

The Issue of Christian Baptism

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Various disputes regarding baptism have been sprinkled (pun intended) throughout the history of the church. We have poured (pun intended again) ourselves into theological debate for centuries. We have been immersed (again, pun intended) in arguments as to why a person should be baptized or when as well as how baptism should be performed and even for whom. For instance:

- Is baptism only for adults who are able to make a conscious choice to follow Jesus or should we allow our children to be baptized as well if they are able to make a conscious choice?
- If so, what is the appropriate age limit, or is there one, at which we should allow children to be baptized.
- Is baptism intended, as some suggest, for infants as well as for adults and children?
- When we baptize people should we insist on immersion, or is its essential purpose equally stated through sprinkling or effusion?
- Some view baptism as a sacrament while others see it as an ordinance.
- Some have even argued that being baptized is an essential ingredient to salvation without which a person cannot experience the Christian grace of redemption and forgiveness of sin.
- Others opine that the practice of baptism has been given far too much press in the local church and look at it somewhat nonchalantly.
- Some, given their stance that baptism in the New Testament was largely a cultural issue of its time, ignore it altogether as a current practice.

It is fair to assume that these various positions regarding baptism have been derived by inference from the Bible in that each involves reasoning from within the body of biblical texts regarding baptism. However, in that we human beings are given to personal prejudice and are often subject to our own respected traditions, the process of deduction and induction by which fallible humans arrive at conclusions tends us toward error. For all our debate the simple truth is this—it is difficult, if not impossible, to say with any degree of intellectual honesty that any one position regarding baptism is definitely taught by Scripture. For that reason it is important for us to observe just what the Bible says about baptism and how the word is used in the New Testament. An understanding of the biblical usage of this fairly significant term will help us to evaluate the arguments of theologians as well as to position ourselves in relation to the many emphases found in various Christian traditions regarding the practice of baptism.

Baptism in the Greek and Jewish Tradition

Both Greek and Jewish religions at the time of Jesus were acquainted with the practice of ritual washings for purification. However, different Greek words were used in each tradition to describe these washings. Some have linked Christian baptism to a

Jewish practice that was followed when a man converted to Judaism. The individual was circumcised and then took a ritual bath. However, this practice is directly linked with Old Testament commands about washing for purification. In neither the Greek religions nor Jewish practice was there a parallel to Christian baptism, nor was the term “baptism” used to describe ritual washings.

Baptism more or less as we know it today was first instituted by John the Baptist. It was a religious innovation. Its intention of communicating the message of one’s personal identity as a believer in God and as a follower of his promised Messiah has no prior precedent, either among the faiths of the Greeks nor in the world of Judaism.

The Meaning of “Baptize” in the New Testament

Two similar and closely related Greek verbs are employed to form the word that is translated into our English term baptism. *Bapto* is the basic verb. It means “to dip in” or “to dip under.” It is often used in the writings of antiquity to describe the dipping of fabric in a dye or of plunging soiled garments or linen down into the water to clean them. *Baptizo* (*baptidzo*) is an intensive form of *bapto*. From early times it was used in the sense of immersing.

As previously mentioned, other Greek words were commonly used of the religious washings in pagan and Jewish religions. In the New Testament, *bapto* is used only in its literal sense of dipping (Luke 16:24; John 13:26; Revelation 19:13). *Baptizo* is the Greek word translated “baptize.” It is used infrequently of the ritual washings of the Pharisees (Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38). Primarily *baptizo* communicates aspects of God’s working through the Christian gospel.

The Five Uses of “Baptize” in the Bible

The average person who reads the word “baptize” in the Bible is likely to assume that it refers to water baptism. Such is not always the case. There are five different uses of the term “baptism” in the Bible: the baptism of repentance offered by John, the baptism of Jesus, water baptism, baptism by the Spirit, and baptism as union with Jesus.

1. John’s Baptism.

All four of the Gospels contain a report of the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1). His name was derived not from his message but

from the new practice he instituted; the immersing of people who responded to his teaching that people must repent of their sin into the Jordan River as a symbolic statement of their agreement with his message.

John called for the people of Israel to turn away from sin and toward God in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Those who accepted John's message were called on to acknowledge their commitment publicly. As John preached repentance, those who went into the waters to be baptized acknowledged their sins and made a commitment to live righteously. John taught them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). The ritual itself had no merit. It must be the changed lives of the baptized that testified to the inner sincerity of their hearts.

John's baptism, then, seems to have involved three significant factors: (1) public identification with his message, (2) a public commitment to live by God's well-known standards of righteousness, and (3) a public expression of eagerness to welcome the Messiah.

John's baptism is not the same in nature or intent as Christian baptism. But the new practice John introduced was picked up by the early church and given new significance—to reflect a reality that goes far beyond the meaning that John gave to baptism—the forgiveness of sins (reconciliation) and imputation of righteousness (redemption) resulting from God's bestowed grace through faith in his Messiah.

2. The Baptism of Jesus.

Why would Jesus accept a baptism of repentance? Even John, knowing the blameless character of his cousin (Luke 1:36) but not yet realizing that he was the Messiah, seemed hesitant, understandably, to baptize him. The answer is at least hinted at in Matthew 3 where Jesus said to John: "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).

John's baptism did not itself mean that a person was repentant. It merely signified that the one being baptized identified himself with John's teachings. Jesus found it fitting to be baptized; thereby identifying himself with the call to righteousness issued by John's message.

3. Baptism in the Church.

John's baptism is mentioned a number of times in the Gospels and in Acts. Corollary passages in Acts and the Epistles make it clear that the early church also practiced water baptism (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47, 48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Corinthians 1:14-17; 15:29; Hebrews 6:2).

However, none of these passages attempts to define what water baptism meant to the early Christian community. We know only that when a person received Christ as Savior, thereby becoming a part of the community of faith, he or she was baptized.

We may safely conclude that water baptism, as is the case with the Lord's Supper, was practiced in the church from its inception and is, therefore, most likely a necessary and positive component of contemporary church life. But we cannot conclude from these passages just what water baptism was intended to convey.

The teaching of the early church was not that water baptism was necessary for one's salvation. Paul himself expressed relief that in his mission to Corinth he himself "did not baptize any ... except Crispus and Gaius" (1 Corinthians 1:14). Were baptism necessary for one's salvation Paul's mention of his not having extensively participated in it would be curious indeed.

While Scripture is silent on the exact meaning of water baptism as practiced in the church, it speaks very clearly about supernatural works of God in the life of the believer, works that are also called baptism. It seems best to understand the meaning of the practice of water baptism by studying the meaning of the theological baptisms revealed in Scripture.

4. Baptism by the Spirit.

John taught the concept of personal repentance and baptized those who responded to his teachings. When asked if he believed himself to be the Messiah, John answered that he was not; that in fact there was a person living even then in the land of Palestine who, he said, "is more powerful than I." That person would appear and baptize, not with water "but with the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16).

The Book of Acts describes the fulfillment of that promise. The baptism took place at the coming of the Spirit on Jesus' followers as reported in Acts 2 (cf. Acts 2:1-4 with 10:45-47 and 11:15-17). Acts describes a number of related phenomena that also took place at that time. The Spirit came. The Spirit filled the believers. There was an outward sign of fiery tongues and a rushing wind. The Spirit empowered the believers to speak in languages other than their own. But again, this is description, not definition. This was the time when Jesus' baptism with the Spirit took place. But the description does not tell us what that baptism is nor whether it is relevant to Christian experience today.

In the Epistles, however, there is a definition of baptism by the Spirit. The definition is given in 1 Corinthians 12:13, and the context makes it clear that the Spirit's baptism was neither the historic incident itself nor any of the associated phenomena. Speaking of the body of Christ, a living organism into which Christians are formed, the Bible declares that "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." The baptism of the Spirit began at Pentecost but is a continuing work of the Holy Spirit. Each individual who believes in Jesus experiences the baptism, for it is that work of the Holy Spirit by which he joins us to Jesus and to one another as members of a spiritual body.

This theological definition helps us see how appropriate the term “baptism” is: we are immersed in the Holy Spirit, and in Jesus himself by the Spirit. Baptism, then, may appropriately be understood as a unifying agency in the church.

5. Baptism as Union with Jesus.

The baptizing work of the Spirit that unites us as one body also unites us to Jesus, the head of the body. This aspect of baptism, union with Jesus himself, is picked up in several New Testament passages. The most notable is Romans 6:3-8: “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. If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. . . . Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

The intent here is not to suggest what happens as the result of one’s baptism; rather, it is to teach what happens within the life of a person who becomes a Christian. God’s grace so unites the life of the new believer to Jesus that Christ’s own death and resurrection become his. Freed from bondage to the old life, believers are given power by Jesus to live a new kind of life.

Other New Testament passages also refer to baptism in this theological sense as real union with Jesus. Ephesians 4:5 speaks of the “one baptism” that, with the Spirit’s other work, enables us to live in unity with other Christians. Colossians 2:12 picks up the language of Romans 6 and describes the believer as “having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through ... faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Galatians 3:27 announces, “All of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.”

Each of these passages is best understood as speaking not of the rite of water baptism but of a work performed by God, uniting us with Jesus so completely that his death and resurrection become our own.

It may well be that the great theological reality of union with Jesus in death and resurrection are intended to be affirmed by the water baptism practiced by the church. But as in the case of John’s baptism, it is clear that the efficacy of Christian baptism does not lie in the ceremony but in an inner work of God within the heart of the person.

Difficult Passages Related to Baptism

A number of New Testament passages have been misinterpreted or have raised questions about baptism:

Mark 10:38-39

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” 39 “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with.”

Jesus asked a pair of eager disciples if they were able to drink the cup intended for him or to be baptized with the baptism he was baptized with. Jesus was speaking of his coming death and of his immersion in that experience of total suffering:

Matthew 3:11

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The Bible speaks of Jesus’ baptizing with the Holy Spirit “and with fire.” This is generally taken as an expression that refers to the final judgment reserved for those who will not believe:

Mark 16:16

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

This verse is sometimes taken to teach that baptism is required for salvation. The two clauses of the verse make it clear that belief alone is the issue on which salvation hinges:

Acts 22:16

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

Instead of teaching that baptism washes away sins, as some have taken the verse to say, the truth here is simply that it is calling on the Lord that effects the cleansing:

1 Corinthians 15:29

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?

Paul refers to the ancient practice of the living being baptized for those who have died, not to voice approval for the practice but in the context of an argument for the truth and importance of the doctrine of the resurrection. In a church in which some doubt the reality of resurrection, it is foolish for others to have initiated a practice of being baptized for the dead. If there is no resurrection, why would they introduce this strange practice?

1 Corinthians 10:2

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

This verse refers to the Exodus generation, who traveled under God's cloudy pillar and—when God opened a way—passed through the sea, as having been “baptized into Moses.” The expression indicates that they were immersed with Moses in a relationship marked by sharing common experiences of God's supernatural activity:

1 Peter 3:21

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.

Many have understood this verse to teach that the ceremony of water baptism saves. The passage speaks of the Genesis flood and the ark that Noah built, in which “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.”

To understand this statement we need to note that in the Old Testament story, the waters of the Flood were the agency of judgment, not the agency of deliverance. The eight people in the ark were carried through the waters safely, to be deposited in a new world, purified by the judgment. In context Peter says that our salvation is made possible by Jesus' resurrection, a resurrection that we who are united with him share. The waters of the Genesis flood symbolize what happens when we are baptized by the Spirit into Jesus. We are carried by Jesus through God's devastating judgment on sin and are deposited in virtue of his resurrection in a fresh, new spiritual universe in which we are expected to live according to the will of God (1 Peter 4:2).

Summary

In summary, baptism by immersion has been practiced by the church since its beginning. But believers have not always understood water baptism. The teaching of the Bible does not support many notions about baptism.

If we are to reach adequate conclusions about baptism, we need to recognize the following basic facts:

- Christian baptism has no parallel in the Old Testament.
- The “baptism of John” described in the Gospels and Acts is distinct from Christian baptism.
- The New Testament uses the term “baptism” to speak of great spiritual realities as well as the rite of water baptism.
- The practice of water baptism in the New Testament is exclusively immersion.
- The spiritual realities communicated by the word “baptism” concern our true union with Jesus in his death and resurrection and our present union in vital organic relationship with all believers in the living body of Christ.
- It cannot be concocted that water baptism is a necessary component of spiritual regeneration.

- It cannot be accurately stated that water baptism should be a prerequisite to one's identifying with the local assembly of believers.
- Never the less, that we who comprise a local body of believers should baptize those who are believers in and followers of Jesus appears to be strictly enforced as a practice of the New Testament Church and for all who would participate within its life and fellowship.
- That baptism be reserved for those who are of sufficient age as to comprehend their own inherent sinfulness and subsequent need for reconciliation and redemption and who have, therefore, responded obediently to the effectual call of God's offer of salvation.

Epilogue

Is it an appropriate baptism only if one is immersed, or is the message of baptism equally meaningful through the practice of sprinkling or effusion? Who knows? None can say with certainty. Many attest to a deeply meaningful experience and expression of baptism via sprinkling or effusion. Such is their right and privilege. Given the absence of any command regarding the mode or method of baptizing it is not appropriate to dismiss such views as being errant. All that may be said with certainty is that it appears that the practice of baptism in the New Testament Church was a baptism through immersion. Precisely how important it is that we adhere to that one method may not be ascertained—it may only be supposed.

It seems that baptism should not be placed before people as a rite of passage that is required for the attaining of church membership but rather offered as the happy occasion for the identifying of oneself with the Savior. As such, we do not require water baptism of those who would become members in our church. However, for those believers who have not been baptized we actively and enthusiastically encourage it for all who become a part of our fellowship. Perhaps we may better understand the import of baptism if we see it less in the negative sense of something we have to do for the sake of satisfying church membership requirements and more in the positive light of Christ's invitation to those who join him to gladly make a public declaration of our inclusion into his life.

The basic truth of our union with all believers and with Jesus is so vital that it places our differences with others about the practice of baptism in distinct perspective. We are one in and through our relationship with Jesus. We may disagree about details. But our disagreements do not destroy the reality of a spiritual unity that makes us truly one.

It is my earnest hope that these thoughts will prove to have been helpful to you. Please accept my heart-felt thanks to you for having read them. For those who are yet undecided regarding being baptized, may I simply offer you a final encouragement to join the multiplied millions of Christian women, men and children that have gladly received Christian baptism at the invitation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.