

Baptism

By Al Felder

The Biblical teaching of baptism has been a greatly debated subject. Men have discussed its relevance to salvation and method of administration. Despite all of the discussions that have taken place in regards to this subject, baptism is still misunderstood by many people. There are, I believe, many contributing factors to this confusion.

The underlying cause of this confusion is the Devil himself. In the parable of the sower Jesus said, *“Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved”* (Luke 8:12). It is the Devil’s mission to prevent as many people as possible from believing the word of God. He takes the plain and simple teachings of the Bible and twists their meaning in order to keep people from obeying them.

The Meaning of the Word

One way that the Devil does this in regards to baptism is by confusing people as to the true meaning of the word. Today, most people will look at a modern dictionary and see the word baptize defined as sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. A factor that has contributed greatly to this misconception is the fact that the word baptize is not a translation of the original Greek word. When the King James Translation was made, the translators took the Greek word baptizo and made a transliteration. In other words, they formed a new English word by transferring the Greek word into English.

If a person desires to know the original meaning of a word, he or she should get a book written by a Greek scholar in which the word is defined by its original meaning. For instance, Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary defines baptism as, *“to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another.”*¹ It is clear by the definition given and examples of its use, that the word baptize means total immersion.

The scriptures prove this to be the case as well. In John 3:23 the Bible says, *“And John also was baptizing in Enon near Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.”* Now if sprinkling and pouring were valid methods of baptism, why would John seek a place with “much water” in order to perform the act? Both methods could be performed with very little water. The only method that would require “much water” is immersion.

¹ Vine, W. E. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 50.

Types of Baptism

Another way that the Devil seeks to confuse people is through a misunderstanding of the different types of baptism found in the New Testament. There are six different baptisms in the New Testament. However, by the time that the Apostle Paul was inspired to write the epistle to the Ephesians only one of these baptisms was in effect and continues to remain today. “*One Lord, one faith, one baptism*” (Ephesians 4:5). In order to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism, it is necessary to understand the purpose and duration of each of these baptisms.

In 1 Corinthians 10:2 the Bible says, “*And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.*” Here we read about the baptism unto Moses. This baptism was a one-time event for a specific group of people. On this occasion, the Israelites were fleeing from the land of Egypt. With Pharaoh and his army close behind, Moses parted the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to walk across on dry land. During this process they were immersed with the water on both sides of them and the cloud above them.

The purpose of this baptism was two-fold. First, this baptism brought the children of Israel into the covenant of which Moses was the mediator. They were brought under obligation to keep its precepts. Second, this baptism was a type of our baptism today. In 1 Corinthians 10:6 the Bible says, “*Now these things were our examples.*” According to Vine’s, the word example means “a pattern”.² Therefore, the children of Israel being baptized unto Moses as the mediator of that covenant pointed toward individuals being baptized into Christ as the mediator of the New Covenant.

A second baptism was the baptism of John. “*In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea*” (Matthew 3:1). John had a special mission. He was given the honor and privilege of being the forerunner of Christ. It was his task to begin preparing the hearts and minds of the people for the coming Messiah. Like the baptism of Moses, the baptism of John was for a specific group of people. John only preached his message to the Jews. This baptism was not intended for the Gentiles.

Also, the baptism of John had a limited duration. During a trip to Ephesus, the Apostle Paul came across a group of disciples. Through their discussion the Apostle realized that they did not have a clear understanding of things. He asked them, “unto what were ye baptized” to which they responded, “John’s baptism”. Paul then proceeded to teach them by saying, “*John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe*

² —. 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN : Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996. p. 202.

on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (Acts 19:4). Upon hearing this message the Bible tells us that these disciples were baptized in the name of Jesus. From this account we conclude that the baptism of John was only in effect until the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. After this had taken place, John’s baptism served no further purpose. All who are baptized now are baptized into Christ.

A third baptism we read of in the New Testament is the baptism of suffering. *“But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straightened till it be accomplished!” (Luke 12:50)* In this verse, and others like it, Christ refers to His sufferings as a baptism. The pain and anguish that He was about to endure was no light matter. He was going to be completely consumed and overwhelmed with sufferings. Metaphorically speaking, He was immersed in suffering.

A fourth baptism found in the New Testament is the baptism of fire. *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire” (Matthew 3:11).* This baptism is still to come. It is for those who disobey God and it will be administered at the final judgment.

A fifth baptism found in the New Testament is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. *“⁴And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. ⁵For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence” (Acts 1:4, 5).* One point that needs to be made here is that this is a promise, not a command. It is not an act that can be obeyed by a person, it is a gift given by God. Jesus is speaking specifically to the apostles in this instance. Thus, the promise was made to them. As recipients of this promise they were to be guided into all truth and have a remembrance of all that Jesus had said.

The only other instance recorded in the Bible where this baptism took place is in Acts 10. It was on this occasion that the Apostle Peter had been sent by God to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles for the first time. During Peter’s speech, the Holy Ghost fell on Cornelius and those of his house. Peter gives an account of this event to the Jews in Jerusalem and refers to it in this way, *“And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15).* Notice how the Apostle refers to this event. He has to go all the way back to the day of Pentecost when he and the other apostles received this promise to find a comparison to the event that transpired at Cornelius’ house. Many people had obeyed the gospel in between the two events, but none of them had received the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

Just as the baptism of the Holy Ghost was given to the Apostles for a specific reason, it was also given to Cornelius and his household for a specific reason. As was previously stated,

this was the first time that the Gospel was preached unto the Gentiles. Therefore, God gave this baptism in order to prove to the Jews that the Gentiles were to be included into the New Covenant as well. *“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life”* (Acts 11:18). The baptism of the Holy Ghost only occurred on these two occasions and is not for us today.

The sixth and final baptism found in the New Testament is baptism into Christ. *“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”* (Matthew 28:19). Like John’s baptism, this baptism is administered with water. The difference between the two, however, is that Christ has come and believers are baptized into Him.

When one reads the book of Acts, it can be easily understood that this is the one baptism which exists today. Every case of conversion recorded in the book of Acts specifically mentions the penitent sinner being baptized (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 22:16). This baptism is a command to be obeyed and not a promise like that of the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

The Purpose of the One Baptism

The baptism into Christ allows for the sinner’s sins to be removed by the blood of Jesus and marks his or her entrance into the Lord’s Church. This can be understood by reading Acts 2. In this account Peter responded to the question, “What shall we do?” by saying, *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins”* (Acts 2:38). Upon hearing this, the penitent sinners obeyed the command to be baptized (Acts 2:41) and were added to the church by God (Acts 2:47).

Many people reject this plain and simple teaching of the Bible. To them, immersion into water for the remission of sins doesn’t make any sense. They can rationalize the need to confess faith in Jesus as the Son of God. They can even see the logic in repenting of one’s sins. But they are at a loss in understanding why getting wet physically makes one clean spiritually. The problem lies in a misunderstanding of what actually does the cleaning. It is not the water; it is the blood of Christ.

The failure to understand the true purpose of baptism into Christ has led many to view it as a symbol – a visible expression of the forgiveness already received at the point of faith. The New Testament nowhere expounds the idea that baptism into Christ is a symbol of previous forgiveness. Baptism into Christ is where things happen. *“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”* (Romans 6:4). It is at the point of baptism into Christ that one is brought into His death. The atoning act of Christ was achieved in His death,

burial, and resurrection; therefore, the penitent believer can only access that redemptive power by being baptized into His death. The newness of life follows – not precedes – baptism.

Conclusion

Who can be baptized into Christ? Those who have been taught and believe (Mark 16:15, 16). Those who are willing to repent of their sins (Acts 2:38). Those who are willing to confess their faith in Christ (Acts 8:37).