

## Baptism

'He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned' (Mark 16:16).

'Go and make disciples of all nations; baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19).

'Repent and be baptised, every one of you in the name of Jesus our Messiah, for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

Why should we be baptised?

(1) Because Jesus was baptised and He is our example – Matthew 3:13 to 17.

(2) To show our acceptance of the Gospel – Acts 2:41.

(3) It is the pledge of a good conscience towards God – 1 Peter 3:21.

(4) To symbolise the washing away and cleansing of our former sins – Acts 22:16.

(5) It tells the world we are now part of the body of believers – 1 Corinthians 12:13.

(6) It is a command of Jesus – Matthew 28:19.

(7) Baptism symbolises our 'burial' and being 'raised' with Him to new life – Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12.

Water baptism is a believers' baptism and it is a physical act expressing a spiritual event. In water baptism we are saying in effect, that we share with Jesus the fact of His death and resurrection, and it confirms our covenant agreement, made before we are baptised. Obviously the person baptised is not dying for sin because Jesus did that for us, but they are making a public testimony; a declaration of their commitment to Jesus and His work. As the believers go into the water and are completely immersed, the burial of the old sinful nature is symbolised. This nature is left under the water and the person is then symbolically raised up to new life in Jesus. They are declaring; "I have been crucified with our Messiah and I no longer live, but Jesus the Messiah lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

We are willingly, gladly and with joy, associating ourselves with the redemptive work of Calvary. We are washed clean by the blood of Jesus (Revelation 1:5). We are cleansed by the Word of God (John 15:3). Baptism in water is a multi-confession to our belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus as foretold by the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3 & 4; Isaiah 53:5 to 12; Psalm 16:10). Baptism makes us part of the body of Jesus our Messiah (1 Corinthians 12:13). Baptism indicates we are finished with the world and have come out of darkness into His marvellous Light (1 Peter 2:9). Baptism is a sign of our repentance (Acts 2:38). We accept that we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Full immersion in water symbolises burial in a watery 'grave' (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12).

To be baptised, we need to show evidence of repentance for our sins, faith in our Lord Jesus, have an acceptance of scripture and our lives need to bear evidence of our Christian profession, so people have to be believers in order for their baptism to be effective. Baptism of adult believers is normal because adults can choose and confess their beliefs. Baptism of babies is not scriptural because they can't choose, nor can they confess their beliefs. There is not one scripture written, regarding infant baptism. All who were baptised in scripture knew what they were doing and chose to be baptised, and all were old enough to make that decision. Infant baptism might make the parents feel good, but does nothing for the baby. That child has to grow old enough to make that decision for themselves, for baptism to be the spiritual experience God intends it to be. Men and women were baptised in Acts 8:12, not children.

We need to see if repentance and faith – the two spiritual conditions required – are present before baptism takes place. If repentance and faith are not there, then the baptism will not have God's desired effect. Baptism can only have God's desired effect when the spiritual conditions are met and the person knows they need cleansing; that is why infant baptism is not effective. Babies do not know what sin is and therefore, they cannot repent. They don't know enough to have faith, so we can only be effectively baptised when we are old enough to understand God's purposes for baptism. Peter

said we are to repent and be baptised and we will be saved (Acts 2:38). Peter makes it clear that there is a moral responsibility to accept that we have all sinned, and the acceptance of the Saviour is a necessary precondition to baptism. If children are too young to be made aware of their sin, they cannot receive the desired effect of baptism. If there is a person who has Christian parents who may feel it is time their child (teenage or adult) was baptised and push their child into the act of baptism, then that baptism is probably not spiritually effective because the person is not repentant of sin, but is being baptised solely to please their parents. Where the spiritual preconditions are not present, then clearly the baptism cannot work.

The concept of water baptism was not new to the Jews who lived in Jesus' day. Jews had used the ceremonial bath (a mikveh) for cleansing themselves before the Shabbat Day for hundreds of years before Jesus came to earth. They would bathe in the specially designed bath to wash away sins before the Shabbat and before offering a sacrifice (Numbers 19:7). Mikveh was the word used to describe the ceremonial baths full of living water (mayim hayim) where 3,000 people were baptised in a single day (Acts 2:41). The Hebrew word for the act of being plunged underwater is 'Tevilah'. It was not called baptism then, because that is a Greek word, and the word baptism was not used until 300 AD when the Bible was translated into Greek. Before then, the whole Bible was written in Hebrew.

The literal use of the word baptism (tevilah) is to be plunged into water and that describes Our Lord's own baptism. He went down into water then came up out of water (Matthew 3:16). John the Baptist baptised people in the Aenon River because there was an abundance of water there (John 3:23). Both Philip and the eunuch went down into water, then up out of the water (Acts 8:38 & 39).

The metaphorical use of the word tevilah is a metaphorical burial. We are 'buried' with Jesus in the waters of baptism (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12).

The scriptural use of the word tevilah is to describe deliverance. Noah's story of the ark and Moses story of going through the Red Sea is explained in New Testament as a form of baptism, yet neither Noah nor Moses got wet. Noah's experience of water is exactly what baptism is to the Christian; a washing away of the past; being saved through water. The water that could have drowned him actually saved him. The water became God's way of saving Noah for the future. The water separated Noah and his family from their past life and opened up the way to a new life, so baptism corresponds to what Noah went through (1 Peter 3:20 & 21). The scriptures tell us the children of Israel were baptised in the Red Sea and in the cloud into Moses, and thus they were brought under the obligation to the Law and the covenant but they went over on dry ground (Exodus 14:22; 1 Corinthians 10:2). There was water on both sides of them and a cloud (made up of water) was behind them, but they remained dry. The water cut them off from their past life and opened the door to a new life. It washed away their old life (Egypt) and put the Israelites under the authority of Moses. When a Christian is washed through the waters of baptism, his past life and the life of sin is put under the authority of Jesus. So we see again, that baptism does for Christians what the Red Sea did for Israel. These two Biblical stories use the word baptise to describe an event in which water achieves something. The water cuts off the old life and brings somebody into a new life; it brings somebody under a new authority. The water is the agent that does it. Studying these two events, the word baptise now means something broader than simply total immersion. It is being used for the event where water is used to cut off the past and opens up a new life for the future.

The Spiritual usage of the word baptism is not being used in connection with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist said, "I baptise in water but He will baptise you in the Holy Spirit" (Luke 3:16). The same word was used in both contexts. Jesus repeated John the Baptist's words in Acts 1:5, and the fulfilment of this was ten days later in Acts 2:1 to 4. Pentecost was the fulfilment of what was spoken by the prophet Joel (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28 to 32). The word baptise is now being used as a synonym for 'poured out'. Later, to be baptised in the Holy Spirit was to receive Him; to be filled with Him; to have the Spirit 'falling upon' and to have Him imparted through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:15 to 17). The word baptism had become much wider in the New Testament, than it was in the original Hebrew ceremonial bath. It now meant to be drenched in any way, from below or above,

even without water. You do not become wet when baptised in the Holy Spirit, yet the scriptures describe it as a baptism.

The Christ-ian usage of the word baptism show us yet another use for the word baptise. Jesus was speaking to the two apostles James and John, shortly before Jesus went to the cross. "Are you able to be baptised with the baptism with which I am to be baptised?" And they replied to Him, "We are able." Jesus told them, "The cup that I drink you will drink and you will be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised" (Matthew 20:22; Mark 10:38). Here, the word is being used in a very different way and was an expression of an overwhelming experience of pain and suffering which ended in death. It was a decisive experience that cut Jesus off from His life on earth, to His resurrection and new life in glory. Those scriptures tell us James and John were to suffer a terrible death because Jesus said they would drink the same 'cup' and be baptised with the same 'baptism' as He would, and we know how Jesus died. James was killed with a sword (Acts 12:2) but John lived to be a very old man and described himself as 'the elderly elder' (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). John was with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry, he wrote the epistle of John, plus the three epistles 1, 2 & 3 John and the book of Revelation circa 95 AD so we know he would have been very old.

The New Testament itself, is more important than what happened before or after it was written, but it is interesting to know just how the early Christians understood the word tevilah. A book written in the 1st century AD is the earliest account we have regarding the order of worship in the early church. What they wrote concerning baptism translated from Hebrew to English is this: "Tevilah in this way: Having first rehearsed all these things, immerse them in the name of the Father (Elohim), the Son (Yeshua) and the Holy Spirit (Ruach HaKodesh) in living (flowing) water (mayim hayim). But if you have not mayim hayim, tevilah in other (still) water. If you cannot immerse in cold then you may immerse in warm and if you have neither, pour water thrice over the head, in the name of Elohim, Yeshua and Ruach HaKodesh."

The early church baptised by full immersion of adults, then baptism slowly diminished to the mere sprinkling of babies. Up until the time of Martin Luther, the church chose infant baptism. A group of believers who were reading the Bible, felt they had to return to believer's baptism and cease infant baptism. They were nicknamed the Anabaptists, which in the language of the day meant the 'twice baptisers' because they were baptising adult believers who had already been baptised as babies. What is not always known is, they baptised by pouring water over the head. Even the first Baptist churches of English people, baptised by pouring. The return of adult baptism by full immersion, began in the Baptist churches, and spread from there to other denominations. The first English Baptist church started in Holland 1609 and not in England. A group of people fled Lincolnshire to escape the religious persecution in England and went with their Bibles to Holland where they were accepted. In 1612, the English people returned to England to start up Baptist churches there, but continued baptising by pouring. It was not until 1641, a man called Richard Blunt said it would be more meaningful to baptise by immersion since it signifies burial. In the English Baptist churches, from that time forward, baptising was done by full immersion. The people who had been baptised by pouring were not rebaptised.

Baptise is not an English word and is rarely translated in the Bible; it is usually transliterated. That means it has been taken over from another language and simply spelt in English letters but it is not an English word. An example of transliteration is the word rendezvous. We all know what that means, but if it was translated into English it would be called a meeting place. English has simply adopted the word rendezvous, and we have kept it as the French version, and use it in its French form. The British and Foreign Bible Society has a legal clause in the Legal Trust Deed forbidding translation of the word 'baptise' so it has to be transliterated. The reason for this ban – as it is supposed – was because infants were being sprinkled with water as a mode of baptism. If they had translated the word into its original meaning of being immersed, plunged, dipped or sunk fully into water, all of the sprinkled infants would have been declared 'unbaptised'. That would have caused an uproar back in 1604 to 1611, when the King James Bible was translated into English.

Baptism is both a physical and a spiritual event. The water is not just symbolic; God is giving water the power to do something within the person. The same applies to the communion. It is not just physical, the bread and the wine (grape juice) are doing something within us; God is giving them power to heal, bless and edify. Baptism is the act where the physical and the spiritual are meeting and both are equally important. A vitally important question is: Is this physical act having the required spiritual result? We need to be careful that the physical event doesn't overshadow the spiritual result. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for doing just that; for washing their hands (the outside), but they were neglecting the spiritual (the inside) (Matthew 15:2 to 9; Mark 7:2 to 13). 'This people honour Me with their lips, but remove their hearts and minds far from Me' (Isaiah 29:13).

While both the physical and spiritual are important, we need to get a sense of balance. Baptism is a liquid event, in which the water separates a person from their past. It is not what the water is doing (rinsing off the dirt), but what the risen Lord is doing through the water (washing away sin). There is both the human and the divine involved in baptism. It is not just a symbolic act, but an act of obedience and submission in which something spiritual is being done. Paul lists some horrible things the Corinthian folks had done, but he said, 'As such were some of you, but you were washed clean, sanctified and justified (through baptism)' (1 Corinthians 6:1 to 11). What is God doing through baptism? What is the divine side of baptism? It is part of the salvation He wants us to have; saving people from the power of sin. It is a divine cleansing of God, separating us from the old life and giving us a fresh new life. God uses baptism to cleanse our hearts. He uses water to do what He wants in us. Believers' baptism as we know, is by full immersion in water. If however, a person has a physical condition preventing them from being baptised by full immersion, then pouring would be acceptable. We cannot refuse to baptise a person because they have a disability. We can't be caught up with the physical immersion when that is not possible. It is the heart that God sees, and if a person has the correct heart attitude and is unable to have any more than a pouring over the head while sitting in a tub or sitting in a chair outside, then God can honour that just as much because it is a spiritual event; a spiritual cleansing.

Most of the teaching on baptism in the New Testament is given to those who are already baptised. We can read about that in Paul's teaching on baptism in Romans 6:1 to 11. It is after baptism that the full meaning is drawn out. If God has truly baptised you, then whatever you read in the scriptures, will fit in with your experience and enlarge your understanding of what has taken place. You see your own baptism in this. If God didn't baptise you at the time, then when you read a passage you won't be able to connect your experience with the Word. It isn't that we need to fully understand the meaning of baptism, but that everything should relate to the Word afterwards and should expand it in our understanding and experience. Baptism is a way of identifying burial with Jesus but it can't be identified with His crucifixion. The essence of baptism is not a washing of dirt from your body, but an answer to having a good conscience with the risen Lord (1 Peter 3:21).

Here are five propositions to consider: (1) Water is an essential element in baptism. (2) The most meaningful mode is full immersion which should be practiced wherever possible. (3) The inward vital factor in baptism is the work of the risen Lord in cleansing the conscience of the baptised. (4) Where a believer has been baptised, the deciding issue as to its validity, is whether the Lord was active in that baptism to effect the spiritual results. (5) Where full immersion is not possible, it is better to baptise by pouring than not at all. There is no scriptural basis for excluding any Christian from baptism and in fact we are not to forbid or refuse baptism (Acts 10:47 & 48).

There is an Old Testament scripture that is symbolic of baptism. In this passage of scripture, God is speaking to Israel regarding their return to their homeland, which as we know, has now happened. In our lifetime, we have seen the fulfilment of this prophecy. God is in this day (the 21st century) cleansing Israel. He said "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart will I give you and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall heed My ordinances and do them. And you shall dwell in the land I gave your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God" (Ezekiel 36:25 to 27). And from there God goes on to bless Israel.

This is exactly what is happening in Israel today. How marvellous and exciting for us believers, that we have seen this scripture being fulfilled right before our eyes!

Jesus said we must all be born-again from above (John 3:1 to 7). That is to be born of water (baptism) and of born of the (Holy) Spirit. 'So that He (Jesus) might sanctify her (the church), having cleansed her (the church) by the washing of water with the Word' (Ephesians 5:26). Jesus Himself is called the Word of God (John 1:1; Revelation 19:13). For the believer, baptism is the 'pen' with which we join the 'dots' as we draw a spiritual 'picture' of the whole salvation message.

Amen and God bless you.

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