

BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

Baptism is practiced by many Christians around the world as a public ritual which is generally understood as an act of identification with the Christian faith. Baptism was first introduced in Scripture in the ministry of John the Baptist who was preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). His practice of baptism was a sign of repentance and of identification with both himself and with Jesus whom he introduced to his audience as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The practice of baptizing was taken up by the disciples of Jesus as they followed Him into Judea where John reports that “He was spending time with them and baptizing” (John 3:22). The followers of Jesus caught the attention of the Pharisees when it was reported that “Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were)” (John 4:1-2). The significance and practice of baptism has not been without controversy, so it might be helpful to take a closer look at what the Bible has to say about the subject.

I. THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

The English word “baptism” comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, a word which means “to dip” or “to immerse” - so the English word is actually a transliteration of the Greek word rather than a translation. A closely related Greek word, *bapto*, was used in the dyers’ trade of ancient times, of the practice of submerging a piece of material into a solution of dye so that it became identified with the dye and came out a different color.

The word “baptism” and its related forms is used in several ways in the writings of the New Testament, not always with reference to the practice of believer’s baptism with water. Be-

cause this is often a source of confusion, it would be well to list and briefly examine these uses in their individual Scriptural settings:

1. Used of John's Baptism - Matthew 3:4-6

John the Baptist became identified by the word because he appeared in the Judean wilderness, calling the people of Israel to repent of their sins. His practice of baptism was a sign of a person's repentance and identification with him and the one he came to introduce to Israel (cf. Acts 19:4).

2. Used of the Baptism of Christ - Matthew 3:13-17

This was also John's baptism, but for a different reason. Jesus had nothing to repent of, but instructed John to baptize Him "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Because John was the messianic forerunner, it was appropriate that Jesus identify with John in the waters of baptism.

3. Used as a Proper Name - Matthew 3:1; Mark 6:14

John the Baptist was identified as the "Baptist" because of his practice of baptism in his ministry as the messianic forerunner (cf. Malachi 3:1-2).

4. Used of Ritual Washing - Mark 7:4

The word translated "washing" is the Greek word for "baptizing" (*baptismos*) - describing the tradition of Jewish elders concerning the ritual washing of hands and cups and pitchers and pots.

5. Used of Sufferings - Luke 12:50

When Jesus said “I have a baptism to undergo,” He was anticipating the suffering into which He would be “immersed.” And He anticipated that some of His disciples would experience a baptism of suffering as well (Mark 10:38-39).

6. Used of Baptism **with** the Spirit - Matthew 3:11-12

John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting that it was John’s prediction that Jesus would **do** the baptizing in this case - as He did on the day of Pentecost, and continues to do each time someone receives His gift of salvation (I Corinthians 12:13b).

7. Used of Baptism with Fire - Matthew 3:11-12

As the context indicates, this is the fire of judgment, not the “tongues as of fire” recorded in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost as some have suggested. When the baptism of fire occurs the Lord “will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

8. Used of Baptism **by** the Spirit - I Corinthians 12:13

Note that the Spirit is the agent by whom all who are in Christ are all baptized into one body - the body of Christ.

9. Used of Believer’s Baptism - Matthew 28:19

Though the method of believers’ baptism is the same as the method used by John the Baptist, the meaning of the act is different (see Acts 19:3-5). Believer’s baptism is the first of two steps Jesus taught His disciples would be involved in the process of making disciples of all nations. Disciples are to be baptized “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” - a process which takes only minutes. Then they are to

be taught to **observe** all that Jesus commanded - a process which takes the rest of a believer's life.

10. Used in Special (Symbolic) Senses

- a. Baptism Into Moses - I Corinthians 10:2. The apostle Paul wrote that the people of Israel were all "baptized into Moses" by their common experience under the cloud and passing through the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses.
- b. Baptism of a Clear Conscience - I Peter 3:21. The baptism which "now saves you," wrote Peter, is not the "removal of dirt from the flesh," but (as in the case of Noah, cited in verse 20) "an appeal to God for a good conscience." If Noah had been "baptized" along with the rest of humanity in the waters of the flood, he would have died! But he didn't die because he had a good conscience before the Lord, so he "found grace/favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8).

II. THE METHOD OF BAPTISM

The method of baptism practiced by the early church was entirely in keeping with the meaning of the word. As Wiliston Walker puts it in his History of the Christian Church:

"As to the method of baptism, it is probable that the original form was by immersion, complete or partial."

Two additional methods of "baptism" are sometimes practiced today (as they have been for centuries) - sprinkling and affusion (pouring). These practices seem to have originated where there was a lack of water to baptize by immersion. They are not fully in harmony with the meaning of the word nor with

the practice of the early church.

III. THE HISTORY OF BAPTISM

A. Jewish Proselyte Baptism

When the practice of proselyte baptism started is not known. The Jews required baptism, among other things, of Gentiles who wished to be identified with the Jewish nation. This practice is known to have been in use around the time of Christ.

B. John's Baptism

When John the Baptist appeared in the Judean wilderness just prior to the public ministry of Christ, he engaged in the practice of water baptism as a sign of repentance and identification with the coming Kingdom and its Messiah, Jesus Christ.

C. Believer's Baptism (Christian Baptism)

When Jesus was about to depart the earth, He instructed His disciples to baptize those who became new disciples. The book of Acts makes it clear that this practice was carried on, as Jesus said it should be, by the early church.

IV. THE REASON FOR BAPTISM

There are two reasons why baptism should be practiced today and why every believer in Jesus Christ should seek to be baptized at his earliest convenience after receiving Christ as his Savior from sin. They are:

A. Obedience to Christ - Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 2:38

Though Christ did not command anyone to be baptized, He made it clear that He intended that His followers should be baptized as a part of being a disciple. The early apostles had no hesitation about challenging those who believed in Christ to be baptized.

B. Identification with Christ - Matthew 28:16-20

Baptism is always an act of identification, whether it be with a color, a way of life, a nation, or a person. This is true of believer's baptism. When Jesus instructed His disciples to baptize those who became disciples, He stated that they should be baptized "in[to] the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The Greek word translated "in" is not the common word *en* (in), but the less common word *eis* (into). Baptism identifies a believer with God and with His people.

CLARIFICATION

Baptism does not save from sin, nor is it necessary for salvation. The Bible teaches very clearly that salvation is by faith in Jesus and His work, not by any work of man (Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 3:5). I Peter 3:18 ff. speaks of a baptism which saves, but it states specifically that it is "not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience." When a person has been immersed in a good conscience before God because of his saving faith in Christ, the Lord then wants that person to be immersed in water as an act of obedience to His will and an act of identification with Him and with His people.