

The One Baptism (Ephesians 4:5) – Its Element

There are four baptisms (immersions) noted in the New Testament, each distinguished from the other by the element into which the subject is immersed. Three of these are mentioned by John the Immerser in Matthew 3:11. “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” The other is mentioned in Matthew 20:22-23 where Jesus is talking about being immersed in suffering.

Considering that Ephesians 4:5 says there is “one baptism” but the verses cited in the previous paragraph speak of four immersions, is it possible that there is a contradiction in God’s Word? Looking at the purpose of each of the elements, we can confidently conclude that there is no contradiction here or anywhere else in the Bible for that matter.

Some believe that the immersion in fire is found in Acts 2:3. “And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.” Since baptism is immersion, we would be hard pressed to correctly define this event as immersion in fire. First of all, the cloven tongues were “like as of fire” rather than literal fire. Secondly, these images sat on the heads of the apostles instead of engulfing or immersing them. There is an immersion in fire referenced in other New Testament verses. Revelation 20:14-15 depicts the scene at the Day of Judgment in saying, “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” Being covered up by the lake of fire, those who are condemned to hell are without question those who will be immersed in fire. Since not all will be immersed in this fire (thankfully), we must conclude that it is not the immersion of which Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:5.

While some may be immersed in suffering for the cause of Christ, not all are. Also, immersion in suffering would be a relative term as what may seem to be a plunging into suffering to some may not be to others.

Now we come to the most misunderstood and most misused of the immersions, that of immersion in the Holy Spirit. Many today advocate that immersion in the Holy Spirit works in conjunction with immersion in water and that while the former is necessary to salvation, the latter is not. Jesus told the apostles in Acts 1:5, “For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” The fulfillment of that prophecy occurred on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. Having been immersed in the Holy Spirit, the apostles flawlessly preached the Gospel in languages which they had hitherto not studied (Acts 2:6-8). This goes hand in hand with what Jesus had earlier said would happen to the apostles (John 15:26; 16:13). This immersion was a promise, and a limited promise at that, limited to the apostles.

Having ruled out three elements that would qualify these immersions as the one immersion of Ephesians 4:5, we are left with just one, the immersion in water. Two of these are found in the New Testament, the one administered by John and the one of which we read in Mark 16:15; Acts 2:38, et al. One of the facts that clearly shows immersion in water to be the one immersion of Ephesians 4:5 is that we find examples of sinners being immersed into this element from Acts 2 when the Gospel began to be preached and onward throughout the New Testament. For instance, in Acts 8:27-40 we read of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. Verse 36 says, “And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” Verse 38 reads, “And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” If there was but one immersion as per Ephesians 4:5 and Philip, by the authority of God, immersed the eunuch in water, we must conclude that water is the authorized element of the one immersion. Another example is in Acts 10 where we read of the conversion of Cornelius and his household. Verse 47 records Peter asking, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” What was the element into which these individuals were immersed? Some would argue that they had first been immersed in the Holy Spirit, although the context does not support this. In verse 48 we’re told that Peter commanded these men and women to be immersed and, contextually,

going back to the previous verse, we see that his command was to immerse them in water. To further distinguish the one immersion in water, we note that there is a distinction between John's immersion and the immersion of which we read in Acts 2 and following (see Acts 19:1-7). Thus we can confidently conclude that the one immersion of Ephesians 4:5 is that which is in water and which is authorized by Christ in His church.

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