

Baptism: The How

(by Bob Pulliam)

You'll find several answers in the religious world concerning how one is to be baptized. Some will tell you to be sprinkled by a priest, while others tell you it must be immersion. Then there are those who say water has nothing to do with the baptism commanded for salvation. They tell us it refers to Holy Ghost baptism. So which is it? How was one baptized in the days of the apostles?

Baptism of the Holy Ghost...

Perhaps people were baptized with the Holy Ghost (Spirit) for salvation. Let's see what the scriptures have to say. First let's see what this Holy Spirit baptism was.

When John spoke of the coming Messiah, he told the people that He would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt 3:11). The promise was not to baptize all of the people with the Holy Spirit, because then they would all be baptized with fire also. If you know what the baptism of fire is, you know you don't want it. It is a reference to eternal punishment (Mt 3:12). So not all would receive either of the baptisms John spoke of. Who would receive it?

In Acts 1:5, Jesus made a statement that hailed to the original statement of John we looked at above. He told some that they would receive the baptism of the "Holy Spirit not many days hence." To whom was He speaking? Reading the first four verses will tell you. It was the eleven apostles (remember that Judas had already hanged himself). In all of scripture, the apostles are the only ones who are ever promised the *baptism* of the Holy Spirit. Many will receive gifts of the Spirit (tongues, prophecy, healing, etc...); but to be overwhelmed by the spirit spontaneously was only promised to the apostles. When it occurs in Acts 2, who received it? Only the apostles. They are the ones under consideration (Acts 1:26) as the chapter begins. They are the only ones to stand up and defend themselves against the charge of being drunk (Acts 2:14).

Later in that chapter, Peter commanded the multitude to be baptized. Did he mean Holy Spirit baptism? How do you obey a command to be baptized of the Holy Spirit? Do you pull a chain somewhere and He falls on you? It cannot be obeyed by man. Peter's command could not have been to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. What was it then? It's the same as the example of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:36-39. "...went down into the water". It's the same as what Peter commanded Cornelius in Acts 10:47. "Can anyone forbid water...?" What did Peter say about baptism in I Peter 3:20f? Is it not in water?

The only recorded case of Holy Spirit baptism, other than Acts 2, is found in Acts 10. When Peter later described that event, he said, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning." (Acts 11:15) Now why did Peter look all the way back to Pentecost for a parallel to what had just happened? If people had just received the baptism of the Holy Spirit last Sunday, that fresh memory would be the logical reference point. Why go all the way back, unless the baptism of the Holy Spirit had not been repeated since the beginning?

Did the household of Cornelius receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be saved? There is nothing in the text to even imply such. In fact, when you read Acts ten and eleven, you get the clear understanding that this incident was to make the Jews understand that the

gentiles could be saved without circumcision. This is even clearer when one sees the recollection of these events as retold by Peter in Acts 15:7-11.

Others who received the Holy Spirit did so by the apostles laying their hands on them (Acts 8:14- 18). Rather than a spontaneous outpouring (baptism), it was a formal bestowal. Now this text verifies what we have already learned to this point. Look at the people of Samaria in Acts 8. They have already been baptized, but they have not yet received the Holy Spirit (v16). Doesn't sound like they were baptized with the Holy Spirit does it?

What About Sprinkling and Pouring?...

Let's start by looking at the definition of our word. If you look *baptize* up in the dictionary you will find that it means to sprinkle, pour, or immerse. That would seem to settle the matter. But the dictionary is not a valid guide to the use of words in the first century when the New Testament was written. The dictionary only tells us how words are used today. When we investigate the words used by Jesus and the apostles, we find that it only meant one thing: to immerse. It was used by Greek speaking people for dipping a vessel into another, or dying a garment by immersing it.

But you don't have to look up the Greek word to know that this is so. We can see what the people of the first century were doing by reading the New Testament. It tells us that John was baptizing in Aenon because there was much water there (Jn 3:23). You find baptism involving the acts of going down into the water, and coming up out of the water (Acts 8:38f; Mt 3:16). Why go to that trouble if you only need a few drop on the head? Baptism is called a burial, and "rising to walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3f; Col 2:12). Think of the imagery as Paul is told to "wash away" his sins by baptism (Acts 22:16). If a few drops on the head is the way you wash... well we won't go there. Needless to say, most of us get all wet when we wash.

How could anyone doubt that baptism was an immersion in water? The Bible is so clear on the subject. Why would it be any other way?... Alas, there are people who do not allow the Bible to guide them in such matters.