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## **BAPTISM**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM**

In the summer after I had graduated from high school, I was asked to give my testimony at a Christian tennis tournament. I was a little nervous but agreed to do so. The director gathered all the players into a large circle and they listened to me share my love for Christ. When I had finished, I saw a gentleman walking toward me, looking as if he wanted to tell me something. “Young man,” he said, “thank you for your testimony...” I knew what was coming next. “But,” he added, “you forgot something key.” I quickly reviewed what I had said and wondered to myself what I could have missed. He went on, “If you read the Bible correctly, you would know it is not just by faith in Christ that you are saved; you must also be baptized.”

This was the first time I had heard this concept. The man took out his Bible and started showing me passages to prove his view. We had a friendly dialogue for about fifteen minutes but could not agree. Before he departed, he encouraged me to continue to study the Word of God on the matter. The discussion left a lasting impression on me, and over the years I continued to search Scripture to understand the practice of baptism.

Would you know how to respond if you encountered such a gentleman? In this pamphlet we hope to provide a short biblical perspective which will enable the Christian to deal with the question of baptism. To pursue the investigation we will use the tools employed by a journalist (*Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?*).

#### **A. Who may be baptized?**

The question of who is eligible for baptism has been a source of debate through the ages. There are two common views: believers’ baptism and paedobaptism. Believers’ baptism is the conviction that a person can, and should, be baptized following faith in Jesus Christ. Paedobaptism, also called infant baptism, is the practice of baptizing infants of Christian parents.

As will be demonstrated, the author holds to the position of believers’ baptism. At the same time, however, he recognizes that many fine Christians maintain a paedobaptist standpoint. Although the topic is very important, he does not regard it as a matter over which Christians should divide. Nevertheless, it is vital that we each understand what we believe and why. We will first summarize the three primary arguments for paedobaptism and some responses to each from a believers’ baptism point of view, before moving on to consider some general principles surrounding the question of who can be baptized.

*Argument for paedobaptism — 1: The New Testament talks about entire households being baptized.*

The New Testament makes mention on several occasions of the early church baptizing entire households. The term “household” would have embraced everyone in the home, including children and possibly infants.

*“When she [Lydia] and the members of her household were baptized...” (Acts 16:15).*

*“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized” (Acts 16:33).*

*“Yes, I [Paul] also baptized the household of Stephanas...” (1 Cor. 1:16).*

*Response to argument 1:*

The verses above do not form a definitive argument. They are general statements. We do not know whether infants were included in the household baptisms.

*Argument for paedobaptism — 2: As Jewish male infants were circumcised under the old covenant, so infants should be baptized in the new covenant.*

*“In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:11-14).*

Under the old covenant, a Jewish male would have been circumcised when he was eight days old. It provided a visible picture of the reality that he was a member of the Old Testament covenant of faith. Those who advocate infant baptism note the comparison the apostle Paul makes between baptism and circumcision in Colossians 2 and draw the conclusion that infants born into a new covenant household should be baptized, just as they were circumcised in the old.

*Response to argument 2:*

The problem with this analogy is that whereas a child was physically born into the Old Testament covenantal community, this is no longer the case in the New Testament. We do not enter the new covenant by physical birth but by spiritual birth. The point of comparison between circumcision and baptism is that they both provide physical, pictorial signs of the connection to the community of faith.

*Argument for paedobaptism — 3: There is a historical predominance of the practice of paedobaptism.*

Infant baptism is recorded as early as the second century. At some point in the fourth century it became the dominant practice in the church and continued so for centuries. Throughout history, millions of faithful followers of Christ have believed that the Word of God teaches infant baptism.

*Response to argument 3:*

Although it is good to appreciate history, not all historical practices are necessarily biblical. In and of itself, the historical argument is insufficient.

There are three further considerations related to the issue of paedobaptism:

*1. There is no explicit command in the New Testament to baptize infants.*

Since the Old Testament emphasizes the necessity of circumcision, we would expect the New Testament to make it abundantly clear if infants should be baptized. But nowhere do we find a direct command to baptize infants. Instead, whenever baptism is used in association with the word “believe,” it always follows this order: believe and then be baptized.

*2. It appears that one of the primary factors in the growth of the practice of infant baptism was the issue of original sin.*

The doctrine of original sin states that we are all born into sin, estranged from a relationship with God. When this was adopted as an orthodox statement of faith, parents expressed concern about what this meant for their children. Although evangelical paedobaptists today do not believe that water can wash away sins, my own study of history has led me to conclude that the early church introduced infant baptism, at least in part, as a response to these fears, claiming that water helped cleanse one’s sin.

*3. In order to answer the question of who can be baptized, it is essential to consider the theological framework surrounding baptism.*

Rather than examining isolated texts that do not prove the matter one way or the other, it is essential to consider what Scripture teaches on the meaning and purpose of baptism. The author believes it is difficult to maintain a paedobaptist position in light of this overall framework.

## **B. What is the significance of baptism?**

As with the question of who can be baptized, opinions vary as to the significance of baptism. Some place very little value on the ordinance. At the other extreme there are those who, like the gentleman at the tennis tournament, argue that it is necessary for salvation.

The reason some people believe it is a prerequisite for salvation is that some passages in the New Testament make a connection between baptism and salvation or forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

*“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).*

*“In it [Noah’s ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, 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” (1 Pet. 3:20b-21).*

In response to this assertion that baptism is necessary for salvation we will examine three arguments:

1. *The majority of Christians have never practiced “believers’ baptism.”*

If you teach that believers’ baptism is necessary for salvation, you are necessarily claiming that the majority of Christians are going to hell. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, J. I. Packer, and John Stott, for example, never experienced believers’ baptism.

2. *Scripture would make this clear if true; instead, the Bible points against it.*

God loves you so much that He would give His only Son Jesus to die for you. He wants you to be saved. He wants you to experience a relationship of love with Him. It follows that He would have clearly revealed it in Scripture if believers’ baptism were necessary for salvation.

Instead, wherever the core thesis of the gospel is summarized, there is no mention of baptism. Notice:

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).*

*“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31).*

*“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” (Eph. 2:8-9).*

3. *The example of the thief on the cross is evidence that baptism is not necessary for salvation.*

*“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: ‘Aren’t You the Christ? Save Yourself and us!’*

*But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’*

*Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’*

*Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:39-43).*

Two criminals were crucified with Jesus Christ. One of them had a true heart of repentance and recognized Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. He was about to die and had no opportunity to be baptized. Jesus’ reply dispels any doubt that baptism is a prerequisite for heaven: *“Today, you will be with Me in paradise” (v. 43).*

The issue of the necessity of believers’ baptism for salvation is far more important than the debate over infant baptism. When someone asserts that baptism is required, he is making a statement on the very essence of the gospel.

So what then is the significance of baptism and what does it actually mean? The image of a modern wedding ceremony may help us. In our society it would be unimaginable to witness a wedding in which there was no exchange of rings. In no way does a wedding ring make a marriage; but it does symbolize the marriage vows. In a similar way, someone who came to faith in the early church would have been baptized as a visible symbol of this faith. An unbaptized

follower of Christ was an unknown concept. Hence the New Testament writers describe a close link between faith and baptism.

There are at least three parts to this symbolism:

*1. When we are baptized, we associate with the body of Christ.*

When we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior, He comes to live in us through the Holy Spirit, and we become citizens of His kingdom. Baptism is not merely an individual act; it is also a means of demonstrating that we are now part of a new social identity, the church of Jesus Christ.

*2. When we are baptized, we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ.*

*“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... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him” (Rom. 6:3-4, 8).*

Very few commentators recognize that Paul means something very different when he uses “in/into/with Christ,” than if he were to say, “in/into/with Jesus.” In his writings the word “Christ” is a technical word, meaning Israel’s Anointed King—that is, the Messiah. When Paul chooses the phrase “in/into/with Christ,” he is making a connection with the kings of the Old Testament, who represented their people, even to the point of corporate solidarity. When the Old Testament kings did what was right in God’s eyes, the people were blessed. But when they did what was evil, the people were cursed. In the same way, what happens to Christ, the Anointed King, also happens to His people. Since Jesus Christ was crucified, buried, and raised again, His people need to do the same. We follow in His footsteps. In baptism we are submerged in the water; we die and go down into the grave with Christ. Water has a double symbolism in Scripture—judgment and cleansing—and in the waters of baptism we remember that Jesus took the judgment we deserved on the cross and so cleansed us from our sin. But our Savior did not stay in the tomb. He was raised from the dead! As we come up out of the waters, we symbolize the reality that we have risen with Him.

*3. When we are baptized, we proclaim death to our old life and a rising to walk in the newness of life in Christ.*

We not only identify with the death and resurrection of Christ; we proclaim that we have died to our old selves and now walk in the newness of life in Christ. Some evangelicals have lost sight of this extremely important point. We are raised out of the water as a means of identification with Christ’s resurrection, but also as a declaration that we are forgiven and have risen to a new life. In fact, many early church believers chose to be baptized in their old clothes to represent their old life. Once they came up out of the water, they would change into new clothes, indicating that they were a new creation.

**C. When should baptism occur?**

Having already laid out the view held by the author that baptism should follow conversion, let us turn to the question of the timing. In the early church it seems believers were baptized

immediately following their profession of faith in Christ. At our church we hold an annual baptism service at the beach when numerous people are baptized publicly in the ocean. It becomes a tremendous celebration and witness to our community.

So how do we reconcile an annual baptism event with the idea that people were baptized straightaway in the New Testament church? We believe God knows our hearts. If we make a commitment to be baptized at the next public opportunity, He honors that intention. Even though we wait for our annual celebration, people are already responding in obedience by signing up. There are, however, those believers who feel they need to experience baptism immediately, and we will baptize them if they request it.

There is a further consideration for Christian parents who have young children that have professed faith and wish to be baptized. Oftentimes, those who are raised in a Christian home will repeat a salvation prayer at a young age. This is wonderful. If they can verbalize their faith in Christ and they desire to be baptized, we will baptize them. But if children have opened their hearts to Christ and been baptized all while relatively young, they have never taken a public stand for Christ when it might cost them something. So I encourage parents to consider waiting until children know what it truly means to live for Christ. In the teenage years, for example, following Christ involves standing out from the crowd, losing a friend or two, living with sexual purity. If they continue to follow Christ through these times, baptism becomes a powerful public testimony and pictorial symbol.

#### **D. How should baptism be administered?**

I believe Scripture teaches that baptism should be by immersion. Those baptized in the New Testament were immersed. What is more, the analogy we discussed previously of identifying with Christ's burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-8) suggests immersion rather than sprinkling. However, if one were in a setting where immersion proved impossible, I believe God would honor baptism by sprinkling. He is ultimately concerned with our hearts far more than the actual process. But, if possible, we should follow the example of immersion.

#### **E. Where should baptism take place?**

Baptism can take place anywhere: baptistry, river, stream, lake, or ocean. If Jesus lived in South Florida today, I doubt that He would be baptizing His followers in a baptistry. Likely, He would be at the ocean baptizing in a public setting.

#### **F. Why should we be baptized?**

*1. To obey and trust the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Matthew 28:19 is not an optional extra. Christ commanded us to make disciples and baptize them. Given that Jesus laid down very few rules to follow and that the instructions He left are always for our good, we need to pay great attention to them.

For Americans there may be a price to pay in the public confession of baptism. It may cost us our popularity or reputation. But for many in the world today, the price of obeying the command to be baptized is far greater. I have had the privilege to meet Christians who have been physically beaten, cast out of their homes, and rejected as a result of their profession of faith in Jesus Christ through baptism.

In former Communist countries, such as Ukraine, it used to be illegal to be baptized. Nevertheless, Christians report how they were baptized in the woods at night. The secret police often listened in to their meetings, trying to discover when the churches were planning the next baptisms. If they found out, they would follow them into the woods. Christians who were caught being baptized risked losing their jobs, and their children could be taken from them and placed in orphanages. And yet these believers in Ukraine were so convinced that they must be obedient to Jesus' command that they continued to baptize—even through the ice on lakes in the middle of winter.

*2. To receive with gratitude a picture of our faith.*

Though the Reformer Martin Luther was a proponent of infant baptism, it is interesting that whenever he questioned his faith, he would repeat to himself: "I have been baptized. I have been baptized." The picture of baptism helped him remember God's promises to him in Christ. Just as wedding rings are exchanged to symbolize both the husband's promises to his wife and her promises to him, so baptism represents not only our profession of faith in Christ, but also His promises to us.

*3. To demonstrate our unashamed love of Christ.*

When we enter the waters of baptism, it is like the part of the wedding ceremony when the couple declares: "I will!" In baptism we proclaim our love for, and desire to follow, our Lord.

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Baptism has been devalued in the American church and yet is of great importance. If you are a believer, have you obeyed Christ Jesus' command by publicly declaring your love for Him? If you are struggling in your faith, can you think back to the day you were baptized and remember the promises it represented? When I look at my wedding ring, I think of my bride and it reminds me of the commitments I have made and how much I love her. When I picture my baptism, I remember all that Christ has done for me and my love for Him.