

The “One Baptism” according to Ephesians



A brief study by Peter McArthur

(Ephesians 4:4-6) **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”**

Our most common understanding of "baptism" is that involving water. Others also see a "baptism in the Spirit" as a valid spiritual experience; some might even say "a necessity".

Let's declare right from the beginning that even when we talk about "water baptism" we should not infer that there is some sort of "regeneration" or magic of salvation associated with it. Some denominations like the Catholic Church see water baptism as an instrument whereby a person (usually a baby) becomes spiritually regenerated, and thereby acceptable to God. This is to make baptism a doorway into heaven - which of course is absolutely incorrect.

It is repentance toward God, and faith in Jesus Christ, that is our way to eternal life, not a baptismal rite and ceremony.

"For you are all God's sons by faith in Christ Jesus". Gal. 3: 26

In Ephesians chapter 4 verse 5, when Paul refers to "one baptism" what "baptism" is he referring to: water baptism, spirit baptism, baptism in fire, etc?

A close look in true Berean style will unpack the fundamental meaning of the word "baptism" and begin to clear the muddy waters. To help grasp what "baptism" actually means, let's look at both the Biblical use and the non-Biblical use of this word as found in Scripture and general Greek literature. The family of words associated with "baptism" will prove enlightening.

Bapto (a verb meaning "to dip") commonly associated with water and consisting of the process of immersion, submersion and emergence, and is used in Scripture the following way:

- it is associated with the meaning of both John's baptism and "Christian" baptism
- of the overwhelming afflictions and judgments to which the Lord voluntarily submitted on the Cross
- of the sufferings Jesus' followers would experience not of a vicarious character, but in fellowship with the sufferings of their Lord.

Baptizo (a verb meaning "to baptise") this word is primarily a form of *bapto*, "to dip," and was used among the Greeks in classical literature to signify:

- the dyeing of a garment by immersion
- the drawing of water out by the dipping of one vessel into another
- of the drawing of wine out by dipping the cup into a bowl
- used metaphorically, of being overwhelmed with questions
- to be overwhelmed with financial debt
- to be overtaken by some kind of tragedy or death.

Let's take a further look at how these words were used in ordinary Greek literature, for that will form a foundation for understanding just what "baptism" in Scripture actually stands for.

In the Greek classic literature of Alcibiades ("The Epigram on the Comic Poet Eupolis") we find this phrase illustrating the use of the verb *bapto*:

"You **dipped** (*bapto*) me in plays;
but I, in waves of the sea, baptising,
will destroy you with streams more bitter."

The meaning is actually quite straight forward; the author is saying "*you made a fool of me but I will in turn kill you by drowning you in streams of bitterness.*"

In this example we see how he uses various words associated with water ("dipped", "waves of the sea" and "streams") as a kind of pun. As well we can see that "dipping" (*bapto*) here is associated with a baptism resulting in death, which is part of its root meaning.

Similarly in Homer's "Odyssey" *bapto* is applied to mean a dipping of something into an element, such as cold water. In other classical Greek writings the word *baptizo* means a complete or great tragedy. Some instances show the calamity involved water, while others show it refers to destruction, suicide, debt and even drunkenness. When we take all these considerations together it's easy to see that "baptism" is concerned with some form of decay, destruction, overthrow, etc.

It clearly highlights the fact that "baptism" had a very wide range of meaning, and wasn't always connected to "water" at all.

"Our ship, having been **baptised** (i.e. sunk) in the Adriatic sea,
caused our number of men, about 600, to swim through the whole

night." [*The Life of Josephus" section 3*]

"And many struggling against the strong swell toward the open sea, the billows rising high above us, **baptised** (i.e. drowned) them all." [*War of the Jews" by Josephus, book 3, chapter 9:3*]

"And he was **loaded** (*baptizo*) with a debt of five million drachmas" [*Plutarch's Lives" volume 4*]

"Stretching out his right hand, unseen by no one, he **baptised** the sword into his neck" [*War of the Jews" by Josephus, book 2, chapter 18*]

"These men, besides the seditions they raised, were the cause of the whole city's **destruction** (i.e. baptism)." [*War of the Jews" by Josephus, book 4, chapter 3:3*]

"I beseech you, before you are fully **baptised** by drunkenness, to return to soberness". [*Saint Chrysostom's plea to Theodorus*]

"The soldiers filled the marshes with blood and the lake with dead bodies, so that even now many bows, helmets and pieces of breastplates, together with swords, can be found **baptised** in the pools of the lake". [*The Life of Sylla" by Plutarch, chapter 21*]

All the above examples show the clear association of the object being baptised and the element in which it is baptised. This is the point of our study; to see the correlation between the **Baptiser**, the **Baptised**, the **Element** used, and the **Result** of that baptism.

In the cases we've just seen, the point is that someone (or group) did the baptising; someone underwent a baptism; there was some form of baptismal element involved, and there was a completely perfect result.

So when we talk of "baptism" we're not simply talking about a partial ceremony, but everything linked to it. Now let's look at the same idea in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX) where it says:

And upon whatsoever any of them, when they are dead, does fall, it shall be unclean; whether it be any vessel of wood, or raiment, or skin, or sack, whatsoever vessel it be, wherein any work is done, it must be **dipped into water**, and it shall be unclean until the evening, so it shall be cleansed.

Lev. 11:32

Likewise in Leviticus:

"And he shall **dip** (*bapto*) the living bird, along with the cedar wood and hyssop, into the blood of the bird that was slain over running water". Lev. 14:6

Here we have a picture of a redeemer who reclaims a leper through death, blood and water. In Biblical typology all this is symbolic of Jesus Christ, who paid the price for the "leprous sinner" who could not cleanse himself but required an innocent to die for him.

In these, as well as the many other instances found throughout both the OT and NT, we find someone doing the baptising, someone undergoing it in a selected and appropriate element, and some kind of long-lasting consequence as the result.

In Biblical Typology, when discerning the meaning of a "type" we need to keep in mind the four aspects already mentioned on the previous page, in relation to our subject :

- the **baptiser**
- the **baptised**
- the **element** used
- and the lasting **result**

It's necessary to grasp the intimate link between the **object or person** baptised, and the **element** in which it is baptised.

In the aforementioned examples we can readily see that the person baptised and the element associated with it brings about "death" or "destruction". The outcome of the association of the Baptiser with the Element, makes the two share a common identity and purpose. Where they were once separate, they now come to be entwined in a common purpose, through the action of the baptism.

The imagery of typology ensures that the symbolism of one conveys the importance of the symbolism of the other.

We see this in the baptism performed by John the Baptiser. His baptism was unusual because he performed the baptism on others. According to Jewish law each individual had to perform their own water baptism of repentance. Hence the literal Greek meaning of "*get yourself baptised*" as often found in the New Testament.

Also the element John used, the River Jordan, was of great symbolic importance. John baptised in the very region that served as the entry point of the Tribes as they first came to the Promised Land. It was in this very locality that Joshua erected the twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Joshua 4: 1-9).

So John's baptism was a kind of re-run in which Israel was to symbolically re-enter the Promises of God. It was a kind of wake-up call to Israel. A call to repentance, so that the Kingdom could be established on earth with its focus being the Promised Land.

The first crossing of the Jordan signified the birth of a nation in a very special way; John's baptism re-played this as a type of new-birth, a national awakening of their corporate soul. It required Israel to die-to-self (the typological meaning of "Jordan") and to live for Another.

If Israel had heeded John's call en masse, then the link between Baptiser, the Baptised ones, and the Element used (the Jordan) would've probably resulted in a corporate death-to-self, with the result being the Kingdom established in Israel.

It was an extremely powerful symbol with great consequences. True, it did involve water, although the tribes did once more cross a watery way on *dry* ground (Exo. 14: 22). There of course was an earlier similar powerful baptism which didn't involve entering INTO the water - it was the famous "dry" baptism of the Exodus.

When Moses led Israel through the Red Sea to freedom it was on dry ground (Exo. 14: 21 and 29), for the water had banked up on both sides. When this episode is recounted in the New Testament note how Paul writes of this "baptism" :

"...all passed through the sea, all were **baptised INTO Moses** in the cloud and in the sea..." 1 Cor. 10: 1-2

See what he says - they were baptised into a NAME. We also see this emphasised in the Gospels :

"...baptising them (lit.) **INTO THE NAME** of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....: Matt. 28: 18-20

We are beginning to see that baptism INTO something is vital, and that in need not involve water at all. What is important is that a Baptiser overwhelms the one needing baptism, that an appropriate symbolic element is present, and that the results of the baptism are immediate and effective, resulting in a death-to-self of some sort.

It is in this that the Baptiser and the Baptised are intimately linked and identified with one another with lasting consequences. What an astonishing thought!

When Paul says there is "*one baptism*" (Eph. 4: 5) he is NOT referring to "Christian water baptism" at all. What he is saying is that when we truly put our faith INTO the name of Jesus Christ, we are overwhelmed by a kind of death, a death-to-self. I am not saying that water baptism is unimportant, just saying that in context of Ephesians 4:5 there is a marked difference of understanding.

This immediate imputation is an act of Grace from God, and not something we do. Rather it is done to us by the Baptiser. It results in the New Birth as a lasting (everlasting) consequence. In the context of the Epistle to the Ephesians this is the ONE and only baptism Paul has in mind here.

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