

Dear Aebi: “Please comment on the statement that Ephesians 4:5 refers to Holy Spirit baptism which saves you rather than water baptism which is for those already saved.”



The questioner gave me a lengthy paper on baptism by a Calvinist and asked me to review it and comment on several things in it. The statement claims that not only Ephesians 4:5, but many other plain passages on baptism, all refer to Holy Spirit baptism, which he calls “spiritual baptism,” as opposed to water baptism.

Calvinists believe that the Holy Spirit operates directly on a sinner in what they call his "religious experience" to give him faith and salvation. They have to say that because they believe one is "born in sin" or born depraved so that he is unable to believe or repent without the direct intervention of God to remove his "original sin" barrier.

Let's try to clear the air by looking at the word *baptism*. It means *immersion*. Now, if we read it “immersion” when we see it, what impression are we going to get? Will we not think of immersion in water, since we know that was practiced in the New Testament by John, Jesus, and His apostles and evangelists? Yes, because that is the literal sense of the word, and a rule of all language is that you take the literal meaning first unless there is something in the context that suggests a figurative meaning. *Baptism* is figuratively used in several passages, but it is obvious from the context what is meant. *Baptism* is used figuratively to describe an overwhelming in the Holy Spirit, (Acts 1:5; 2:1-4), in fire (Luke 3:16-17); in suffering (Matthew 20:20-23), and of Israel in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-2; Exodus 14:21-22). In each of these cases, the context tells what is meant.

When Jesus tells the apostles they will be baptized in the Holy Spirit, he says it will give them power to testify about Him (Acts 1:8), and when the Spirit came, the power is described in Acts 2:1-4 as ability to speak in foreign languages without having to study those languages. It was an overwhelming power that could be described as a "baptism," but It does not say anywhere in Acts 1 or 2, or anywhere else in the Bible, that the baptism of the Spirit would forgive their sins. It never did. The outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 was on Jews, and those Gentiles who received the Spirit in Acts 10 had not yet heard the word by which they were to be saved (Acts 11:14). And since faith comes by hearing the word (Romans 10:17), they had not yet believed. The Spirit was sent upon them by the Lord to prove to Jews that the Gentiles could be acceptable with God and be saved, just as were the Jews. They were saved by faith, repentance, and baptism, just as were the Jews (Acts 2:38; 10:46-47).

The baptism in fire is explained by John as being burned with unquenchable fire (Luke 3:17). The baptism in suffering is described as drinking Jesus' cup, which He asked God to remove if possible (Matthew 26:39,42), and which we know He had to go through to save us from our sins. Both "baptism" and "cup" in this passage are used figuratively. The baptism unto Moses is described as being covered by the cloud and being on the bottom of the sea with walls of water over them on both sides. The "baptisms" of fire and suffering are figurative uses, but they do not nullify the literal meaning of immersion in water that is usually meant.

Ephesians 4:5 says there was only one baptism left at that time, and Ephesians 5:25-26 describes it as “the washing of water.” Could anything be plainer? The one baptism that saves us, the baptism of Ephesians 4:5 and 1 Peter 3:21, is water baptism, not Holy Spirit baptism.

Charles Aebi