

Baptism

Introduction

This short paper on the topic of baptism is intended to give the reader an overall understanding of this most important ordinance of a New Testament church. Many books have been written on the topic of baptism, and much confusion and controversy has been created by this simple act of obedience. A complete treatment of this subject is beyond the scope of our immediate concern, however it is our hope that this short treatment is sufficient to deal with any questions the reader may have.

We will approach this topic by looking at what baptism IS NOT and then by looking at what baptism IS. We will then look at the practice of New Testament baptism and complete our discussion by dealing with common questions regarding baptism.

What Baptism IS NOT

1. It IS NOT a requirement for salvation.

Probably the most prevalent misconception about baptism is that it is a requirement for salvation. This is not true. Baptism is a symbol of our identification with Christ and should occur after one is saved. There are many cases in history where one came to know Christ but due to circumstances were unable to be baptized. If we hold to the notion that baptism is a necessary ingredient of salvation then these saints of history are lost. A prime example of one who was saved and yet not baptized is the thief on the cross. Christ promised him that *“To day shalt thou be with me in paradise”* (Luke 23:43)

2. It IS NOT a way to earn points with God.

Secondly, baptism is not a way to earn brownie points with God. There are not two classes of Christians, baptized and unbaptized. This is not to say baptism is not important. But on the other hand, one does not receive special favors from God just because one is baptized. Baptism is an act of obedience, not an act of one seeking special favors from God.

3. It IS NOT a requirement for Christian service.

Thirdly, baptism is not a requirement for Christian service. Just because one is not yet baptized does not preclude that person from being involved in witnessing, prayer, and study of the Word. Again, baptism is an act of obedience, not a prerequisite for blessing or Christian service.

4. It IS NOT a sign of the covenant like circumcision was in New Testament times.

Some who hold to the doctrine of infant baptism point to baptism as being a sign of the covenant (for example, Presbyterians). Others point to it as a necessary act to prevent infants who die from going to a place called limbo (for example, Catholicism). Neither of these views are true. There is no evidence that baptism becomes the “Church” counterpart to circumcision nor is there a shred of Biblical evidence to point to the teaching that infants who die unbaptized go to limbo.

What Baptism IS

1. It IS an expression of obedience.

Baptism is first, and foremost, an issue of obedience. In the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:18-20 we read, *“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (KJV)”* There is only one verb found in the Great Commission, and that is “make disciples.” How does the Church make disciples? They must go and teach (evangelize), baptize, and command men to observe all that God has commanded us in Scripture. Part of the Great Commission, and part of the process of disciple-making, is the practice of baptism.

2. It IS an outward expression of an internal reality.

Secondly, baptism is an outward expression of an inward reality. In New Testament times, as well as today in many parts of the world, one can become a Christian without any adverse effect on one’s life. However, the moment one becomes baptized, they are ostracized from their family and become the object of ridicule, persecution, and even death. Why? It is because baptism is an outward sign of identification with Christ. It is an act which sets one totally apart to Christ in the eyes of society.

3. It WAS a normal practice of the New Testament Church

Throughout the book of Acts one finds occasion after occasion where baptism accompanied salvation. Some representative passages are Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:36-38; 9:18; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; and 19:5. Since it is our desire at Open Door to pattern our church after the New Testament Church, we practice baptism not as a requirement for salvation, but as an act of obedience after salvation. In fact, it is interesting to note that in the book of Acts salvation is often mentioned side-by-side with the act of baptism.

The Practice and Method of New Testament Baptism

1. Who is to be baptized?

The consistent pattern in the New Testament is that only professing believers are baptized. There are no instances in the New Testament where infants are baptized. It is important to note the phrase “professing believer.” Only God knows the heart of man, and only He knows those who are truly redeemed. We cannot see the heart of man, and therefore there may be times when we baptize someone who professes to be a believer, but in fact is not. An example of this in the book of Acts is Simon Magus in Acts 8. Simon professed to be a believer and was baptized by Philip the Evangelist. However, later on when Peter arrives we see that Simon was never saved in the first place, and in fact evidenced his unregenerate state by offering to pay for the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is probably a good time to stop and ask yourself if you are truly redeemed. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, *“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (KJV)”* The believer is periodically encouraged to examine himself to see if he is really in the faith. Please take a moment to look at Appendix A of this document in which the plan of salvation is laid out. Ask

yourself if you truly believe these things deep down inside. If you do not, why not believe on Christ as your Lord and Savior today?

2. How are we to be baptized?

Now that we know who should be baptized, the next question is how are we to be baptized. The word we find in the New Testament for baptize is *baptizo*. It means to immerse or dip in water, and by extension “to identify with.” The first meaning, that of immersing or dipping, is seen in Hebrews 6:2. There the word “baptisms” is used to refer to the ceremonial dippings and washings of the Old Covenant. The second meaning, that of identification, is seen in 1 Corinthians 10:2 where we read, “*And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.*” This verse refers to the Children of Israel and says that they were “baptized unto Moses.” What does that mean? Does it mean Moses baptized over two million Israelites in the wilderness? No! It means that the Children of Israel were identified with Moses in spiritual solidarity (John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary, 1 Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1984] 219-220).

By putting these two concepts together, dipping and identification, we can define baptism as “immersion in water so as to identify that which is immersed with the water.” From this we can draw two conclusions:

a. Baptism is by immersion

First, baptism is total immersion. Sprinkling will not do. In John 3:23 we read, “*And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.*” Why did John baptize where there was much water? It is because New Testament baptism was practiced as total immersion. When we read of Christ’s baptism in Mark we are told that he came “*up out of the water (Mark 1:10)*” Again, we find total immersion. In Acts 8:36-39 we read that the Ethiopian Eunuch went “*down into the water.*” Again, total immersion is implied in the context.

b. Baptism is a symbol of total identification.

Secondly, baptism is a symbol of total identification. Just as an object placed into water becomes in a sense “identified” with that water, so a person in the act of baptism becomes outwardly “identified” with Christ. Again, baptism does not *cause* that identification with Christ, it is a *symbol* of that identification. The *cause* of our union with Christ is salvation, the *symbol* of our identification is the public act of baptism.

Conclusion

In conclusion we note that the act of baptism, which is to be practiced as total immersion, is an outward expression of an inward reality. The inward reality is our union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-4). The outward expression, which does not contribute to or effect salvation but is an act of obedience, is baptism.

Common Questions Regarding Baptism

What About Sprinkling?

As we have noted above, the weight of evidence in the New Testament greatly favors immersion as the method of baptism practiced by the early church. Only total

immersion is a clear picture of our complete identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Those who are baptized by sprinkling, even though their salvation is not affected, have not followed the New Testament model.

What About Infant Baptism?

This is probably the most confusing and controversial issue regarding baptism. Many think that because they were baptized as infants, they do not need to be baptized again after salvation. In fact, some think it a serious dishonor to one's parents or even a sin to be baptized again after being baptized as an infant. Note the following points in response to this notion:

1. Infants cannot make a conscious choice for or against God, therefore, how can they be baptized as a result of personal salvation?
2. There is no Biblical model given for infant baptism. There is no example in the New Testament of an infant being baptized, nor is there any instructions given regarding the baptism of infants.
3. The teaching that unbaptized infants go to limbo is completely without any Biblical support. Not only is this teaching false, but the notion of limbo itself is not found anywhere in the pages of Holy Scripture.
4. The clear New Testament pattern for baptism is that only true believers who have made a public profession of faith in Christ are baptized.

Does Not Acts 2:38 Clearly Teach That Baptism Is Necessary For Salvation?

Acts 2:38 reads, *“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”* Some point to this verse as teaching the doctrine of baptismal regeneration which asserts that baptism is a requirement of salvation. However, closer inspection of the text does not support this heretical teaching. Note the following somewhat lengthy quote in response to this question:

The meaning of Peter's statement that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins has been much disputed. Those who teach baptismal regeneration—the false teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation—see this verse as a primary proof text for their view.

That view ignores the immediate context of the passage. As already noted, baptism would be a dramatic step of Peter's hearers. By publicly identifying themselves as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, they risked becoming outcasts in their society (cf. John 9:22). Peter calls upon them to prove the genuineness of their repentance by submitting to public baptism...

Second, such teaching violates the important hermeneutical principle known as *analogia Scriptura* (the analogy of Scripture). That principle states that no passage, when correctly interpreted, will teach something contradictory to the rest of Scripture. And the rest of Scripture unmistakably teaches that salvation is solely by faith (cf. John 1:12; 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 3:21-30; 4:5; 10:9-10; Phil. 3:9; Gal. 2:16).

Third, after condemning the ritualistic religion of the scribes and Pharisees, our Lord would hardly have instituted one of His own...

Fourth, this interpretation is not true to the facts of Scripture. Throughout the book of Acts, forgiveness is linked to repentance, not baptism (cf. Acts 3:19; 5:31; 26:20). In addition, the Bible records that some who were baptized were not saved (Acts 8:13; 21-23), while some were saved with no mention of their being baptized (Luke 7:37-50; Matt. 9:2; Luke 18:13-14)...

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, the apostle Paul summarizes the gospel he preached and by which the Corinthians had been saved. There is no mention of baptism. Further, in 1 Corinthians 1:14-16, Paul rejoiced that he had baptized none of the Corinthians

except Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas. That statement is inexplicable if baptism is necessary for salvation...

While the preposition *eis* (for) can mean “for the purpose of,” it can also mean “because of,” or “on the occasion of” (A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint of the 1930 edition], 3:35-36; H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1957], 104). The latter is clearly its meaning in Matthew 12:41, which says that the people of Nineveh repented because of the preaching of Jonah.

The order is clear. Repentance is for forgiveness. Baptism follows that forgiveness; it does not cause it (cf. 8:12, 34-39; 10:34-48; 16:31-32). It is the public sign or symbol of what has taken place on the inside. It is an important step of obedience for all believers, and should closely follow conversion. (John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary, Acts 1-12* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1994], 73-75).

Why Was Christ Baptized?

An interesting question asked by many is “Why was Christ baptized.” Christ did not need to be baptized as a result of salvation, because he needed no salvation. He could not have been baptized as a result of repentance, because he had no sin to repent of? Although this is a difficult question to answer, we offer the following:

1. When Christ came to John, it was with the express purpose of being baptized. The word “baptized” is in the aorist passive infinitive (*baptisthenai*) which indicates purpose.
2. Why Christ was not baptized. (John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary, Matthew 1-7* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1985] 76-78).
 - a. The apocryphal *Gospel According to the Hebrews* states that Christ was baptized at the request of His family.
 - b. Gnosticism taught that Christ was just a man until baptized, at which time He became anointed by God for His ministry. Just prior to His death, God abandoned Him and He died as a mere man on the cross. A variation of this is also known as Adoptionism.
 - c. Christ was baptized as an initiation into His high priestly role.
 - d. Christ was baptized to identify with the Gentiles.
3. John’s baptism was for repentance (Matt. 3:2, 6, 11). Why would Christ need to be baptized since He was sinless and hence needed no repentance? The following are offered in response to this question:
 - a. Christ was baptized as an example of obedience.
 - b. Christ was baptized in order to identify with sinners although He was sinless.
 - c. Christ was baptized as a symbol of His death.
 - d. Christ was baptized so that those who observed His baptism would also see His ministry confirmed by God the Father (1 John 5:6).
 - e. Christ was baptized to “fulfill all righteousness.” (Matt. 3:15)

Appendix A

The Gospel

- I. Why Must I Be Saved? Romans 1:18-2:16
 - A. God is my Creator thus I am accountable to Him.
 - B. God is holy and I have broken his law - I have sinned.
 - C. I am at war with God. His wrath is upon me and that wrath will be culminated when, after death, I am eternally separated from God in a place of torment called the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

- II. What Must I Do To Be Saved?
 - “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” - Acts 16:31*
 - A. What does this “belief” involve?
 - 1. Not a false belief - John 2:23-25
 - 2. Not a mere intellectual belief - James 2:19
 - 3. But a true faith wrought by the Holy Spirit - Titus 3:5
 - 4. A true faith accompanied by repentance - Acts 20:18-21
 - B. Why must I believe on the “Lord Jesus Christ?”
 - 1. He fulfilled the righteous law of God - Matthew 5:17.
 - 2. He died as my substitute on the cross and in so doing He took upon Himself the wrath of God due me because of my sin - Matthew 27:45-46.
 - 3. Through His bodily resurrection He proved that His sacrifice had been accepted by the Father and He, as the “first fruits”, has given His followers the assured hope of eternal life - Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:12-13.
 - 4. It is Jesus Christ, and Him alone, who can save me - Romans 5:15; 6:23; Acts 4:12.
 - 5. My deeds have nothing to do with my acceptance before God. Sin has so infested every area of my life that even my “good works” are filthy rags in God’s eyes - Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:8-9.

- III. How Can I Know That I Am Saved?
 - A. My life bears the fruit of a new God-given nature - 1 John
 - 1. Love for God
 - 2. Love for God’s people
 - 3. Love for God’s Word
 - B. The Holy Spirit bears witness with my spirit - Romans 8:16