

Word Study BAPTIZE

(Ian S. Davidson, Motherwell)

Baptize" is a transliteration of the Greek verb *baptizo*, which is "primarily a frequentative form of *bapto*, to dip..." (Vine) Interestingly, Vine also says that baptism consists of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence. To baptize, therefore, is to dip, to plunge, to immerse, to sink and to overwhelm. To pour and to sprinkle are not equivalent actions. In fact, there are other Greek words for these actions – *ballo* and *rhantizo*.

HOW TO ESTABLISH THE EXACT MEANING

Alexander Campbell has written: "The primary means by which the meaning of the word is ascertained are the following:

- 1) The ancient lexicons and dictionaries;
- 2) The ancient and modern translations of the New Testament;
- 3) The ancient customs of the Church;
- 4) The place and circumstances of baptizing, as mentioned in the New Testament; and
- 5) The allusions to this ordinance and the expositions of it in the apostolic epistles.

His studies reveal:

- 1) All the ancient lexicons and dictionaries affirm that the action for baptism is immersion and not sprinkling or pouring.
- 2) The versions translate baptism and its derivatives as immersion and on no occasion ever translate them by sprinkling or pouring, or any word equivalent to these terms. "Now, if an English reader will try *sprinkling* or *pouring* in those places where he finds the word *baptism*, he will soon discover that neither of these words can possibly represent it... For instance, we are told, that all Judea and Jerusalem went out to John and were *baptized* of him in the Jordan. Sprinkled them *in* the Jordan! Poured them *in* the Jordan! Immersed them *in* the Jordan! Can any one doubt which of these truly represents the original in such passages? I may sprinkle or pour water upon a person; but to sprinkle or pour them into water is impossible. It is not said he baptized water upon them, but he baptized them *in* water, in the river".
- 3) The ancient Church, it is admitted on all hands, practised immersion.
- 4) The places where baptism was anciently administered, being rivers, pools, baths and places of much water, show that it was not sprinkling or pouring. They went down *into* the water and came up *out* of it, etc.
- 5) Baptism is also alluded to and explained under the figure of a burial and resurrection, as relating to death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, etc. (Romans chapter 6; Colossians chapter 2)

No Greek scholar worth his weight in salt could deny any of the above. Certainly, the famous Presbyterian scholar, Professor William Barclay of Glasgow University, could not. For example, he writes: "Commonly, baptism was by total immersion and that practice lent itself to a symbolism to which sprinkling does not so readily lend itself. When a man descended into the water and the water closed over his head, it was like being buried. When he emerged from the water, it was like rising from the grave.

Baptism was symbolically like dying and rising again. The man died to one kind of life and rose to another; he died to the old life of sin and rose to the new life of grace." I addressed a group of ladies the other day on this very subject. I pointed out to them that I had taken many funerals in my time and, usually, some soil was sprinkled over the coffin as I spoke the words: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." Imagine our reaction if we returned to the grave a week later and it was still lying open. Imagine our reaction too if the gravediggers said in response to our complaints: "The deceased is buried. After all, earth has been sprinkled on his coffin and, to us, this constitutes a burial."

BATH OF REGENERATION

The apostle Paul referred to baptism as a "bath of regeneration". (Titus 3:5) The Authorised Version translates it as the "washing" of regeneration, but the Greek word is *loutron*, which is the word for a bath or a laver. Who would think that sprinkling water on their forehead constitutes a bath? Interestingly, the word *loutron* is found in but one other passage of Scripture – Ephesians 5:26. We read: "**...that He might sanctify and cleanse it [the Church] with the washing (*loutron*) of water by the word.**" I believe that Paul here is referring to actual water and thus to Christian baptism. His words tie in with Jesus' statement to Nicodemus: "**Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.**" (John 3:5b). The "bath of regeneration" is the last act of regeneration, which completes the whole, and is therefore used to denote the new birth. "Being *born of water*, in the Saviour's style, and the *bath of regeneration*, in the Apostle's style, in the judgement of all writers and critics of eminence, refer to one and the same act – viz.: Christian baptism." (Campbell)

ORIGIN OF SPRINKLING

When was sprinkling first introduced as a substitute for baptism? Eusebius, the great church historian, writes about one Novatus. "Novatus, being relieved thereof by the exorcists, fell into a grievous distemper; and it being supposed that he would die immediately, he received baptism, being besprinkled with water: on the bed whereon he lay, (if that can be termed baptism). Neither when he had escaped that sickness, did he afterwards receive the other things which the canon of the church enjoined should be received: nor was he sealed by the Bishop's imposition of hands: which, if he never received, how did he receive the Holy Ghost?" This incident in Novatus' bed happened not earlier than A.D. 251, and probably 253. Eighty years later a decree was issued, called "the twelfth canon of the Council of Neocaesarea", against such pourings. So in the history of Christianity, the whole world, Eastern and Western Christendom, with the exception of a few sick and dying persons, practised immersion during the long space of thirteen hundred years. Thereafter, sprinkling or pouring came into use by slow degrees, and only in some of the more western parts of the western Latin Church. (Books have been written in the subject and they make fascinating reading)

Satan is into confusion in a big way. He likes to take words and destroy their original meaning. For example, we can think of priest, minister, pastor, bishop, church, etc. Baptize is no exception. To many, the word is now synonymous with *christen* – a word that literally means to make Christian. To sprinkle and to pour are no substitutes for to baptize. To baptize is to immerse a believer in water unto his or her remission of sins. The action identifies the believer in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6: 3, 4) It is simple. What Christ did for us, we must do for Him. He died; we must die. He was buried; we must be buried. He rose from the dead; we must rise from the dead - to newness of life in Him.