



The Foundations – The Doctrine of Baptisms

Introduction

I will never forget that meeting. The lesson that day was being taught by a gifted teacher. He had been teaching from Romans for several months; and had come to Romans 6. For some reason, he felt it necessary to warn everyone that he would be discussing “baptism”.

Almost immediately, at least half the men in the room moved to the edge of their seats; leaning forward in anticipation of what the teacher would say next. You could feel the tension in the room intensify. I wasn’t the only one that noticed: The teacher tentatively covered the topic – like someone walking through a mine field.

Let’s face it, right here at the beginning: “Baptism” has become one of the most polarizing – dare we say, divisive – doctrines in the church. Whole denominations are at odds with one another over what they believe the other believes about baptism. How could a sacrament of God – a sacred God moment – become such a destructive force?

Surely, I am not the only one that sees the irony in our “doctrines of baptism” – that the word of God has the opposite singular and plural context:

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. Hebrews 6:1-3

There is only one doctrine; and it is the doctrine of many baptisms.

Then there was this other meeting. The question of communion came up (from John 6): What does it mean to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink His blood? Everyone in the room offered their understanding; and no one said anyone else was wrong. There was humility and respect.

More importantly, there was a genuine desire to discover the meaning of a mystery. The Holy Spirit taught me something about communion that day; and He taught me something about community: God speaks in it, when people desire to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

I recognize that you may not agree with my convictions regarding the doctrine of baptisms; and that’s okay. As a good friend of mine likes to say, “It may not mean what I think it means, but it must mean something. You search out its meaning.” My hope is that there is something here that encourages, edifies and equips you in your search for the lost foundations.

Furthermore, I hope and pray that whatever you believe about the doctrine of baptisms, you will not divide over it. The truth can defend itself, and only God possesses the full truth of His kingdom. One thing is certain: His Son’s Bride will not be dismembered. Therefore, let’s commit ourselves to focus on Him, as we search out the elementary principle of the doctrine of baptisms. In Jesus name. Amen?

Some Key Definitions

Doctrine (*didachē*): teaching; that which is taught; doctrine, teaching, concerning something. (Outline of Biblical Usage, blueletterbible.org)

The writer of Hebrews indicates that the doctrine of baptisms is elementary teaching. Therefore, we can expect the Scriptures to explain the doctrine in clear and simple terms. We must resist the temptation to add complexity to its meaning.

Baptize (*baptizō*): To dip repeatedly, to immerse, to submerge (of vessels sunk): to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water, to wash one's self, bathe; to overwhelm. (Outline of Biblical Usage, blueletterbible.org)

It is hard to read this definition and understand baptisms as anything other than a full submersion of the one being baptized. It is also noteworthy that baptism accomplishes something – to cleanse, wash, and overwhelm.

Sacrament: A religious ceremony or act of the Christian Church that is regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual divine grace, in particular (www.google.com). A Christian rite that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality (Merriam-Webster).

I have introduced these particular definitions of “sacrament” to force a decision: Are baptisms a means of grace, or are they a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality? If they are a means of grace, then they accomplish something. If they are a sign, then that something has already happened. I encourage you to hold this question in your mind as you consider the remainder of this study.

The Process of Salvation

The doctrine of baptisms is best understood in the context of God’s work in our life – particularly the work of salvation. Like most of God’s work, salvation is a process. It has a beginning – justification; and it has an end – glorification.

SIDE NOTE: Many understand the middle part of the salvation process to be sanctification. This is not entirely correct. Sanctification is one of the processes of salvation (transformation is another), but it is not the process of salvation. Salvation, as you might expect, is much more.

Salvation (*sōtēria*): Deliverance, preservation, safety, salvation; deliverance from the molestation of enemies; in an ethical sense, that which concludes to the soul's safety or salvation (of Messianic salvation); salvation as the present possession of all true Christians; future salvation, the sum of benefits and blessings which the Christians, redeemed from all earthly ills, will enjoy after the visible return of Christ from heaven in the consummated and eternal kingdom of God. *Outline of Biblical Usage, BlueLetterBible.org*

As you can see, the definition of salvation describes a process – as do the verses below:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1Corinthians 1:18

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 2Corinthians 2:15

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. Romans 5:9-11

But he who endures to the end shall be saved. Matthew 24:13

As followers of Jesus Christ, we “have been saved”, we “are being saved” and we “shall be saved”. The implications of this are profound.

Praise God that salvation is a process – because it is a process where God is doing the greatest thing He has ever done for man; and not just in a moment, but in the full length and breadth of our lives. He is continuously and progressively saving us!!

I believe this understanding – that salvation is a process – helps resolve at least one conflict that exists in the church regarding the doctrine of baptisms. By definition, a process is a collection of events. No single event accomplishes the purpose of the process. Therefore, we can understand that baptisms are a part of God’s saving work, without suggesting they are “the” saving work.

This is particularly encouraging when we understand Who is doing the work.

The Work of God

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

Clearly, our salvation is “not of works”. We are saved by God’s grace, through the faith He gives us. Therefore, baptisms are not effectual for our salvation – as a work of man. However, what if baptisms are the work of God’s grace? What if, as I heard one preacher say, “Something happens when you go down in that water”?

That is, of course, what I am suggesting; that, through faith in the divine work of God, baptisms are effectual toward our salvation. As we discovered earlier, baptism accomplishes something – cleansing, washing, overwhelming. It is more than a symbolic act of obedience; which is, by the way, a work of man.

Are you on the edge of your seat? If so, I hope it is out of anticipation. Again, the passages presented here may not mean what I think they mean, but they must mean something. Don’t reject them just yet. You give meaning to what the Scriptures say. Let the Holy Spirit guide you into understanding about the four baptisms.

The Four Baptisms

That’s right: The Bible describes four baptisms; four baptisms and one doctrine. We will begin with the two most common – water and Holy Spirit – and proceed to two you may not have considered: baptism into the Body of Christ, and baptism in fire.

Water Baptism

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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.” Amen. Matthew 28:18-20

Water baptism is a command of our Master – the One given all authority in heaven and on earth. That should be enough instruction, right there. Without equivocation, we should be baptizing every born again believer.

The more important question is: What does God accomplish in our baptism? The Bible has more to say about this subject than most have considered. Here are a few passages to whet your appetite; that you would search further into this incredible mystery:

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. Acts 2:38

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? 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. Romans 6:1-4

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. Galatians 3:26-27

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 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. Colossians 2:11-12

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 22:15-16

These passages speak clearly for themselves: God accomplishes much in the grace of water baptism. I encourage you to study these verses in context – paying particular attention to the putting off of the old man, and the putting on of Christ.

There is one extremely important point to make here: The Colossians 2 passage reveals the manner in which we appropriate every grace of God. It is “through faith in the working of God”. It is by grace, through faith, that we are being saved. This is true for all four baptisms.

Holy Spirit Baptism

John the Baptist, who baptized with water for repentance, declared that one mightier than he would come baptizing in the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11). We will look at the baptism of fire in a moment. For now, let’s try to understand our baptism in the Holy Spirit.

It is important to recognize that this baptism is not the same as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yes, both are gifts; they are just not the same gift. Now, some would argue that they are the same; and I respect that opinion. However, it has been the experience of many champions of the faith that the Holy Spirit Baptism is something more (read *They Found the Secret*, by V. Raymond Edman, for some of their testimonies).

The gift of the Holy Spirit comes when we are born again; as described in Ezekiel.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Ezekiel 36:25-27

God puts the Holy Spirit in us. This is such an awesome gift – the Holy Spirit abiding in the born again believer, with all His fruit and gifts – that it is hard to imagine there could be more. Praise God; with Him, there is always more. Praise God for the “greater than” life!

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has

come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:4-8

In the Holy Spirit Baptism, Jesus is the Baptizer, the disciples are those being baptized, and the element of the baptism is the Holy Spirit. Here we come to appreciate the “overwhelming” aspect of baptism; the common description of those that receive this awesome gift.

Also common to all that receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit is God’s purpose for it: To empower us to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and His gospel (vv. 7-8). Here are a few passages that give us some idea of what that looks like:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. John 14:12

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 16:17-18

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Acts 2:42-43

In his personal testimony, Dwight L. Mooney explained that, before his baptism in the Holy Spirit, ten would come at the invitation to receive Christ. Afterwards, though the sermon and invitation were the same, hundreds responded! The Holy Spirit not only overwhelms the one who is baptized, but also those whom he or she are used for the witness of Jesus Christ and His gospel.

Body of Christ Baptism

It is the glory of God to hide a matter; and the glory of kings to search them out (Proverbs 25:2). Searching the Scriptures always turns up exciting truth. Even the smallest phrase can open up our understanding in the most significant way. Here is an example:

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. 1Corinthians 12:12-13

Here we discover our third baptism; where the baptizer is the Holy Spirit, the baptizee is the disciple of Jesus Christ, and the element of the baptism is the Body of Christ.

This discovery is more important than we might initially recognize. Let’s search a little deeper; that we might appreciate the Holy Spirit’s work.

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. 1Corinthians 2:10-12

The Holy Spirit knows our destiny, purpose and provision. Therefore, He knows best where to place us in the Body of Christ for the Father’s greatest glory. How exciting and encouraging it is to know that the Holy Spirit has providently placed each one of us – both in time and geography – exactly where we need to be to maximize our contribution to the kingdom of God.

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.
1Corinthians 12:14-20

As much as we might like to decide what organ we prefer to be, the Holy Spirit places us into the body as the Father desires. This should take a good deal of pressure off many in the Body of Christ. It is not our responsibility to find the right fellowship; not even the one that best meets our needs.

We can simply go where the Holy Spirit leads us; and stay there until He repositions us. Our selfish desires are a distraction, most likely inhibiting our full baptism into the body of Christ.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:23-25

It is the tragedy of our day that, as we see the Day approaching, many are choosing to abandon their baptism into the Body of Christ. Jesus' vision for His church was "the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies"; or as the KJV puts it, "fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth" (Ephesians 4:16).

Could it be that our separation and division is delaying the coming of the day of God (2Peter 3:12)? Perhaps there is more for our preparation than we have come to understand and believe.

Fire Baptism

The doctrine associated with the fourth baptism may be the most challenging of them all. So, before we go on, let's remind ourselves that the doctrine of baptisms is an elementary principle. All four of the baptisms are for the most juvenile of Christ's followers. Furthermore, each of the four baptisms is a work of God in the process of our salvation.

Lastly, and particularly in this case, we must remember that God is love; and our King – Jesus Christ – is a good king. He pronounced it so in what we may call His inaugural address.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* Luke 4:18-19

With this held firmly in our minds, we now consider John the Baptist's proclamation: Jesus came to baptize us in both the Holy Spirit and in fire.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire." Luke 3:16-17

Notice that the chaff in this passage is not a reference to individuals that will burn in hell. That is what we might prefer to think; but, it is just not right. Both the Holy Spirit Baptism and the baptism with fire are intended to accomplish God's mission and vision for the church; AND both are for His disciples!

The chaff that will burn is the chaff that is in us – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It is likened unto the dross forced out by the refining fire; that the metal might be pure and pleasing to the silversmith. This is the purpose of the fire baptism.

... just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. Ephesians 1:4-6

“Adoption as sons”, “the good pleasure of His will”, “the praise of the glory of His grace”, “accepted in the Beloved” – all predicated on our holiness and blamelessness before Him. How is this accomplished?

Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. 1Peter 4:1-2

This is the effectual work of baptism by fire: our ceasing from sin; to live for the will of God. Our suffering is an instrument of God's grace for holiness. Our loving Father both allows and authors suffering in our lives (Hebrews 12:4-6). We should not think this strange.

Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator. 1Peter 4:12-13,19

The fire baptism is common to everyone who desires to live the normal Christian life. The fiery trials are preparing us to receive (and be part of) a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:28-29

God is love; and God is a consuming fire. The fire baptism is nothing less than a baptism into God, and into His perfect love. Hallelujah!!

Conclusion

A word of encouragement: In case you did not notice, I am growing in my understanding of the doctrine of baptisms. I am more certain of some aspects than others. Being made is a process, both continual and progressive. It is truly a blessing to know that there is more of God to know and experience.

Furthermore, “knowing” is more than a mental exercise. It includes heart, mind, soul and strength. There are things we believe, that make no rational sense; and that's okay. There are things we will not fully understand until we have experienced them (e.g., a supernatural gift, a fiery trial that is good for us).

God has placed in the heart of every believer, the desire to understand, believe and experience the doctrine of baptisms. Surrender to Him, in that desire, and He will give it to you. He is working to will and do to His good pleasure, which is to give His kingdom to His children (Philippians 2:13; Luke 12:32).

Working It Out

The Son of God became the Son of Man to show what was possible for the sons of men that become sons of God. Jesus demonstrated the normal Christian life. As His disciples, we are called to (and promised) a life greater than the life most Christians are living.

As disciples, we are commissioned to make disciples. Making disciples is a process of leading others into and through the process of salvation. The four baptisms are milestones on that journey.

You cannot lead someone on a path you have not taken yourself. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit will do the necessary work, if we will simply trust and obey. Here are a few elementary steps to get you started.

1. Consider the work that God is doing to save you. What is left to be done? What part do the baptisms play in that work?
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the desire in your heart for the complete work of each baptism. Surrender to it, commit your way to the LORD, and respond to His leading.
3. As a disciple, called to make disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, share what you have learned of the doctrine of baptisms.

Recommended Reading

The following are some of my favorite books on this subject. Most can be found at your local Christian book store, or at one of the many online distributors.

The Normal Christian Birth; David Pawson

They Found the Secret; V. Raymond Edman

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Humbly Yours and Forever His,

Rob