

Water Baptism

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Many years ago I had the privilege of water baptizing a woman. When she came up out of the water she shouted, "Did you hear it? Did you hear it?" "Hear what, sister?" I asked. "The chains! The chains fell away! I could hear the chains hitting the bottom of this tank. Hallelujah, I'm free! I'm free. Jesus has set me free!"

This woman had been deeply involved for many years in a false religion before finding Christ. Her ears actually heard the spiritual chains that had bound her for so long slip away and fall to the bottom of the baptismal tank. As she obeyed the Lord's word to be baptized, God gave her a great reward, *spiritual freedom!*

Jesus meant water baptism to be a wonderful experience. Yet in my travels I regularly encounter questions concerning this entire subject. I have even been in regions of the world where denomination is set against denomination, and brother against brother over the various issues surrounding water baptism. I find this most unfortunate. I do not believe that any Christian should be excluded from fellowship due to a difference in doctrine concerning baptism. Thus, I am devoting this teaching article to the subject.

At the outset let me list some of the doctrines that I believe are absolutely foundational to Christianity. By foundational, I mean that without them, the very foundations of Christianity would be distorted.

For example, the deity of Christ, (the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God) is a foundational doctrine. All of Christianity accepts this doctrine. If someone says he or she is a Christian and does not believe Jesus is the Son of God then he is believing in someone other than the Jesus of the Bible. That person is not really a Christian.

Some other foundational doctrines are the virgin birth, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, blood atonement (Jesus' shed blood for our sins), the sinless life of Jesus, the return of Jesus, Jesus as the only way to salvation and, salvation by grace through faith.

There are also doctrines that are less essential to the existence of Christianity. One example of these less essential or non-foundational doctrines is church government. Some Christian churches are ruled democratically with every member of the church voting on all issues before it. Other churches are governed by elders. Some are ruled by a regional bishop. All these forms of government are Biblically permissible.

Communion is another doctrine in which there are legitimate differences. Some churches use wine for communion while others use only grape juice. Sanctification is another such doctrine. Is it instantaneous or is it progressive? There are legitimate differences of opinion regarding these doctrines.

So we see that there are doctrines about which we cannot, indeed **must** not tolerate differences. But there are other doctrines about which we should not be so dogmatic and unyielding in our belief. When we take a dogmatic position on non-foundational doctrine we begin to improperly divide the church. Water baptism is a doctrine about which we should not be

unyielding. Why? Because it is not a foundational doctrine.

Yes, there is a firm, solid teaching in the Scripture regarding the doctrine of water baptism. And we should know our doctrine and teach it properly to our congregation. But if individuals in our church do not agree, obey, or comply with our teaching, this must not become a barrier to fellowship. I also believe a particular position on water baptism should not be a requirement for church membership. This is an area in which we must back off and allow the Holy Spirit to work and convict. Our part is to teach baptism properly and love those who differ with us or who fail to respond to our teaching.

I am now going to set forth the Biblical teachings on water baptism (as I see them) and answer some of the questions that have been raised about baptism.

Two Church Ordinances

Protestant churches generally recognize two church ordinances. By ordinance, I mean a directive or command left us by the Lord. Jesus instructed us to practice both water baptism and communion. He specifically instituted communion and commanded His followers to partake in communion from time to time. Jesus also commanded His disciples to baptize believers. In fact, the last words Jesus gave His disciples include the command to baptize:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . . (Matt 28:19 NIV, italics added.)

What Baptism Is

Why did Jesus command His disciples to baptize those who believed? Because baptism symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Paul said,

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Rom 6:3,4 NIV)

Baptism then is a declaration by the convert to the world that says, "I have died to the old way of life. Sin will no longer rule over me for my old self has been buried. I have been resurrected by the power of God to live a new life in Christ Jesus."

Thus every person who partakes in water baptism is 1) obeying a command of the Lord Jesus, 2) partaking in a church ordinance, and 3) making a declaration to the world of his new life in Christ.

What Baptism Is Not

There is a doctrine which holds that baptism is necessary for salvation. This doctrine is often referred to as "baptismal regeneration." Those who believe in this doctrine maintain that

it is necessary to be baptized in order to be saved. I believe this doctrine is false. Let us look at the Scriptures upon which this belief is based.

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mk 16:16 NIV)

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 NIV)

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:16 NIV)

. . . and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. . . (I Pet 3:21 NIV)

If we looked only to these Scripture verses we could easily conclude that baptism was necessary for salvation. But we must look at **all** Scripture on the subject of baptism. Remember, in Bible interpretation we may not take only verses that support one view while ignoring others that take a different view. To do so is not "correctly handl[ing] the word of truth."

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15 NIV)

Thus we must examine the principles contained in Scripture more closely to view the **full** teaching on baptism.

Here are the arguments opposing baptismal regeneration:

One: The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is by **grace through faith**:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8,9 NIV)

Baptism is something **I do**, it is my works. It is clear from the above Scripture that salvation is quite apart from works--Paul says "so that no one can boast."

Two: The Apostle Paul seems to downplay the significance of baptism in his first letter to the Corinthian church. Let's examine what he wrote:

I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to

preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (I Cor 1:14-17 NIV)

From this segment of Scripture it seems to me that if Paul regarded baptism as necessary for salvation he would not have viewed baptism this loosely. His statement, "For Christ did not send me to baptize" clearly removes baptism from the salvation formula, does it not?

Since One and Two above are obviously true and based solidly in Scripture, then what **are** the so-called "baptismal regeneration" Scriptures saying? Let's look at them one at a time:

Whoever **believes** and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not **believe** will be condemned. (Mk 16:16 NIV, emphasis added.)

The obvious, single salvation condition which Jesus Himself declared here is **to believe**. The statement "and is baptized" seems to be added to convey the idea of follow-through in commitment. It does not say, "whoever is not baptized will be condemned."

Peter also seemed to place the same emphasis as did Jesus on follow-through and commitment.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38 NIV)

Now let's look at Acts 22:16:

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:16 NIV)

These words are the final instructions to the Apostle Paul by Ananias, the Damascus disciple whom the Lord sent to pray for Paul after God blinded him. We know that only the blood of Jesus washes sins away (see 1 Pet 1:18, 1 John 1:7, Rev 1:5;7:14.) I believe that when Ananias included the words to Paul, "be baptized and wash your sins away," he was calling Paul to totally turn from his old sinful ways, and to immediately begin his new life in Christ.

Now for the last Scripture:

. . . and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. . . (I Pet 3:21 NIV)

Here Peter clarifies his own statement and in so doing, he is actually supporting the argument **against** baptismal regeneration. He says that the "water **symbolizes** the baptism that now saves you also--**not the removal of dirt from the body [that is, the physical immersion into water] but the pledge of a**

good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. . ." In other words, what Jesus did is what saves us, not water baptism. Water baptism only **symbolizes** Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.

How Important Is Baptism?

Some may ask, "Since baptism isn't necessary for salvation, just how important is it?" The answer is that the act of being baptized is very important. Why? Because it is a matter of obedience to Scripture and to the Lord. Jesus is the one who gave the command. He is the one whom we are disobeying when we do not become baptized.

From another perspective, we can say that baptism is a building block in our Christian walk. If that block is left out, obviously our growth will be limited. Most of us have enough hindrances to our Christian growth without adding to them. Baptism, then, in addition to being obedient to a command of Jesus, is necessary for continued Christian growth.

Finally, there are some societies in the world in which water baptism is highly significant. In these societies, the act of water baptism is a statement repudiating any prior religion in which the person was born or to which he had adhered. In these regions, water baptism is even more important because of what it means in that society, in addition to its importance as a Biblical doctrine.

What Is the Proper Method of Baptism?

I am aware that there has been an on going discussion for centuries about the proper method of baptism. To my knowledge no serious Bible scholar today, be he or she Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or others, seriously disagrees that baptism in the New Testament was by immersion.

To prove that the immersion method was used in the days of the New Testament, we need to go to the original Greek text of the New Testament. In the Greek text the word used for baptize is βαπτίζω, or *baptizo*. In the Greek language of Jesus' day *baptizo* meant to "dip" or "immerse" an object in water, dye or some other liquid. Through it's Christian use, *baptizo* came to mean the act or ordinance of baptism.

What About Sprinkling?

Many Christian denominations today use sprinkling as the method of baptizing. Since the first century church obviously practiced immersion, where did sprinkling come from?

In the first half of the 2nd century a document was written entitled *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, commonly known as "*The Didache*." The following is a direct quote of a segment from The Didache:

"Now concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having taught all these things, baptize ye into [eis] the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, in living water. And if thou hast not living water, baptize into other water; and if thou canst not in cold, then in warm [water]. But if thou hast neither, pour water thrice upon the head in [eis] the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

There is thus no doubt that early in the 2nd century some Christians felt that baptism was so important that, when the real baptism (immersion) could not be performed because of lack of water, pouring might be used in its place.¹

Now let's weave in here the practice of infant baptism. It began because of the Biblical belief in original sin. Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.) fully embraced the concept of infant baptism as a way of defeating the hold of original sin on every soul and of insuring salvation.

As early as the fourth century the practice of sprinkling of both infants and adults had become the standard means of baptism and remained so until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Several protestant denominations have chosen to continue the practice of sprinkling. Other protestant denominations began to pattern the practice of baptism after Scripture and have returned to the practice of baptismal immersion.

In conclusion let me urge the practice of baptismal immersion. I believe that, if at all possible, the pattern in Scripture should always be the basis of Christian beliefs and practices. If this is so, then obviously immersion is preferable if enough water is available.

Who May Be Baptized?

Concerning infant baptism, Scripture makes it quite clear that it was only those who received Jesus as Savior who were baptized. In other words, only those who were born-again were baptized. Obviously this excluded infants, since an infant neither knows right from wrong nor does he or she have the capacity to "believe and repent."

This poses a problem for those who are now adults who were "baptized" as infants. The simple fact is that such a person hasn't really been baptized. Yes, his parents did put him or her through a religious ritual. But in the truest Biblical sense he is not baptized. One must be born-again first. People who were "baptized" as infants and who today are truly born-again believers need to be baptized. And they are not being baptized "again," since they were not really baptized to begin with.

What About Baptism "In Jesus' Name"?

There is yet another unfortunate division in the church today based on the formula of administering baptism. I think most follow the teaching of Jesus from Matthew 28 in which He said, ". . . baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." Others follow Acts 2:28 and 10:48 baptizing "in the name of Jesus Christ."

Some of those who adhere to the "in Jesus' Name" tradition insist that if you haven't been baptized in Jesus' name you aren't baptized. Again, Scripture answers Scripture and I think these people are omitting or ignoring the Matthew 28 Scripture.

But why did the Bible use two different ways to describe baptism? The Jewish people of the first century were familiar with a ritual used to initiate a convert into Judaism. Part of the ritual involved baptism. It was called Proselyte Baptism. Most believers of that day had an intimate knowledge of Judaism,

especially during the early spread of Christianity. These Christians also had knowledge of the baptism of repentance, or what they called "John's baptism." Hence, the term "in Jesus' name" was simply a term to distinguish Jesus' teachings on baptism from the Proselyte Baptism or John's baptism of repentance. That is so simple, isn't it? Yet from this small misunderstanding of and misinterpretation of Scripture, a conflicting and divisive doctrine has evolved.

Who May Baptize?

Traditionally pastors have done the baptizing of converts in their churches. This it is a good practice but I do believe it is based more on tradition than on Scripture.

Scripture is silent on the subject of who should baptize except that it is obvious that the Disciples and some of the Apostles baptized. It is my belief that any believer may baptize. This includes male or female, young or old, whether or not one holds a church title. I have seen mass baptism services in which dozens of people were baptizing hundreds of new converts in the surf waters of the ocean! In fact, I heard one man give testimony of how he was alone in a remote place for several months. During his spare time he began to read a Bible. Under the Holy Spirit's conviction he gave his heart to the Lord. As he continued to read the Bible he saw that he needed to be baptized. He went to a nearby river and baptized himself!

Do I accept his baptism as valid? Yes, I do! Who am I to question another man's baptism? He qualified as a believer because he had repented and accepted Jesus as his Savior. If both he and Jesus are satisfied, who am I to judge?

The Power of Baptism

The Old Testament contains many types that are fulfilled by corresponding antitypes in the New Testament. One such type/antitype is found in I Corinthians where Paul, speaking of Israel in their exodus from Egypt said, "They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." (10:2 NIV) Paul is saying that Israel was "baptized in the sea." And certainly we know from Exodus, chapter 14, that Pharaoh and his entire army were

drowned when they tried to cross the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites. Clearly, to the natural eyes, before Israel was "baptized" by crossing through the Red Sea, Pharaoh had the power to take them back to Egypt by force.

I believe that this type/antitype illustration shows us the enormous spiritual power and freedom we gain through the act of baptism. As with the Israelites of old, that power translates, in part, to our ability to have victory over the powers of darkness and spiritual captivity.

Conclusion

I believe that when we come to fully understand the wonderful benefits of baptism, we will all see even more clearly what a shame it is to make various doctrines of baptism a source of controversy within God's church. Jesus commanded us to be water baptized. We know it is a powerful spiritual event in the life of every believer. As I have tried to make plain, the various traditions and differences in the forms of baptism should not stir up contention or divide a church.

Yes, we need to teach the truth, as best we can discern it based on Scripture. But the rest should be left to the Holy Spirit. It is ultimately His job, not ours, to see to it that a believer is baptized. Our love, fellowship, and acceptance of a fellow believer should not be based upon his form of baptism, or even whether or not he has undergone water baptism.

Lord, thank you for your Word. Thank you that you left us with your command to go forth into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. May we always seek to more clearly understand, then to act on your word. And may your Word not divide us, but rather may it always unite us as followers of Christ, in a way that is pleasing to you.

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Baptism: by A. T. Robertson, Volume I, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, page 387.

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