

## We Believe in Baptism

Because of the confusion over the meaning of baptism among Christians today, many have thrown up their hands in despair or disgust and have said that it must not matter anyway. Others say that unless a person is baptized in water he cannot have eternal life with God.

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*

*Ephesians 2:8,9*

The Biblical record on baptism does not show it to be a means of eternal life, which is a gift for trusting in Jesus Christ alone as Savior from the guilt and penalty of sin (Ephesians 2:8,9). But neither does Scripture say that baptism is unimportant.

### What is Baptism?

The word *baptism* is actually a transliteration instead of a translation of the Greek word *baptizo*. It always includes the idea of dipping or immersing (sinking a ship, dying material, drowning a person). It is different from the Greek word for pouring (*ekcheo*) and sprinkling (*rantizo*).

Gentiles who wanted to become Jews were circumcised and then immersed in the years before the New Testament was written. But the first Biblical record of baptism is the practice of John the Baptist (Matthew 3). John baptized those Jews who confessed their sinfulness and who were looking forward to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His Kingdom. Their act, then, was a symbol of cleansing based upon their confession of need and personal helplessness to save themselves (Matthew 3:6-12). Their circumcision was insufficient to make them subjects of God's kingdom, and so was their baptism, for John warned them that water baptism was secondary to another baptism yet to come, Spirit baptism (Matthew 3:11).

After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He commanded His disciples to go into all the world to all nationalities and to make disciples, first by baptizing the converts and then following up with teaching (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is what the disciples did. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 new converts were baptized, all Jews (Acts 2:41). When the good news of eternal life was first preached to Gentiles, they too were baptized after it was clear that they too had received the gift of eternal life (Acts 10:47, 11:17-18). When the apostle Paul led men to Christ, he immediately baptized them (Acts 16:33). And when Paul found a group of men who had been baptized by John, but had not yet come to know the Lord as their risen Savior, he commanded them to be baptized on the basis of Jesus' authority (Acts 19:5).

Since Jesus commanded baptism and the apostles practiced it from the beginning of the church at Pentecost and throughout their ministries, so do we. Since the very concept of "baptizing" means to dip or immerse, that is how we do it. Since the Biblical record shows only believers were being baptized, we also limit it to such.

Now let's look at some practical questions.

### Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

Based on Acts 2:38 and a couple of other New Testament passages, many churches teach that a person cannot receive eternal life without being baptized in water. This apparently contradicts Ephesians 2:8-9, which says that salvation is a free gift apart from works of any kind. How do you explain Acts 2:38, then?

*"Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins..."*

*Acts 2:38*

The key may be the little word “for” (*eis* in the Greek). It can mean with a view toward or on the basis of. For instance, if we say that a man is wanted for murder, we mean because he has committed murder, not so that he can commit murder. That same Greek word is translated as “for” and used in the sense of “on the basis of” in another baptism passage, Matthew 3:11. John the Baptist said, “I baptize you in water for repentance,” and yet the context makes clear that their personal repentance was a basis for and prerequisite to being baptized by John. In the same way Peter may be saying in Acts 2:38 that those who have trusted Christ as Savior and have, therefore, received forgiveness of sins should be baptized.

Another passage in Acts, 10:33-48, makes this sequence clear. As Peter preached the Gospel for the first time to Gentiles, the hearers believed the message and received the Savior while they listened. As evidence that they had received the new birth into eternal life, the Spirit of God entered them, accompanied with external signs so that no one could be mistaken about what had happened. The fact that they had received the Holy Spirit proved they were saved (Romans 8:9), and twice letters of Paul make clear that the only requirement for receiving the Holy Spirit is to hear with faith (Ephesians 1:13-14, Galatians 3:2). These people to whom Peter was preaching heard, believed, and received. They were thus placed by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s body, the church (“Spirit baptism,” 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Because it was evident that they had received the gift of eternal life, Peter next asked, “Why shouldn’t they be baptized, too?” (Acts 10:47). So it is clear that their baptism followed their salvation. Peter defended his action in Acts 11:16-18 by explaining to the other apostles that God had given them the gift of salvation on the basis of faith in Christ alone, therefore, there was no reason not to baptize Gentiles.

One final word on this subject; Paul the apostle writes to a church apparently divided at least partially because of the baptism issue (1 Corinthians 1:17), “*Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel*”, (1 Corinthians 1:17). If the requirements of the Gospel had included water baptism, Paul was unfaithful to his call and misleading in his message. However, the essential baptism is Spirit baptism (Matthew 3:11, Acts 11:15-16), which means to be placed by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). This baptism is a result of faith alone, and is a prerequisite to water baptism.

## **Is Baptism By Immersion Necessary?**

The key word in this question is “*necessary*”; necessary for what? Certainly not for eternal life. So then, what is baptism for, anyway?

The result of baptism is identification with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10:2 it is said that the Israelites were “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” when they came out of Egypt. Obviously, they did not get wet. But they were identified with Moses, their leader in these elements. With what is the Christian identified in his baptism? Romans 6:3-4 uses the picture of baptism to explain what happens when a person is saved: He is identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Now, if water baptism is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, then only baptism by immersion pictures that. After all, there is no potency in water; it is the meaning of the act that counts.

## **Should I Be Rebaptized?**

People who come from churches that practice infant “baptism” often asks this question, as well as people who have been “baptized” by some means other than immersion after their conversion. The question hinges on whether or not simple contact with water in a religious (even “Christian”) setting is actually baptism.

Acts 19:1-7 presents a case study in regards to this question. The apostle Paul met a dozen men who had been baptized under the ministry of John the Baptist, believing his claim that the Savior was coming. But they knew nothing of the subsequent events of Calvary, of the resurrection, or the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit began to indwell every believer.

Paul asked, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" That, as we saw from Peter's experience in Acts 10, is the indication that someone has received Jesus as Savior and with Him the free gift of eternal life. When the men answered, "We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," Paul knew that they'd not yet heard the Gospel so that they weren't yet born again. They'd been baptized, but not saved. When they believed in Christ as Savior, then they were baptized.

The conclusion is that baptism before personal salvation is not Christian baptism.

Some ask, "But isn't baptism, at least of children, the sign that one is entering under the New Covenant, just as circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant?"

Nowhere in the New Testament is baptism called a sign of the New Covenant. In fact, Jesus said at the Last Supper, "This is my blood of the New Covenant." It is through the blood of the Lord Jesus, not water, that one enters the New Covenant.

If there should be a parallel between baptism and circumcision, it would be this: A child was circumcised to show he had been born into a Jewish family; a person is baptized to show he is born into God's family. Just as a Jew could not be circumcised before physical birth, so a Christian cannot be baptized before spiritual birth. Water cannot save - only personal faith in Christ does that. Therefore, the lack of water cannot condemn.

As for believers who have been baptized by sprinkling or pouring after their salvation, they may want to be immersed to show their understanding of the intended picture of water baptism, which is identification with Christ, is His death, burial and resurrection. However, there is not a Biblical text to cover such a point because baptism by modes other than immersions was not practiced in New Testament times.

## **Is Baptism Necessary for Church Membership?**

As one reads through the book of Acts in the New Testament, he is impressed with the fact that baptism was the very first step after salvation. For instance, in Acts 16:33 we are told that Paul baptized a group in the middle of the night. Because of the consistency of this practice, it was probably very rare to find an unbaptized Christian, except among those who wanted to keep their faith secret for fear of persecution.

On the other hand, one does not read of "joining a church" in the New Testament. There was not the proliferation of churches and denominations that there is today. The true Christians banded together around the teaching of the Apostles, to learn, to share, to worship and pray (Acts 2:42). All who were saved were welcome at those gatherings, and the only ones who were designated as outsiders were those who did not have the Holy Spirit, that is those who were unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:23). Baptism was not and should not be the test of fellowship, but rather faith.

As strongly as it is held that baptism should follow salvation at the earliest opportunity in unquestioning submission to the teaching of the New Testament, it is also held that no external rite should govern fellowship among believers or admission to the Lord's table, but only "faith, working through love" (Galatians 5:6). The only requirements for sharing in the Lord's table, for either a child or an adult, are personal faith in Christ and the confession of known sins (1 Corinthians 11:28).

## What About 1 Peter 3:21?

"Baptism now saves you," says 1 Peter 3:21. This is used by some to support baptismal regeneration. However, two other interpretations of this passage are possible which see it consistent with the New Testament teaching that eternal life is a gift to those who put their faith in Christ, with no other requirements attached.

Some believe Peter to be talking about Spirit baptism, since it is the work of the Holy Spirit to put us (baptize us) into the body of Christ the moment we trust Christ as our Savior. In the context of 1 Peter 3:18-22, this would be consistent with the fact that it was the ark that saved Noah and his family from destruction, and the ark can be thought of as a symbol of the Lord Jesus who saves us.

One thing is certain; it was not passing through water that saved Noah and his family, because they never got wet. What the water did do for them was to separate them from the wicked world, so that they did not come under the influence of the depravity of the time. Therefore, a second possible way to interpret 1 Peter 3:21 is this: "By making a public confession of Christ through baptism you cut yourself off from your past life and associations, identifying with Christ and His people, so that you may be delivered from experiencing the same earthly defeat and despair that comes upon those who do not believe in Christ, and upon Christians who do not live godly lives.

Peter was writing to Christians (1:4-5) who faced the danger of suffering for their faith (1:6, 2:21), and were tempted to keep their faith secret. In this context he clearly states that it is not the external effect of baptism that is beneficial ("not the putting away of the filth of the flesh"), but rather the effect which baptism has upon the conscience of a believer ("an appeal to God for a good conscience"), knowing that he has identified with his Savior no matter what the cost.

## What About Being Born of Water (John 3:5)?

In this context, Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus before Christ's baptism was established and while the baptism of John the Baptist was still the standard. As we have seen from Acts 19:1-7, the baptism of John was not final.

So what does Jesus mean, "You must be born of water?" Some have suggested He refers to the water of physical birth, but this seems redundant for Jesus to tell someone he must be physically born before being spiritually reborn. Others find the solution in Ephesians 5:25, equating water and Word, but this anticipates fuller New Testament understanding than was available to Nicodemus.

The best answer is to be found in the Gospel of John itself. In John 7:39, John explains that water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit who brings new birth. In John 4:14 Jesus offered the woman at the well a well of "water springing up to eternal life." And in John 3, He tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water that is (a legitimate translation of the Greek work, *kai*) the Holy Spirit. This would draw upon the Rabbi's understanding of God's promise in Ezekiel 36:25-27 to bring new birth to Israel through the work of God's Holy Spirit, which in that text is symbolized by a sprinkling of water.

## Conclusion

Our purpose has not been to investigate the history of how Christians have interpreted or practiced baptism, but only to see what the New Testament says about it. And what does the evidence show? That baptism is an external rite of dipping or immersing a person in water as a symbol of that person's internal identification with the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His death, burial, and resurrection. Water cannot save; Jesus alone can save. And He does not save on the basis of water, but on the basis of faith alone. Therefore, baptism follows salvation as a picture of what has happened. It is an important part of Christian practice, acting as an external symbol and

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reminder of salvation perhaps in the way a wedding ring symbolizes and reminds of a marriage. But one should not confuse the symbol with the reality. When Jesus was asked by Jews in His day, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" His answer was clear. "The work of God is this: to believe in the One He has sent" (John 6:28-29).

The apostle Paul made the message just as clear in Romans 4:5: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

"We Believe in Baptism" was written by Johnny V. Miller, president of Columbia International University and former senior pastor of Cypress Bible Church.