

## **Three Baptisms** *By James Moriello*

*A companion paper to the sermon delivered July 8th, 2012  
at Firm Foundation Christian Church, Woonsocket, RI*

*“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11)*

These are the words of John the Baptist, the scene is in the wilderness by the Jordan River, and the context is the baptism of Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:11-17). Water baptism continued into the church age as an ordinance to Christians. To believers it is said: “Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38). To the church it is said: “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” (Matthew 28:19). The word ‘baptism’ comes from the Greek ‘bapto’ or ‘baptizo’, words which were used over eighty times in the New Testament. The term signifies identification with or immersion in something. In our text, three types of baptisms are mentioned, and we will take them in the order in which we find them. They are baptism with water, baptism with the Holy Spirit, and baptism with fire.

Baptism with water is an outward expression of an inward reality, namely salvation, which has already taken place in the life of the believer. It is a major step of faith for the Christian, and the Bible presupposes that believers submit to the ordinance after placing faith in Christ. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). We learn from this Scripture that water baptism follows faith, and also that water baptism is an obedient act not necessary for salvation. We can say the latter with confidence because condemnation is based upon unbelief, and not upon whether or not one has been baptized. For example, the man on the cross who put saving faith in Jesus Christ was never baptized with water, but the Lord did affirm that he would receive his heavenly inheritance that very same day (Luke 23:43). Baptism with water does not impart grace to the believer. Such a teaching contradicts the

Word of God which says: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Any teaching that states or implies that baptism can aid in our salvation is a works teaching that denies the grace of God and the unlimited power and grace inherent in the work of the Savior. You may ask: Why then be baptized at all? The answer is simple: a desire to obey Christ and abide in His love. Jesus Himself said: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love” (John 15:10). In Scripture, there are no instances where people were baptized prior to believing the gospel. Neither are there any instances of babies being baptized, and this is because a baby is not capable of making a decision either for or against Christ. (Please ask for a copy of ‘The Eternal Destiny of Baby Doe’ if you are interested in a biblical exposition regarding babies, infants, and young children.) There are however, several instances of people being baptized with water after believing in Jesus the Christ. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized...the Lord opened her heart...she and her household were baptized...and many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 2:41, 16:14-15, 18:8). Water baptism is an outward symbol of the inward reality of newness of life in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15-17). Water baptism also symbolizes identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord. “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, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

The second baptism we find in our text is baptism with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist affirms that this is something only God can do. Whether one defines baptism primarily as immersion or identification, the same conclusions are reached. Let us look at two other Scriptures that will aid us in our understanding. Speaking to believers, Paul asks rhetorically: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). Speaking to those who have trusted Christ, Paul writes: “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians

1:13). According to these verses, the identification with the Holy Spirit, or the immersion of the believer with the Holy Spirit if you like, takes place at the moment of belief unto salvation. Therefore, the baptism with the Holy Spirit is something that accompanies salvation, taking place at that moment. All true believers are already baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Now we come to the third baptism mentioned in our text, which is baptism with fire. Like baptism with the Holy Spirit, this is something only God can do. It is very different than the modern day connotation of 'baptism by fire', which refers to being in a situation with two choices; sink or swim. There is no chance of swimming in the biblical baptism with fire. Whether one is immersed in or identified with fire, he or she is in dire straits indeed. The reference here is clearly to the hellfire mentioned in other places in the Bible (Isaiah 66:24; Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:43-48). The very next verse after our text makes that unmistakable connection: "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12). Take heed that you do not fall into this category, for I pray that none hearing or reading these words experience the fearful baptism with fire.

We can summarize the three baptisms in this way: everyone is either baptized with the Holy Spirit or baptized with fire sooner or later. Those baptized with the Holy Spirit are free to obey their Lord's ordinance of baptism with water. If you are taking this step, get ready, for every time we go forward with Christ opposition is sure to come. Take heed that you get more serious than ever about Christ Jesus, for people are watching your testimony—how you live, who you keep company with, and whether or not you worship your God publicly. The world will look at these things and judge whether your public profession at your water baptism is really who you are and what you are about. What will they see?