times was that it needed to be done in “living water”—water that was flowing. Lacking a river or lake, the Jews frequently constructed a Mikveh—a large stone tub with at least a small source of water coming in and a place for it to flow out. Archeologists have discovered many of these that date back to the time of Christ. A bath tub with water flowing in and the drain partly open would be similar to this.

History further indicates that the person being baptized went under the water themselves—the baptizer watched to be sure that he or she went completely under water. If part of their body remained above water, the baptizer would tell them to redo it. (The baptizer might also assist a person who needed help getting in and out of the water.) Today, unfortunately, many “ministers” physically push the person under the water and then to pull them up. This seems to symbolize that a minister “controls a believer’s spiritual life”. Whereas, self-immersion symbolizes a person laying down their own life to Christ, rising up by the power of Christ

in them and relying on other brethren to point out mistakes that they cannot see for themselves. This symbolism seems much better.

Receiving the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

The Scriptures use the terms “Holy Spirit”, “Spirit of God” and “Spirit of the Lord” (Yahweh) interchangeably. This author was amazed to find more specific references to people receiving the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament than there were in the New. However, the Old Testament references are usually to one person or a small group of people, whereas the New Testament references include many big groups. The Spirit does appear to work with people for a specific purpose at times without actually being in them. References are not included with words like “and the Spirit of the Lord began to **stir** him...” (Jdgs 13:25). Because of the large number, only a summary of most verses is presented—showing how and why the Holy Spirit came. Please look them up if you so desire, but as it stands, this is a quick summary of when God gave His Spirit as revealed in the Old Testament:

- “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have **filled him with the Spirit of God**, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of **workmanship**” (Ex 31:2–3).
- Some of the Spirit was taken from Moses and given to 70 elders (Num 11:25)
- “And Balaam raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and **the Spirit of God came upon him**” Num 24:2).
- (Balaam also practiced divination—Num 22:7).
- The Spirit came upon Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, so he could save the people (Jdgs 3:9–10).
- It came upon Gideon so he could organize an attack (Jdgs 6:34).
- It came upon Jephthah so he could organize an attack (Jdgs 11:29).
- The Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson several times, mostly to fight people (Jdgs 14:6, 19; 15:14).
- Saul received it by coming close to some prophets (1Sam 10:6, 10).
- Saul received it again by getting angry at evil Philistines (1Sam 11:2–6).
- The Spirit of the Lord came upon David when Samuel anointed him with oil to later be king (1Sam 16:13).
- Saul received the Spirit again when he and his messengers came near Samuel and prophets (1Sam 19:20–24). (Saul took off his clothes and lay down naked because of the Spirit—God does not always do what we expect!)

- Elisha received a double-portion of Elijah's Holy Spirit from God when Elijah left (2Kngs 2:9–15).
- The Spirit just came upon Zairian the son of Obed (2Chr 15:1).
- The Spirit came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest when people refused to listen to other prophets (2Chr 24:19–20).
- It came upon Ahaziah the son of Zechariah as he stood among the people and he prophesied a message of hope (2Chr 20:14).
- The Spirit came upon Ezekiel when he prophesied (Ezk 11:5).
- Joseph (Gen 41:38–39), Moses (Isa 63:11), Daniel (Dan 4:8) and others had the Holy Spirit, but it does not say exactly how they got it.
- "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him'" (Num 27:18).
- "Now Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Deut 34:9).

The last two verses represent the only clear example of laying on of hands to impart the spirit in the Old Testament. When the elders received some of Moses' Spirit, or when Elisha succeeded Elijah, there is no record of laying on of hands. The rule there seems to be that God places His Spirit in people when He so decides.

Receiving the Holy Spirit in the New Testament—Before Acts 2

Before the Feast of Pentecost, covered in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit was not generally available to all who would obey (Acts 5:32). Therefore, one might consider the receiving of the Holy Spirit in the first part of the New Testament as more similar in character to the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit comes in a variety of situations by different means. Laying on of hands does not appear to be one of them. Again, we summarize most of them, and leave out references duplicated among the four Gospels.

- The Spirit descended "like a dove" on Jesus (Math 3:16).
- John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth (Luke 1:15).
- The Holy Spirit came upon Mary to conceive Jesus (Luke 1:35).
- Elizabeth, John's mother, was filled with the spirit when her baby leapt inside of her (Luke 1:41).
- Zecharias, John's father, was filled with the spirit after John was born (Luke 1:67).
- The Holy Spirit led Simeon to see Jesus when He was still a baby (Luke 2:25–29).

- The Apostles received some of the Holy Spirit when Jesus breathed upon them (John 20:22).

Receiving the Holy Spirit in the New Testament—Acts 2 and Beyond, Without Laying on of Hands

While many churches teach that the Holy Spirit is only received through the laying on of hands, there are quite a few references, even after the Spirit was made generally available, where it was not mentioned or may not have happened.

- The disciples—not just the twelve Apostles—were all filled with the Spirit accompanied by the sound of a mighty wind and tongues of fire on their heads (Acts 2:2–4). We do **not** have an account of the Apostles laying hands on the other disciples.
- "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; **and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'" (Acts 2:38).
- The laying on of hands is not mentioned above, nor is it in the general reference below. Galatians 3:5 is similar:
- "Does God give you His Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" (Gal 3:5).
- Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit" to preach a powerful message (Acts 4:8).
- The Holy Spirit again filled the disciples when they prayed (Acts 4:31). There were more disciples by this time than there were in Acts 2:2.
- The Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household while Peter was speaking (Acts 10:44; 11:15).
- The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit after being persecuted (Acts 13:51–52).
- It is unlikely that the disciples completely "lost the Spirit" then had to get it back again. But they were given an extra amount to accomplish the task at hand. Nevertheless, the laying on of hands was not mentioned in the above cases.

Laying on of Hands to Impart the Holy Spirit

There are two clear references to believers receiving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Depending upon one's viewpoint, they might be considered very common conditions, or they might be considered unusual conditions.

“For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:16–17).

This is the incident where Peter and John came to lay hands on the believers because they did not receive the Spirit after baptism. They also had to confront Simon the sorcerer who was baptized with the others (Acts 8:9–22).

“And he said to them, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ So they said, ‘Into **John’s baptism.**’ Then Paul said, ‘John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were **baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.** And when Paul had laid hands on them, the **Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied**” (Acts 19:3–5).

One could say that the above two instances of laying on of hands were to “correct errors”, and that the verses in the previous section, where the Holy Spirit simply came upon people, are the more common ways of doing it. On the other hand, one could say that the previous section contains special miracles used to start a church, and that the laying on of hands was the more common way whereby the Holy Spirit was received later on. The Bible does not give the reasons why it happened differently at different times, so we do not know. But since God gives us all we need, we do not have to know now.

There is one more place where the Bible might say that hands were laid on to impart the Holy Spirit: the story of Ananias being sent to visit Paul. There are three different accounts of it, each giving varying amounts of detail. In the vision Ananias received, God tells him to put his hand on Paul so he will receive his sight back:

“And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and **putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight**” (Acts 9:12).

In the main story, which has the most detail, Ananias lays his hands on Paul, and then states his purpose:

“And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and **laying his hands on him** he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may **receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**’ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. **He got up and was baptized**” (Acts 9:17–18).

Was the laying of the hands on Paul just for healing or also to impart the Holy Spirit? If so, then Paul received the Spirit **before** he was baptized which is not the normal order, but did occur with Cornelius and his household. The retelling of this in

Acts 22:12–16 records the healing and the baptism, but says nothing about the laying on of hands.

In the basic doctrines of Hebrews 6:1–2, laying on of hands is mentioned right after baptism, but nothing is said about the Holy Spirit. As the next section will show, the overwhelming number of references to the laying on of hands are for healing and leadership selection.

From these verses, we can certainly see that laying on of hands as **one way** that the Holy Spirit was imparted. There is certainly nothing wrong with believers doing it today. But to say that it is the only way, or a required way seems in conflict with the scriptures.

Laying on of Hands for Other Purposes

By far, the greatest use of “laying on of hands” or “touching with the hand” is for the purpose of healing. Jesus did it numerous times (8:3; 8:15; 9:18; 9:25; Mark 1:31, 41; 5:23,41; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23, 25; 9:27; Luke 4:40; 5:13; 8:54; 13:13). It was a practice of believers as well (Mark 16:18; Acts 5:12; 9:12, 17; 19:11; 28:8). Mark 16:18 says of believers in general “they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover”. Jesus also laid hands on children to bless them (Matt 19:13, 15; Mark 10:13, 16; Luke 18:15).

There are five other examples of laying on of hands other than imparting the Holy spirit. It is to separate people for a specific task within the church.

“[Seven men chosen by the brethren to serve the widows] whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them” (Acts 6:6).

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2–3).

In the first passage, above, the brethren chose the seven, and in the second one, the Holy Spirit did. The laying on of hands appears to be a physical recognition and confirmation, along with a prayer, that acknowledges the people to be chosen for a specific task.

The next two examples show that hands were laid on Timothy when a prophecy was given that he would teach and lead the brethren—apparently even after the death of the Apostles (1Tim 1:18–19; 6:20–21; 2:Tim 2:2; 4:1–3). It makes little sense that these verses were referring to the Holy Spirit given to Timothy at baptism. Paul’s writing never mentions his baptism, but continually talks about his responsibilities to the church:

“Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the **gift** that is in you, which was **given to you by prophecy with**

the laying on of the hands of the eldership" (1Tim 4:13-14).

"Therefore I remind you to stir up **the gift of God** which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2Tim 1:6).

Finally, the last verse about laying on of hands is a caution to Timothy:

"Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure" (1Tim 5:22).

If is fairly obvious that the reference here is to laying on of hands **for responsibility**. It makes little sense that Paul would be telling Timothy to be slow to lay hands on somebody for healing—or to wait to impart the Holy Spirit after baptism.

Observations: Receiving the Holy Spirit

From this exhaustive study about receiving the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands, it appears that we can conclude the following:

1. God often gives the Holy Spirit to whom He wants, when He wants. Sometimes it is for a short term and sometimes for life (or until it is rejected). Neither Simon the Sorcerer nor modern day church organizations have received an exclusive franchise to impart the Holy Spirit.
2. The Holy Spirit is sometimes imparted through the laying on of hands, but there are more examples where laying on of hands is **not** mentioned.
3. The most commonly mentioned use of laying on of hands in the Bible is healing.
4. The next most commonly mentioned use is for recognizing a position of service.
5. The Bible contains no limiting statements as to who can or cannot lay on hands. There is no example where anyone is told not to do it.
6. When people were baptized and did not receive the Holy Spirit, they did have the Apostles lay hands on them.
7. There are no Bible examples of light-hearted laying on of hands. Everyone was serious. No one should ever act on behalf of God if they do not have faith that they are doing the

right thing. "...for whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23).

The Bible shows that God has worked with people in many different ways. "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). Believers can trust the Holy Spirit to lead them, within the many methods described in the Scriptures. The overriding guidelines that the Bible gives us, "are you within the law and will of God?"—not "are you authorized to do what you are doing?"

In the Old Testament, there were many functions that could only be done by the priests. But now, all believers are priests:

"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1Pet 2:9).

Every believer is authorized to represent Christ!

What Happens If We Do it Wrong?

There is a human tendency to say, "I can't baptize or lay hands on people. What if I did it wrong?" There is a fine Biblical example of exactly that—a person who diligently taught what they knew, but did not understand as much as other believers. What happened?

"This man [Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:25-26).

God sent people to correct Apollos, and he went on teaching. If he had refused the correction, that would have been a problem. God honors a diligent but humble attitude. If there is a man or woman who wants to be repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, any mature believer ought to be willing to serve them—not to act important, but to do what Christ said.

May God help all of us to better know and do His will.

For more Bible literature, or to talk to a ministry about baptism, please contact:

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