

## Newsletter August 2012

In this newsletter we shall briefly discuss the tradition of baptism, which we analyze in much greater detail in Book II, Chapters 15.1, 15.2 and 15.3. Not unlike during the Imperial Roman church era, Christian life for many today begins with a ceremonial baptism by water and all too often ends as it began without any knowledge of ritual baptism's underlying roots and profound meaning far beyond any initiation rite into a temporal church.

As we discuss at length in Chapter 15.1, a lack of understanding of the Greek word *baptizo* is at the core of the difficulty in correctly understanding the Greek word “baptize” or *baptisma* for “baptism” as they are found in Scripture. The root word of *baptizo* is *bapto* (or *baptein*), which literally means, “to dip.” As the earliest English versions of the Bible were being translated, it was not possible to directly replace *baptizo* or *baptisma* with an existing English word, since there was no English word that consistently expressed the precise meaning in the varying contexts found in the Greek manuscripts. Any attempt to replace one word with another word that was not precise in meaning would have resulted in going from simple translation to interpretation, which would have distorted the original text. Consequently, the words that we find substituted for the Greek words in our English Bibles are what we call transliterated words. That is, the Greek word *baptizo* was anglicized or “reshaped” into the word “baptize,” and *baptisma* into “baptism.”

If we consult a Greek lexicon (i.e. Greek dictionary), we gain a better understanding of the underlying definition of the word “baptism” as it was employed in Scripture. The word *baptizo* literally means to make “fullywhelmed,” and the word “whelmed” means to submerge or to engulf, and “fullywhelmed” means to “overwhelm.” The English word “overwhelm” means to overpower or “to overcome completely in mind or feeling” (*The Random House College Dictionary*). The word “engulf” means “to swallow up as in a gulf” or to immerse completely. Here we are beginning to see the original meaning of *baptizo*, the scope and complexity of which made it impossible for the early Bible scholars to properly translate it in all the varying contexts in which it was used.

It is important to note that “water” is not automatically implied by the word “baptize” and certainly not by the Greek word *baptizo* that it represents. The key to the precise meaning of the word “baptism” is to be found in the *immediate context* in which it is used in *individual* Scripture passages. Many read the word “water” into the word “baptism” or “baptize” in the New Testament text everywhere it is found without any valid reason for doing so except that it would seem that deeply imbedded tradition requires it. Baptism *can* mean submersion in water (made fully wet), but it can also mean a submersion and complete overwhelming by something, or even *someone*, other than water.

When the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us, we are at that very moment baptized in the Spirit of Christ — in an instant, we are overwhelmed and submerged in his Spirit. We are saturated and made one with the Holy Spirit and thus with Christ as we are fully *identified* with Him through a miraculous Spiritual infusion. Our minds become immersed in the Word of God as the Holy Spirit begins his work in us. We are inwardly convicted of our sinful nature, and then we are washed of our sins by the blood of Christ and mentally regenerated by the washing of his Word (Ep.5:26). We become permanently identified with Christ for all time and eternity through a purely spiritual baptism (Mt.3:11; Mk.1:8; Lu.3:16).

Baptism in water as a ceremonial ritual predates Christianity and even predates Judaism being found in early pagan cleansing rituals. Therefore, baptism is actually a long-standing human tradition that was first adopted into Judaism and then later on by Christianity as the tradition continued forward. Moreover, we cannot say that Christ instituted ritual baptism. Jesus never baptized anyone in water, nor can we find any

declarative statement made by Him that would mandate it, or for that matter even explicitly approve of it. We find however that his disciples practiced the tradition of ritual baptism as new followers identified themselves with their group and that Jesus never made any statement that would prohibit that practice. Baptism was a practice of identification so commonplace in that day that it was not even a matter in question.

A study of baptism would not be complete if we did not discuss the tradition of ritual baptism as it was practiced by the followers of Christ as found in the New Testament (Jn.4:1,2). There are instances where the word “baptism” in Scripture *does* refer to ritual baptism in water as a physical act that *symbolizes* immersion in the Holy Spirit as administered by Christ in the new birth (Mt.3:11; cf. Book I, Chapter 5.4). Scripture attests to that ritual practice in several places that we examine in some detail in Chapter 15.2. One certain instance of ritual baptism in water took place when Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch. (Ac.8:36–39).

However, we find that many of the texts that are often used in an attempt to prove the prominence of ritual baptism in Scripture do not specifically indicate that water was involved at all. We reexamined the text concerning the event on Pentecost in some detail wherein water is never implied (Ac.2:5–40). We find that Cornelius and his household first received the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Ac.10:44); *after* which, they were baptized in water. In Acts 16:15, we read that Lydia and others of her household were said to be “baptized.” In Acts Chapter 8 verse 12, we read that people in Samaria were “baptized” as the Gospel expanded out beyond Judaea. (Ac.8:12). In these later two verses water may or may not be implied beyond spiritual immersion, but not proven, as we discuss fully in Chapter 15.2.

One place, in particular, that many say Scripture not only indicates but also commands ritual baptism by Jesus Himself is in a verse found in the text generally known as the “Great Commission.” This verse is found first in the Gospel according to Matthew that reads, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:” (Mt.28:19). However, what this verse really states in its immediate context is that the disciples are to go forth and teach all nations, immersing, overwhelming, submerging, and engulfing them in the name of Jesus. For, in Jesus “dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col.2:9). We should take note that the parallel verse of the commission found in Luke’s Gospel does not contain the word “baptism”: “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in [Jesus’] name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lu. 24:47).

We would utterly fail in this great commission if we merely go about baptizing men and women outwardly with water in some mysterious ceremony by reciting “the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” as a mantra. If we consider this expression of the Godhead as words to be recited in ritual baptism, the argument could easily begin over the exact phrase to be recited. That is, should we be baptized “in Jesus name” as is stated in Acts 2:38 or “the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” as is stated in the Great Commission? Contextually, in Ac.2:38, we are to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sin, not in water. These two texts have comparable meanings (cf. Col.2:9). We could indeed baptize men and women in water until the rivers, lakes, and oceans run dry and still see no one saved if they are not first regenerated through a supernatural immersion in the Holy Spirit.

Even among those who properly understand the traditional expression of unity in Christ that the privilege of ritual baptism represents, there are still often open, frequently warlike, controversies regarding the mode of water baptism as well as the time in a person’s life when ritual baptism should take place. This controversy is discussed in detail in Chapter 15.3. As a consequence of trying to determine the proper time in one’s life, we must also

ascertain who can be legitimately baptized at all. For instance, should young children and even babies who as yet have insufficient mental capacity to grasp the true implications of the Gospel be baptized? They are unable to profess anything.

In addition, there are three modes of baptism practiced by various churches today. They are immersion, pouring, and sprinkling. Immersion, in general, is only administered to professing adults, while pouring or sprinkling (collectively referred to as “affusion”) is most usually associated with the baptizing of infants (pedobaptism). The difficulty we encounter when attempting to verify procedural matters concerning ritual baptism is that Scripture does not spell out in specific language or through consistent examples exact details for this practice. The main reason controversies arise with regard to baptism is that most continue to incorrectly interpret the word “baptism” to always mean ritual baptism in water everywhere it is found in Scripture (as we have already pointed out).

Two passages in particular bolster the immersionist view of the practice of baptism in the early church. (Since the more common definition of the Greek word *baptizo* literally means to immerse, that definition is a sufficient basis in itself for employing immersion by many). These two Scriptural passages are the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch, which we examine in detail. Baptists and others make an application of Ro.6:3,4, wherein water baptism can be made to symbolize burial by inclining the believer under the water, and resurrection by raising them again out of the water. We must seriously question if Paul was even thinking about ritual baptism in this verse in Romans since he is obviously talking about our full *identification* with Christ in *His* death and resurrection, not ours. The word “water” is not used in this passage, nor is it in any way implied by the text. If ritual baptism is wrongly understood, this verse can incorrectly be construed to imply baptismal regeneration. We must always be very careful not to fall back into the trap of that particular Romanist error.

Church or denominational requirements for baptism ultimately undermines the ritual of baptism altogether because it denigrates it into an initiation rite into a local church or denomination while at the same time declaring it to be mandatory for all believers. The temporal church often denies fellowship with other believers unless the other believer is baptized into their particular church or denomination following their own set of rules as to mode and procedure. Only then can the church be sure of the believer’s loyalty — not to Christ, but to the church’s own particular governance and dictates. Considering the growing renunciation of the true faith by many of our churches today, that requirement can soon force the believer to make a choice between the absolute dictates of a local church (or denomination) and his direct allegiance to Christ that must be held inviolable.

Ritual baptism, as it is practiced today, has become far too common and cheap, inasmuch as churches have consistently used this ritual to swell their membership roles. As many are enticed to join churches, often for all the wrong reasons, any allegiance to Christ that is expressed in the process of ritual baptism is being treated as window dressing to the ritual membership initiation. If the object is to join a church only for various social benefits it affords, ritual baptism becomes but a trivial means to that end, and it is often not taken seriously.

Finally, we must understand that ritual baptism does not change anything about the spiritual relationship that we already have with Christ in the spiritual birth from above. Properly understood and administered, it merely serves to openly attest to that relationship before God and affirm it before men that others may recognize it outwardly. That spiritual relationship exists in fact within the New Birth with or without the ritual of baptism (or church membership) being appended to it. *Arthur J. Smith August 2012*