

“Baptism”

In this brief article I'd like to address a topic that can be very divisive among Christians. The topic is the mode of water baptism. Should water baptism be administered by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling? It is unfortunate that baptism, which is meant to signify that Christians belong to the one body of Christ, divides Christians on this topic. My intent is to demonstrate that Scripture does not clearly teach one mode of water baptism. However, if Christians can agree that water baptism symbolizes the spiritual baptism of renewal, then we must strongly consider the act of “pouring” or “sprinkling”.

The word “baptism” is literally translated as “to wash”. It takes on different meanings. For example, the gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus’s disciples did not “baptize” their hands before they ate meals, as required by some Jewish traditions (7:2). It goes on to add that they “baptized” cups, pots, copper vessels, and dining couches (7:4). There is no evidence that Jews immersed their furniture into water; instead, it just means to pour water on something.

Another meaning of “baptism” is associated with “sprinkle”. Hebrews 9 speaks of the various baptisms (“washings”) in the Old Testament that symbolized the forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:10, 19-22). He then connects baptism with the “sprinkling of defiled persons” (13). Later in Hebrews, forgiveness is again symbolized by the action of sprinkling (10:22).

The spiritual element of baptism is expressed by the action of “coming upon” a person. In Acts 1, Jesus prophesies to his disciples that they will be baptized on the day of Pentecost (5). He explains the mode of the Spirit’s baptism in verse 8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” This prophecy was then fulfilled in Acts 2 when “divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them (3). The tongues of fire resting on them fulfill the promise of Luke 3: “He shall baptize you with fire” (16).

Later on the day of Pentecost, Peter addressed the multitude and explains the extraordinary event by citing the Old Testament prophet Joel: God will “pour out” His Spirit on all flesh (2:17; Joel 2:28). “Pour out” is the mode of the spiritual baptism. Peter remembers the same event later in the book of Acts and describes it as the Holy Spirit “fell on them” (11:15-16). Administered by God Himself, the Pentecostal baptism points to the pouring out of the Spirit as the Scriptural mode of spiritual baptism.

Because the Scriptures do not clearly teach the mode of water baptism, one must then carefully refrain from saying that one mode is necessary. However, because the mode of the spiritual baptism is revealed through the action of pouring or sprinkling, one must consider these to be properly Scriptural modes. At least, that is the conclusion to which I arrive on the subject.

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