

WATER BAPTISM- its History and Meaning

The Origins of water baptism:

A study of history reveals the presence of Water Baptism during Old Testament times. When Gentiles wanted to identify with Israel and become Jews (not racially, but religiously), they had to go through a three-fold process: circumcision, animal Sacrifice and water baptism. So the first instance of baptism was that of Proselyte Gentile immersion. This was done in a pool in the Temple court of the Gentiles.

The Water Baptism mentioned in the New Testament is our topic of study.

This was:

- Instituted by the Father (Jn. 1:6, 33)
- Commanded by the Son (Mt. 28:19)
- Attested by the Spirit (Mt. 3:16; Acts 2:38b)
- Instructed by the Apostles (Acts 10:48)
- Practiced by the Early Church (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 9:18)

The Meaning and Mode of Water Baptism

The English word 'Baptize' comes from 'Baptizo' (Greek) which in turn comes from the root "bapto". The Greek-Bapto means "to Dip" (Lk. 16:24; Jn. 13:26; Rev. 19:13) It carries the idea of dipping a substance into a fluid and then taking it out again.

- Historical Usage- the verb "Baptizo" can be traced back into the earlier, classical form of the Greek language as far as B.C. 5. It has a continuous history in the Greek language right down into the 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D. Throughout, the word retains one unchanged basic meaning- "to dip", "to plunge", 'to submerge', or "to immerse". E.g. Between 500 and 400 B.C.- Plato; 400 B.C.- Hippocrates; Between 200 and 100 B.C.- 2 Kings 5:14 (Septuagint); Between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100- Strabo; 1st Century A.D.- Josephus; Between 1st and 2nd Century A.D.- Plutarch
- Technical Note- 'Bapto' and 'Baptizo' are never used in the passive sense. This means that water is never said to be baptized on someone; rather, someone is baptized into the water. It carries the sense of "to bury in the ground."
- Biblical Evidence-There is the immersion baptism done by John (Jn. 3:23); the baptism of Jesus (Mk. 1:9-10); and the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:38-39)
- Other Evidences for Baptism as Immersion are found in **The Didache**: An early handbook on Christian ministry, written between 100-110 A.D., which distinguishes between 'pouring' Greek ekxeo, and 'immersion' (baptizo). Church historian Philip Schaff, the reformers Martin Luther, and John Calvin all

state that immersion was the custom of the ancient church. Josephus (1st Century Jewish Historian) describes John the Baptist as 'John the Dipper'. Early baptism for those Gentiles who joined the Jewish faith was by immersion. It is worthy of noting that there is another Greek word that can be used for "Sprinkling" it is the Greek verb, "prosraineo. It wasn't until A.D.1311 that the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Ravenna made 'sprinkling' or 'immersion' alternatives as modes of Baptism. It was in 1644 that the Church of England adopted sprinkling by vote of Parliament.

Significance of Water Baptism

There are two extremes in Christendom: one group believes that baptism is so powerful that it can impart life to a spiritually dead sinner (baptismal regeneration), while the other group believes that there is absolutely nothing that takes place in water baptism- it is just a purely symbolic activity. But both these extremes should be avoided.

Baptism is not a magical act; neither is it a meaningless act. When a true believer enters the waters of baptism it is a spiritually significant moment in his profession of faith in Christ. His repentance and faith has made him (her) a new creation, and water baptism is his public announcement of being "in Christ."

- Water baptism is an Identification with the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 15:1-5; Eph. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:24) In Baptism, the Christian testifies to his faith in Christ and His work on the cross. He is publicly declaring his faith in the Gospel. He is basically 'identifying' and 'joining' with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is declaring that Jesus died for him, was buried for him and was raised for him and considers himself as having died, buried and risen with Jesus.
- It is a Clothing with the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:27) In Baptism, the Christian is 'clothing himself' with Christ. Through this act, he is declaring that he belongs to Jesus and that henceforth it is no longer *'he that lives but Christ'*. Just as a uniform declares which school a person belongs to, baptism works in the same way to declare that the believer belongs to Jesus. It is a public testimony that the person being baptized is now a Christian.
- It is an Expression of the reception of Forgiveness of Sins (Acts 2:38) In Baptism, the Christian expresses outwardly the fact that he has received forgiveness of sins. This Scripture portion reads: Repent and be baptized 'for' the forgiveness of sins... This does not mean that we receive forgiveness of sins only if and when we are baptized. The word "for" in Greek is the preposition "eis" it means here: *'on account of', or 'because of'*. The verse thus reads: "Repent and be baptized on account of having received the forgiveness of sins". Forgiveness can never come through Baptism. It comes only through Jesus (Lk. 24:47; Acts 5:31; Acts 10:43; Eph. 1:7) and His blood (Mt. 26:26; Heb. 9:22; 1 Jn. 1:7).
- It is the Testimony of a Good Conscience (1 Pet. 3:21) In Baptism, the Christian testifies that he has received a good conscience towards God. We were enemies with God due to our sins. But through our relationship with Jesus Christ, we have been reconciled and now have peace with God (Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:18-19). Our hearts have been sprinkled by the Blood of Jesus to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and we can therefore come boldly before the very presence of God (Heb. 10:19-22). Note: This

Scripture portion describes Baptism as the answer, response, or pledge of a good conscience before God.

- It is an Entrance into a new Public Life as a Christ-follower (Acts 2:40-42; Rom.6:4) In Baptism, the Christian publicly proclaims an end to his old way of life-the old order. The old world system is henceforth buried or submerged under water and he comes out into God's government or system. He is henceforth joining and fellowshiping with the church, the people of God. In those days, baptism to a Jew in the name of Jesus Christ meant giving up Judaism and losing all fellowship of his nation with all his political rights and privileges.

The Bible commands those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:12, 37; 10:47-48; 16:33-34). Note: There is no baptism before personal conversion to be found in the New Testament.

This truth can easily be seen by the fact that People always took baptism after the experience of salvation, not before. (Acts 8:12; 9:17-18; 10:47-48). God always works on the 'inside' first and then on the 'outside'. He changes a man's actions by first changing his heart. E.g. Faith (Inside) and Works (Outside) We are told to believe in your heart (Inside) and confess with your mouth (Outside) (Rom. 10:10) Man looks at the appearance (Outside) but God looks at the heart (Inside) (1 Sam. 16:7) In the Bible, ritual always comes after inner spiritual reality. E.g. Abraham first believed. He was circumcised only after 25 years. (Heb. 11:8; Acts 7:2-4; Compare Gen. 12:1-3 with Gen. 17:9-19; Compare Rom. 4:1-4 & 10, 11)

- Why is it then that Infants are not eligible for Baptism? First, there is no Biblical evidence for such a practice. The whole significance of baptism proves that no infant can take part in it. Even the Didache did not allow for Infant Baptism. The Christian life is one where each individual is held accountable to God. There is no room for proxy. So an infant cannot take baptism with another person believing on its behalf. For example-Salvation: I cannot be saved for another; The Power of the Holy Spirit: I cannot receive the anointing of the Spirit for another; Holiness: I cannot be holy for another; Judgment: I cannot give an account for another. Jesus commanded that his disciples be baptized. A disciple is a follower, a learner who can be taught. A disciple has a Master. An infant can never be a disciple! Even when people came to John the Baptist, he commanded that each person should first repent. Only those who repented were given Baptism. (Mt.3:8, 11; Mk. 1:5; Lk.3:8-14; Acts 13:24).

Common questions raised to support Infant Baptism

"The Bible mentions "entire households" being baptized. Were there not infants in these homes?"

We must clearly understand that the issue is not whether infants were present in homes. Surely, they may have been. But a study of each household clearly reveals that whether or not infants were present, only those who believed were baptized. Cornelius: Acts 10:44, 47, 48; The Philippian Jailer: Acts 16:33-34; Crispus: Acts 18:8; Stephanas: 1 Cor. 1:16 and 16:15; Lydia: Acts 16:15 (In this case, it is not specifically mentioned that only believers were baptized. But this does not prove that infants were

baptized because the Greek word for 'household' may mean Lydia's servants or her workers, employed by her for the cloth trade- 16:14).

"Didn't Jesus rebuke the disciples for preventing babies from being brought to Him? Did He not say that we should not hinder the little children from coming to Him as the Kingdom of God belonged to them? (Mt.19:13)"

Yes. But remember that these babies were brought to be 'blessed' by Him; not to be 'baptized' by Him. The two are radically different. To baptize is to help a person identify with the work of the Cross; to bless is to seek God's benefits for that person.

"Has not Circumcision been replaced by Baptism in the New Covenant?"

No. Circumcision and Baptism serve entirely different purposes. Circumcision was only for Israel/Abraham's descendants; it was a sign of one's national relationship with the Lord. It was not for all believers

This is why Naaman and the repentant Assyrians were not asked to be circumcised. (See 2nd Kings 5) Baptism, on the other hand, is for every believer; it is a sign of one's personal relationship with the Lord. Circumcision was only for males; baptism is for all, irrespective of sex. Circumcision was done on the eighth day; Baptism is done immediately after a person believes in the Lord. If Circumcision had indeed been replaced by Baptism, it makes no sense as to why the Jews in the early church demanded that the Gentile believers who were already baptized be circumcised as well (Acts 15:1-2). Surely, the Jewish Christians did not consider baptism as a replacement for Circumcision.

"Does not 1 Cor. 7:14 support Infant Baptism as it states that children of believing parents are already holy?"

The whole passage (vs 12-16) is a reply by Paul to the issue of 'mixed marriages', where only one partner was a believer. The situation was that some men and women, who were already married prior to hearing the Gospel, were confused as to whether their marriages were now still acceptable to God as one of their partners was an unbeliever. They wondered if they had to divorce their unbelieving partners. A related issue was "What must we do with regard to children?" Paul tells these people that a 'mixed marriage' is acceptable to God as the believing partner can exercise a holy or godly influence over the unbelieving spouse and so bring the partner to salvation. And naturally, if the parents are thus acceptable to God, it is also legitimate to have children. So, when Paul speaks of children being holy and unbelieving spouses being sanctified, what he means is that the presence of believers in a home places that family in a holy atmosphere, which gives unbelievers the possibility or opportunity to experience salvation. He does not mean that they are already saved.

- What the Bible does say about Children

We do not have to fear whether infants or little children who die before hearing the Gospel will perish in hell. God is just, merciful and loves all children, whether they are born in Christian homes or not (Mt.18:2-3; 19:14). He does not hold them accountable until they are able to discern good from evil

(Deut. 1:39; Is. 7:15-16). The duty of a parent is only to bring up children in the fear of the Lord (Eph. 6:4) and to train them in the right way (Prov.22:6).

- How Infant Baptism arose in the church:

This doctrine was first mentioned by Irenaeus (2nd Century A.D.), opposed by Tertullian and later became a practice in the 5th Century. Historically, infant baptism arose because of false teachings of sacramentalism in the Roman church. When the church fathers began to teach that baptism gives a person saving or mystical grace and teaching “Baptismal Regeneration” (water baptism washes away sins). Some political reasons were also there. The Roman Catholic Church wanted to secure everyone into her system. By making everyone from birth itself a “Christian”, the Church made sure that the people belonged to it and were under its control.

Time of Water Baptism

In the Bible, we find that those who heard and accepted the Gospel were baptized ‘immediately’. There was no delay (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 8:36-38; 16:31-34). The only exception was in the case of Paul who was baptized after 3 days, and that too, for no fault of his (Acts 9:18).

Some other Questions on Water Baptism

- The Link between Baptism and Salvation

Salvation is often thought of only in terms of being delivered from hell. Thus it causes a big problem when it is taught that baptism is an integral part of the salvation experience. But we must note that salvation takes place in three stages. And the whole process must be experienced in order for a person to be truly and fully saved! There is the salvation in the past- deliverance from the penalty of

sin, salvation in the present- deliverance from the power of sin, and salvation in the future- deliverance from the presence of sin. When a person repents and believes, he immediately becomes a believer. But the salvation experience is not yet over. The next step is to take water baptism. And even after this, he has to continue in the Christian faith. Only then will the salvation process continue to be worked out in his life. It is only at the return of Christ that we will be fully saved.

- Are we to be baptized using the Trinitarian Formula?

Which is right- being baptized in the name of Jesus; or in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Mt. 28:19, 20 says we are to be baptized ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. The reason the Trinitarian formula is not mentioned in the Book of Acts is because over there, the emphasis was on the difference between the baptism of John or the Jewish baptisms and the baptism which Jesus had introduced. However, whether we use either formula, we are witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and have no need to be legalistic about it.

- Why was Jesus baptized?

“To fulfil all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). In other words, Jesus was baptized as an outward act of obedience to his Messianic calling. He wanted to do everything that was pleasing to God. In this manner, He is an example to us demonstrating how we too need to lead lives that are wholly pleasing to God.

- Should we be ‘baptized for the dead’?

(1 Cor.15:29) No. This was not an apostolic practice. Paul doesn’t say, “Why are WE baptized for the dead...” but “Why are THEY baptized for the dead...” This passage refers to the topic of Resurrection. Paul was trying to prove the truth of Resurrection to those Jews who disbelieved. To further establish his point that there is indeed a resurrection, he pointed to the practice of the Jews themselves. By taking baptism for the dead, they had shown that they really had a fear of resurrection even though they wouldn’t admit it. So, here, Paul was simply taking an example of the existing custom to his advantage; he was not writing it as a rule for Christians.

Water Baptism-Statement of Faith

Kingdom Ministries Fellowship

Biblical Baptism

Water baptism of believer's in the New Testament Church was used as a public testimony to a believer's faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. New Testament baptism was BELIEVER'S BAPTISM. We see a good example of this in **Acts 16:30-33**; where Missionaries Paul and Silas, have openly preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the ancient town of Philippi. They were arrested for preaching, beaten severely by the Roman jailor, and thrown into the Roman prison. At midnight, these two battered and beaten men of God began to sing praises to God and God heard them and sent an earthquake to set them free. All the prison house was shaken, the jail doors sprung open, and the prisoners were free to flee the prison-but none did. They were so awe struck by this miracle they remained in the cells. When the frightened jailor looks into each cell, and sees the prisoners all there, he brings Paul and Silas out of their cell and says, "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved.*" And they said, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.*"

Paul then told the jailor and his family how to pray a prayer of faith and repentance and they received Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Now, verse 33 is very important- after this jailor and family all believed in Christ, immediately (in the middle of the night) they all were baptized. "*And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, (those of Paul and Silas) and immediately he was baptized, he and his household.*"

The jailor washing the very wounds he had inflicted, is a visible evidence of his repentance. He and his family being baptized in water is a visible, public sign of their faith in a risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lessons we can learn from this conversion of the jailor in Philippi:

1. Baptism is for believers only
The jailor and family were saved by faith when they "*believed on the Lord Jesus.*" Baptism is not a saving sacrament. It is not a means to Grace. "*For by grace you are saved, through faith, it is the gift of God, not a result of works (water baptism) lest anyone should boast.* **Ephesians 2:8, 9**
2. Baptism is "in water" not just "with water" meaning there is only one type of New Testament water baptism-total immersion. The original Greek word used in the New Testament means to "bury, or immerse." The idea of sprinkling, or pouring water over the head was not a Biblical practice. It came about centuries later by the Roman Catholic Church. All water baptism experiences in the Book of Acts is by immersion. Paul's imagery in **Romans 6: 4** is a picture of a death, burial, and raising from the grave, which immersion baptism symbolizes.
3. Water baptism is a visible drama illustrating two things:
 - 1) The Believer's faith in the death and resurrection of Christ.
 - 2) The believer's new birth from death unto life.
4. Water baptism is a public act of obedience to Christ. **Matthew 28:19** quotes Christ as saying, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit.*" You cannot call yourself an obedient Christ-

follower without being baptized. Water baptism is the new believer's first public act of obedience as a witness to your new life in Christ.

Baptism a symbol

Because baptism is only a symbol of what has already happened to the Believer (his being born again) it is not essential to his salvation, but it is essential to his faithful obedience to Christ as Lord of his life.

Illustration #1

Water baptism **is** like a soccer player putting on his team's uniform. The uniform tells all who see him "I am on this team, and not the other team." The uniform identifies him with his team. Even so, water baptism says to all who witness it, this person is on Christ's team, this baptized believer is a Christ-follower.

Note: The uniform does not make you a soccer player, it only tells others you are on this team. Even so baptism does not make you a Christian, but is a way to tell others that you are professing to be a Christian.

Illustration #2

Another illustration of the symbolism of baptism is that of a wedding ceremony between a man and a woman. The ceremony is a public announcement of the love between two people and their "oneness." The ceremony does not make them married, nor make them truly love each other, however, it is the public witness to the love they feel for each other, and their desire to declare it to all their friends and family.

What believer's "say" at the time of baptism

We can profess our faith both verbally and in the symbolic act of baptism. The early church did both. In **Acts 8:37** the Ethiopian Enoch is eager to be immersed and asks Phillip what he must do to "merit" water baptism. Phillip answers, "*if you believe with all your heart, you may be baptized. And he answered and said "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."* Verse 38 says, "*And he ordered the Chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.*"

This helps us understand that only true believers are candidates for baptism. We encourage pastors and others who baptize others to ask them three questions as they are standing in the pool of water:

1. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?"
If the candidate response is "yes" the 2nd question follows:
2. "Are you trusting Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins?"
If the candidate answers "yes" this 3rd question follows:
3. "Do you promise to follow Jesus all the days of your life no matter what the cost?"
If "yes I promise" is the answer; then you baptize the person in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Baptism Class

Before baptizing any candidate, there should be a baptism class meeting in which the pastor or a

trained Elder teaches this lesson to those about to receive water baptism. Each person should be taught, then questioned about their personal salvation experience so that they clearly understand what they are doing. The three questions list above are asked of each candidate, then repeated verbally at the time of immersion.

Hopefully this practical guide can assist pastors in both explaining baptism to their people and in the actual practice of baptizing them.