



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.1 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Meaning of the Word “Baptize”

The word “baptize” (βαπτίζω, *baptizō*) is a Greek word that is used in various ways in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, the word is used with reference to a Jewish custom or tradition that Jesus’ disciples were not observing. We read: **“Now when they (the Pharisees) saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches”** (Mark 7:2-4). The Greek words “baptize” and “baptism” are used for the words that are underlined in the above verses. Thus, in these verses “baptizing” and “baptism” refer to a certain kind of ceremonial washing that had become a tradition among the Jews. They applied water in some way to make their hands ceremonially clean, and they also applied water in some way to make their utensils clean.

Since there are many Baptists who claim that the word “baptize” means to immerse or to put something or someone totally under water for a time, it is important to realize that in Mark 7 the word does not mean “immerse”. Surely the Jews did not submerge themselves in water every time they came from the marketplace, nor would they have immersed their couches to make them ceremonially clean.

A similar usage of the word “baptize” is found in Luke 11:38, where a Pharisee invited Jesus to dine at wit him. We read: **“When the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He (Jesus) had not first washed before dinner.”** The underlined word is the word “baptize” in Greek. Here again the word refers to a traditional Jewish cleansing ceremony. The Pharisee would not have expected Jesus to submerge himself before dinner. The same Jewish tradition is mentioned in Hebrews 9:10 where there is reference to **“various washings”** or “baptisms”.

Jesus used the word “baptism” to refer to the persecution and death that He and His disciples would undergo. When James and John requested seats of honor at Jesus’ right hand and left hand, Jesus asked them: **“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”** (Mark 10:38). When they said they were able, Jesus responded: **“You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized”** (Mark 10:39). Jesus was speaking of His own coming suffering and death when He said: **“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!”** (Luke 12:50). Thus, just as water may be poured out in a torrent on a person, so persecution and pain and even death will be poured out on Jesus and those who follow Him. In a similar way today, some people speak of a “baptism of fire”.

John the Baptist foretold a time when Jesus would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit. That is, He would pour the Holy Spirit on them by means of a number of supernatural events. He said: **“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”** (Matthew 3:11). Shortly before His ascension to heaven Jesus repeated John’s prophecy, saying to His disciples: **“John truly baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”** (Acts 1:5). Ten days later this word was fulfilled. **“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.**

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues (languages), as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

The words “baptize” and “baptism” are used in the New Testament most frequently, however, for the water baptisms administered by John the Baptist and his disciples and by Jesus’ disciples during Jesus’ ministry among them. These words are used as well as for the baptisms administered by Christians in response to Jesus’ command: **“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” (Matthew 28:19-20).**

There is no doubt that the baptisms of John the Baptist and Jesus were water baptisms. We read: **“Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him (John the Baptist) and were baptized by him in the Jordan” (Matthew 3:5-6).** In fact, John said that it was God who sent him **“to baptize with water” (John 1:33).** John the Baptist used the Jordan River as his source of water for his baptisms. It is also reported: **“John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23).**

Jesus referred to water also when He described baptism as being **“born of water and the Spirit”¹ (John 3:5).** The early Christians used water for their baptisms. The evangelist Philip was sitting in a chariot with the Ethiopian treasurer, explaining the Gospel of Christ to him. The book of Acts reports: **“Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ ... And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38).**

The apostle Paul referred to baptism as a washing. He wrote to the Ephesians: **“Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:25-26).** In his letter to Titus he referred to baptism as **“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6).**

We have seen that baptism or baptizing may refer to various methods of applying water to wash something ceremonially. It can also refer to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost or the blood of persecution and martyrdom. Based on how the Bible uses the word, we must disagree with those who insist that the only proper way to baptize is by immersion, that is, by submerging the whole body of the person under water. The water may be applied in various ways, such as total immersion, partial immersion, pouring, sprinkling, washing, or even daubing. The usual method followed in American Lutheran congregations is the pouring of water on the head of the person being baptized three times while speaking Jesus’ words of institution **“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).** But we do not contend that this method is the only proper method. It is only one of many possible proper methods.

Sprinkling is mentioned in Exodus 24:8 and Ezekiel 36:25 in Old Testament ceremonies, as well as in Hebrews 12:24. Total immersion is ruled out of consideration in the Jewish ceremonies referred to in Mark 7:1-8 because it would not be practical to submerge the items being washed. When the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they were not immersed with the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit was poured out on them (Acts 1:5; 2:17; 10:45). In Romans 6:4 the apostle Paul speaks of baptism as a burying and a rising; in this case immersion could present a good picture.

¹ In the Greek (as in the English) there is only one preposition (“of”). This shows that Jesus was speaking of one birth: that of both water and the Spirit.

The water used in baptism does not have to be of a certain quality. Naturally, one would try to use clean water rather than dirty water, but no test is needed to determine a certain level of purity. A very early manual used in the first centuries of the Christian era makes this suggestion: "Baptize...in living water. And if you do not have living water, baptize into other water; if you do not have cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water thrice upon the head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (*Didache*, VII, 1-3, quoted in Schaff: *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, pp. 247-252). The climate of a country may help to determine which method of applying the water is used.

Questions

1. Why can we be sure that the word *baptizō* does not mean "immerse"?
2. What kind of baptism was Jesus talking about when James and John wanted special places in His kingdom?
3. What kind of baptism was Jesus talking about when He spoke about the disciples being baptized with the Holy Spirit?
4. In what way did the Holy Spirit come on the disciples on the day of Pentecost?
5. How do we know that the baptisms Jesus commanded us to do refer to water baptisms?
6. When did Jesus give His disciples the authority to baptize?
7. How many persons were baptized on the day of Pentecost?
8. What are some of the various ways by which the water of baptism may be applied?
9. What suggestions are made by the early Christian manual called *Didache*?
10. What method of baptism is generally used in your locale?
11. How would you answer those who insist on immersion or some other method as being the only correct way of baptizing?