

6. One Baptism

The phrase “one baptism” seems to have been a debatable and divisive one over the years, which is somewhat bizarre, seeing that its use is in a section of scripture urging unity! Part of the problem lies in the fact that there are several types of baptism mentioned in the Bible (*see Endnote¹*), which raises the question as to which baptism Paul is referring. The phrase has been taken up by cessationists as a ‘proof-text’ against the baptism of the Holy Spirit for today, their argument being that as Paul writes of there being just one baptism, it must be water baptism that is in view, and therefore all other baptisms are no longer valid - an argument which I do not believe is sustainable in light of other scriptures referring to baptism in the Holy Spirit (*see Acts 2:39 and Endnote²*). I do however, believe it is water baptism that Paul is writing about, because it fits with the context, and with other mentions of water baptism by Paul in his writings.

In trying to find the true meaning of a text, we must always compare scripture with scripture, seek out similar passages, and attempt to understand the full testimony of the Bible on the matter. Considering that the context of one baptism is unity, it is relevant to ask the questions as to whether water baptism was ever a cause of disunity, and whether there are aspects of water baptism which are unifying, and are such matters mentioned in the New Testament? There is indeed mention in both respects, and we shall see that with particular reference to 2 portions of scripture.

1Cor. 1-4: Water Baptism a Divisive Matter?

1 Corinthians finds Paul pleading with the brethren at Corinth to be, “perfectly joined together in the same mind and same judgment” (1Cor. 1:10). They were quarrelling with one another, and Paul felt it necessary to rebuke them for it. At the heart of the quarrels was a tendency to follow men, and to brag about it, Paul mentions himself along with Apollos and Cephas as those who were particularly named in this respect (1Cor. 1:12; 3:4). It seems there were some members of the church of Corinth who were taking pride in having received input in their lives from a particular minister, and claiming superiority over one another because of it. The result was sectarianism, one saying, “I am of Paul” while others claimed allegiance to Apollos or Cephas, or to Christ (*see*

¹Other uses of baptism:

- Mt. 21:25; Lk. 3:3 - John’s baptism; a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.
- Mt. 3:13-16 - The baptism of Jesus (to fulfil righteousness).
- Lk. 12:50 - The crucifixion, “I have a baptism to be baptized with . . .”
- Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16 - John foretells that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
- Mk. 10:38,39 - Sufferings of Jesus and disciples.
- Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 2:39 - The Baptism of the Holy Spirit (note 2:39 - it is God’s promise for all believers).
- 1Cor. 10:1,2 - Israel baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.
- 1Cor. 12:13 - By one Spirit baptized into one body.
- 1Pet. 3:20,21 - Noah and the ark given as representative of baptism.

*Endnote*²). Paul considers such behaviour spiritually immature and carnal, and he saw that it caused envy, strife and division (1Cor. 3:1-4). In this atmosphere of ‘oneupmanship’ water baptism seems to have played a part, and Paul indicates that there were arguments over whose baptism was better depending on who had conducted it. Paul noted that he had personally baptised only a few, and he thanked God for it, because he did not want anyone making gain by use of his name in baptism (1Cor. 1:14-16).

Paul’s response to these quarrels and divisions was to point out the centrality of the message of the cross, and God’s choice of foolish things to confound the wise, so that in all things the Lord, not man, is glorified (1Cor. 1:29-31). Yes, God calls men to minister the spiritual truths of the kingdom of God, but everyone’s gifting for ministry is given by God (1Cor. 3:5), any success in ministry is because of God (1Cor. 3:7), and therefore no one has anything to boast about before God or men (1Cor. 3:21; 4:7; cf. 1Cor. 15:10). In all this Paul is pointing out very clearly that Christian life is not a matter of following men, but of following the God who had called, gifted and sent. Paul in fact has tough warnings for those who carry out ministry that is not built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, every minister will be judged for his work, and that which is wood, hay and stubble will be burnt up (1Cor. 3:12-15). Paul warns that any who defile the temple of God will be destroyed by God, in context this is a warning to any who conduct ministry that glorifies self, and promotes and glorifies a ministry above God who is the giver and enabler of ministry (1Cor. 3:17).

It may be that such things were in Paul’s mind when he included one baptism in his list of uniting attributes. Perhaps thinking of the quarrels in Corinth over baptism, and seeing believers divided over their allegiance to certain men by whom they had been baptized, he felt compelled to remind that water baptism is not into various individuals but into one Lord and Saviour, Jesus.

Rom. 6: Uniting Aspects of Water Baptism

In 1 Corinthians chapters 1 to 4 we find Paul having to deal with divisive elements in the church, baptism having been a part of that. In Ephesians with the use of the phrase one baptism, Paul is highlighting the uniting aspects of baptism, and we now turn to Romans chapter 6 to examine these.

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death . . . For if we have been united in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection. (Rom. 6:3-5)

Here Paul uses the illustration of water baptism to explain the believer’s spiritual death and resurrection. He uses the 3rd person plurals (“us,” “we”) in describing what ought to be common

² See Jn. 4:1,2; 1Cor. 15:6 - At the time of writing 1 Corinthians some were still alive who had known Jesus during His time on earth, it is easy to understand how they could use that to claim superiority. It is very possible that some who had been baptized in the presence of Jesus were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and also made that a matter of boasting.

experiences for all who have received Jesus as their Saviour. Water baptism gives a very clear picture of true conversion and the subsequent new life of the believer: going under the water illustrates the death of the old life; the lifting up and out of the water illustrates resurrection from death, and symbolises the baptismal candidate's commitment to live a new life as a disciple of Jesus. There are certain relevant things to note from this passage:

- We were “baptized into Christ Jesus,” emphasising for us that baptism is not into a particular man's ministry, nor into a church denomination. It is into the Lord, Jesus the Messiah. Baptism is undertaken in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), it should never exalt the individual or organisation who perform the baptism. The use of baptism to promote or endorse a ministry is a gross mis-use of the baptismal rite, and turns it into a carnal act. Philip is a good example for us, with no formal ceremony, and on a simple confession of faith in Jesus, he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in the nearest water and went on his way, leaving the Ethiopian rejoicing in his new-found salvation.
- It is a baptism into “His death,” we do not always get the violent implications of death contained in the baptismal words in the original Greek, but “baptize” had usages outside of our present use of it in water baptism. Leon Morris gives some helpful commentary on Romans 6:3:

. . . to “baptize” evoked associations of violence. It was used for example, of being drowned, or of ships being sunk, Josephus used it metaphorically of crowds who flooded into Jerusalem and “wrecked the city.” It is quite in keeping with this that Jesus referred to His death as a baptism (Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50). When it is applied to Christian initiation we ought not to think in terms of gentleness and inspiration; it means death, death to a whole way of life. It is this that is Paul's point here. Christians are people who have died, and their baptism emphasizes that death. (*Leon Morris; The Epistle to the Romans; Eerdmans, 1994*).
- “We have been united together in the likeness of His death,” here the thought of unity is highlighted, because Jesus' disciples have a shared experience of death. The death is not a physical death, it is spiritual, and relates to the old life of sin. In verses 6 and 7 Paul states that, “our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.” This is the shared experience of all who have been born-again, there must be a death of the old life of sin, along with a determination to keep the old man buried, and to remain dead to sin.
- Paul uses several phrases to describe the new life illustrated by rising out of the baptismal water: He talks of “newness of life” (v.4); “the likeness of His resurrection” (v.5); “alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.11; cf. v.8); “alive from the dead” (v.13); “set free from sin” (v.18). Again, these are shared experiences of all who have truly received Jesus as Lord and Saviour,

the whole outlook on life is changed. No longer living under the domination of sin, the disciple is called to be like Jesus in living a righteous and holy life before God. No longer a slave of sin, but a slave of righteousness and of God, the exhortation is given to present ourselves to God, and to live righteous lives that bring forth the fruit of holiness (vv. 13; 22).

Death and Resurrection

Romans 6 gives the clearest and most detailed explanation of the symbolism of water baptism. It illustrates death and resurrection, two shared and unifying aspects of Christian life which believers have in common. Baptism is into Christ Jesus, not into a ministry or church denomination, again it is unifying because no matter who carried out the baptism, the focus is not to be on any human agency, but on Jesus who died and rose again, and on the new life He gives to those who accept Him as their Saviour. Water baptism represents integration into that new life which is to be lived in union with the Lord and with His people (who are His body). The new life is characterised by death of the old life of sin, and newness of life in righteousness and holiness. Those who are truly in Christ Jesus, and have given testimony to that in water baptism, share a common desire to present themselves to God, to live as those who are alive from the dead, and to serve God as instruments of His righteousness (Rom. 6:13).

Paul's mention of one baptism in relation to unity is a reminder of the unifying aspects of water baptism. A reminder that water baptism is not to be used by men to exalt their own ministries, nor for individual boasting, both of which become a cause of division; it is a reminder that Christ Jesus is at the focal point of baptism. Those who undergo baptism in the right Biblical way do so as an expression of unity with Christ in death and resurrection. In this way we should understand Paul's use of one baptism, for there is only one valid water baptism, that which is into Jesus Christ and into His death, the evidence of which is resurrection of the believer into a new, holy, and righteous life in service of God.