

# Doctrinal Considerations Regarding BAPTISM

There are many different beliefs about baptism within the Christian community. Some believe there is no salvation if there is no water baptism. Others believe water baptism is entirely symbolic. Some baptize infants and others baptize only adults. Then there are those who focus on a baptism of the Spirit and make it an experience completely separate from salvation.

It is very important to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism. If it is necessary for salvation, then we ought to know that and participate in it lest we miss out. If it is not necessary for salvation then we ought to know that and help people avoid trusting in something that does not save. If there is something we ought to seek after salvation, then we ought to understand what that is and pursue it with passion. If there is not, then we ought to be able to defend against such teaching with scriptural evidence.

Half of all references to baptism in the Bible are found in the Gospels. Jesus himself was baptized, but His baptism is very different than Christian baptism. It served as an anointing, marking the beginning of his ministry on earth. John's baptism of the Israelites bears some resemblance to Christian baptism in that the fruits of repentance were a prerequisite (Matthew 3:7-8). Still it was different, because those who had been baptized unto John's baptism were re-baptized after Christ's work on earth was completed (Acts 19:1-5). Some point to the thief on the cross to show that baptism is irrelevant. He professed belief in Christ and Christ promised him a place in paradise even though he could not possibly get down off the cross and be baptized. This was before the church began, however, and question whether or not it is appropriate to apply this specific incident to Christian baptism.

For an understanding of Christian baptism, one must study the book of Acts and the New Testament letters. A literal and dispensational interpretation of these Scriptures will show that there is a spiritual baptism that takes place at the moment a person is saved. This spiritual baptism consists of the Holy Spirit placing a believer into the body of Christ. It will also show that there is a water baptism which is entirely symbolic, serving as a public testimony of one's salvation and as an illustration of the spiritual baptism performed by the Holy Spirit. To arrive at other conclusions about baptism requires a different method of interpreting Scripture.

## The Word "Baptism"

The word baptism is a transliteration of a Greek word rather than a translation. Transliteration transfers the spelling of a word from the alphabet of one language into the alphabet of another language. Thus the Greek word βάπτισμος (baptismos) becomes the English word "baptism." Translation, on the other hand, transfers the meaning of a word from the vocabulary of one language into the vocabulary of another language. If the word βάπτισμος (baptismos) were translated instead of transliterated, Scripture would typically read "immersed" instead of "baptism" because that is the action suggested by the meaning of the word.

The Greek verb "baptidzo" means to immerse or submerge an object into something else such as a liquid like water or dye. In each case where the word baptism or any of its forms is found in the Bible, it would be appropriate to substitute the word "immerse" as an English translation of the Greek word. It is translated "washed" in Luke 11:38 because the focus of the context is on the **effect** rather than the **action** of immersing one's hands into a basin of water. Immersing is the

**action** of baptism, washing or dyeing are possible **effects** which result from the act of immersing depending upon the specific activity involved.

God chose to use the word “baptism” in the Bible because the **action** of immersing describes the spiritual relationship of a believer to Jesus Christ.

In Romans 6:3-4, believers are  
baptized, or immersed, **into** Christ;  
and  
baptized, or immersed, **into** his death.

In I Corinthians 12:13, believers are  
baptized, or immersed, **into** one body  
(the spiritual body of Christ).

In Galatians 3:27, believers are  
baptized, or immersed, **into** Christ.

### Spiritual Baptism

Spiritual baptism is an act of the Holy Spirit by which he places a believer into the spiritual body of Christ. I Corinthians 12:13 says, “*For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body....*” When a person receives Jesus Christ as his Savior, he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit who then baptizes him into the body of Christ. This latter act is called “baptism” because the Holy Spirit immerses the believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ called the church. Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27 support this concept by saying that believers are immersed into Christ; and Romans 6:3 adds that when a person is immersed into Christ, he is also immersed into His death. This means that when a believer is part of the spiritual body of Christ he is considered by God to have participated with Christ in His death on the cross. Romans 6:4 explains that the **effect** of this spiritual immersion into the death of Christ is a participation in the resurrection of Christ, enabling a Christian to walk in newness of life here on earth.

Spiritual baptism takes place at the very moment of salvation. It is not an experience subsequent to salvation. It is not a second blessing. It happens immediately upon a person’s receiving Christ as his personal Savior.

In that wonderful moment, when a person confesses his sinfulness to God, believes the Gospel of Christ in his heart, and prayerfully receives Christ, there are many things that happen to him. God forgives him for his sins, declares him to be justified, regenerates him, bestows eternal life upon him, indwells him by His Holy Spirit, seals him unto the day of the rapture/resurrection event, and immerses him into the body of Christ. All these things happen in a single moment of time, but some of them happen sequentially before or after others. For example, a person is forgiven before he is justified because God would not declare a person to be just before he has been forgiven. Likewise, a person is justified before he is baptized into the body of Christ because God would not include a person in Christ who has not been justified. It is very important to note that all of these things happen in exactly the same moment, and yet they do occur in a sequence.

The conclusion, therefore, is that while a person must be saved before he can be put into the body of Christ, there is no delay between these two events. They happen together in the same moment. Romans 8:9 clearly teaches that a person who has been born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit is also in Christ. Likewise, a person who has not been born again and indwelt by the Spirit is not in Christ. These two things, salvation and spiritual baptism, are as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. You cannot have one without having the other. They must, therefore, both occur at exactly the same time.

Spiritual baptism results from salvation; it does not produce salvation. At the same time, spiritual baptism is part of the salvation event and not a separate experience. Only those who have been born again by faith in Jesus Christ are baptized by the Spirit into Christ, but all who have been saved are baptized into Christ at the very moment they are regenerated by grace through faith in the gospel of Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

## **Water Baptism**

### **1. Purpose**

Being immersed into water is not what places a person into the body of Christ, nor does it cause one to participate in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Spiritual baptism by the Holy Spirit causes these things to happen as described above. So what then is the purpose of being baptized into water?

Water baptism is a testimony, a public declaration, which illustrates two aspects of a believer's relationship with Christ. First, water baptism symbolizes being placed into the body of Christ. However, because this is a permanent relationship and God did not want people left under the water permanently, He also provided, in His infinite wisdom, a second symbol in water baptism. Baptism also symbolizes being placed into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a person goes under the water, he shows that he is part of the body of Christ and as such has participated in Christ's death and burial. When he comes up out of the water, he shows that he is a full partner in the resurrection and is now walking in the hope of that resurrection in newness of life.

Being immersed into a body of water gives a believer the opportunity to declare openly his identity with Jesus Christ. If a person is not willing to be baptized into water, it is reasonable to wonder how real his relationship is with Christ. It seems that Christ ordered this symbolic act of water baptism to give each professing Christian the opportunity to state publicly that what he professes with his mouth is possessed in his heart.

### **2. Timing**

The Scripture is very clear on when a person may be baptized into water. It can properly take place only after a person has received Christ as Savior.

In Acts 2:41, those that had already "gladly received his word" were baptized. In Acts 8:12, the Samaritans were baptized when they believed the things that Philip had preached to them. In Acts 18:8, Crispus and many of the Corinthians believed the Gospel and then were baptized.

In Acts 10:44-48, some Gentiles who believed in Christ as their Savior were indwelt by the Holy Spirit just as believing Jews had been. God verified this by the same miraculous events He had used among the believing Jews. After the verification took place, Peter asked the other believing Jews if they could possibly forbid these believing Gentiles to be baptized with water. Obviously they could not, so Peter commanded the Gentile believers to be baptized into water because they had already been saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The Ethiopian Eunuch's question to Philip in Acts 8:36 gives further evidence that salvation comes first and then the testimony of water baptism. He asked, "*See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?*" Philip's reply was, "*If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest.*" As Roman's 10:10 says, "*For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.*" If the Ethiopian had not believed with his heart unto righteousness, the symbolic testimony of water baptism would not have meant anything. Salvation came first to the Ethiopian, and then he could testify about his

salvation by being immersed into water.

### **3. Mode**

Some churches “baptize” by pouring water over the head. Other churches “baptize” by sprinkling water on the forehead. Still others baptize by completely immersing the whole person under water. Does it matter what mode of baptism is used as long as it is done?

In reference to pouring and sprinkling, the word baptize was put in quotation marks in the previous paragraph because neither pouring nor sprinkling is really baptism. The Greek word “baptism” means to immerse. It never means to pour or sprinkle. The Greek word which means “to pour” is “cheo.” The Greek word which means “to sprinkle” is “rantidzo.” If God had wanted pouring or sprinkling to serve as the symbol for our relationship to Christ, He would have used one of those words. Instead, He used the word “baptidzo” which in translation means only “to immerse.”

In Acts 8:36-39 when Philip baptized the Ethiopian, they went down **into** the water and came **up out of** the water. When John the Baptist baptized, he did it **in** the Jordan river (Mark 1:5), at places where there was **much water** (John 3:23), because the water needed to be deep enough to immerse the ones being baptized.

Pouring and sprinkling does not properly fulfill the symbolism associated with baptism. Neither can properly illustrate being placed into the body of Christ, nor participating in His death, burial and resurrection. Immersion is the only mode of baptism that fulfills this testimony and communicates the truth of our relationship with Christ. Besides, pouring and sprinkling are used typically by those who believe the ceremony itself has some spiritual effect upon the participant and Scripture nowhere suggests that this is so.

### **4. Who should be baptized into water?**

Since water baptism is a public testimony intended to illustrate what has already happened in a person’s life, then only those who have received Christ as their Savior by grace through faith alone should be baptized into water. This eliminates infants, since they cannot believe. It also eliminates those who are old enough to believe in Christ but have not.

Caution should be used, though, in baptizing young children who have made a profession of faith. While children are capable of truly understanding the Gospel and genuinely receiving Christ at very young ages, it is better to wait until it can be confirmed that they understand the symbolism involved in water baptism. Baptizing them too soon may confuse them and make them think that the water had something to do with their salvation.

## **Some Doctrinal Errors Regarding Baptism**

### **1. Confusing spiritual baptism with the indwelling and filling works of the Holy Spirit.**

Some erroneously refer to the “baptism of the Spirit” as the time when the Holy Spirit enters into the life of a believer. It is true that God sends His Spirit into believers’ hearts (Galatians 4:6) to dwell within them (1 Corinthians 3:16). But Scripture never applies the term baptism to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism in the Bible refers exclusively to the act of the Holy Spirit by which he immerses a believer into Christ and to the immersion into water which symbolizes that event.

For those who believe that baptism is the same as indwelling, consider the analogy that

Christ himself draws between being baptized with water and being baptized with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:5, Jesus was talking to the disciples just before He ascended into Heaven. He said, *“For John truly baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.”* When John baptized the people with water, what did he do? Did he put the water into the people? Or did he put the people into the water? When he baptized with water, did he say, “Put your head back and open your mouth because I am going to pour water into you?” No, the baptism of John did not involve pouring water into the people. He immersed the people into water. This is clearly stated to be the process of water baptism in Acts 8:38 where Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch “went both down into the water” where Philip immersed the Ethiopian into the water, baptizing him because of his belief in Jesus Christ.

In the same way, baptism with the Spirit does not involve pouring or placing the Holy Spirit into a believer. Rather, it is the placing of the believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. When a believer is indwelt, the Spirit comes into him. When he is baptized by the Spirit, the believer is placed into Christ.

Others believe that the baptism of the Spirit and the filling of the Spirit are interchangeable terms. In the Bible, baptism and filling are two distinct ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. The biblical word “fill” refers to the effect the Holy Spirit has on a believer’s life as He dwells within him. Ephesians 5:18 explains that in contrast to the nasty effects of alcohol, but in exactly the same fashion of taking control, the Holy Spirit can radically change the behavior of a believer. After He indwells someone who has received Christ, the Spirit can alter a person’s activities from being fleshly to being spiritual. It is important to note that when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell believers on the day of Pentecost, the spectacular things that followed were not because Christians were baptized with the Holy Spirit but because they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4).

The filling of the Holy Spirit is essential for effective service in the Christian life. Without being filled, a believer will be ineffective, no matter how hard he tries to do his best for God. Being filled, the unlimited resources of God Himself become available to the Christian worker and the effectiveness of the believer becomes unrestricted. Filling, however, is a ministry of the Holy Spirit, wholly distinct from His baptizing of believers into the Body of Christ.

## **2. Insisting that water baptism is necessary for salvation.**

Some believe that a person is not born again until he has been baptized with water. This is properly termed “baptismal regeneration,” although not everyone who holds this view is fond of the terminology. This doctrine is believed in several different forms by different denominations. In all its forms, however, the effect is the same - no water, no salvation. There are some verses of Scripture that sound like they promote such a doctrine, but each can be easily explained.

**Acts 2:38**, *“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”* The key word in understanding the intent of this verse is the word “for.” This word can have several connotations. It can mean “in order to obtain” as in the sentence, “I will give you a dollar for that book.” In this case an exchange is being made. A person receives a book in exchange for a dollar bill. If the word “for” is used in this sense in Acts 2:38, then God is saying, “Be baptized in exchange for, or in order to obtain, the remission of sins.” However, the word “for” may also mean “because of” or “in honor of” as in the sentence, “He received the prize for having the best score.” In this case, the best score was achieved first and then a prize was awarded because of, or in honor of, what was already accomplished. If the word “for” is used in this sense in Acts 2:38, then God is saying “Be baptized because of, or in honor of, the fact that you have already experienced the remission of sins. The latter is the sense in which God uses the word “for” in this verse. It teaches that a person ought to repent of his sins

and receive Christ as his Savior whereby his sins are forgiven. He then ought to be baptized for, because of, or in honor of, the remission of sins he has already received. Thus it does not teach baptismal regeneration.

**Acts 22:16**, “*And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.*” These words are spoken by Ananias to Saul shortly after Christ spoke to him on the road to Damascus. Saul was not saved because Christ confronted him on the road. Saul had to make his own personal confession to the Lord and receive Christ as his Savior. Ananias implores him, knowing now what he does, to be immersed into Christ by confessing his sin and being washed clean by the redemptive work of Christ’s blood. Peter had testified on the day of Pentecost that “*whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (Acts 2:21). Ananias was simply encouraging Saul to do what he should do now in order to be part of the body of Christ.

**Mark 16:16**, “*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*” The explanation of this statement is that this is only half a verse of Scripture. The rest of the verse says, “*...but he that believeth not shall be damned.*” Salvation is based on what a person believes as clearly stated by the second half of this verse, for if a person does not believe, he is not saved. A person who has believed is saved and a saved person willingly testifies of his identity with Christ. There is nothing more to this verse.

**Acts 13:24**, “*When John had first preached before his coming the baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.*” This is a reference to the activity of John the Baptist before Jesus came onto the scene. In Matthew 3:2-6, John preached the message, “*Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” He then baptized all who came to him “*confessing their sins.*” In the verses which follow, some Pharisees and Sadducees came to him to be baptized, but he refused to do so, rebuking them by saying they needed to “*bring forth...fruits meet for repentance*” first, and then they could be baptized. When John preached the baptism of repentance, therefore, it was not a baptism that served as an act of repentance, but a baptism that followed an act of repentance.

**I Peter 3:21**, “*The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*” Here again, the explanation is contained within the verse itself. This is not talking about water baptism saving us because, as the verse explains, the word baptism is not used here as a reference to the washing of the exterior of the body. Baptism in this verse refers to our being in Christ, and thus having participated in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4), which provides a good conscience toward God because our sins are forgiven. Thus it teaches that the baptism that saves us is our immersion by faith into the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not our immersion into a body of water that washes off the exterior of our flesh.

A similar explanation can be given for every verse that seems to teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. In some cases the word is referring to spiritual baptism, in which the Holy Spirit is placing a believer into the body of Christ after he has been saved (Romans 6:3; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27). In other cases the word is referring to water baptism which is merely a testimony of the believer’s relationship to Christ and His work (Acts 19:3-5; I Corinthians 1:13-17).

### **3. Baptizing infants is spiritually beneficial.**

Some churches believe that baptizing infants brings them into union with Christ, even though they are not able to exercise faith. Others believe that baptizing infants brings them under divine protection from depravity until they can reject the Gospel on their own. Still others believe that God uses infant baptism to claim his own and put his seal upon them in a unique way. And

still others believe that infant baptism is the New Testament replacement for Old Testament circumcision.

Infant baptism is nowhere to be found in Scripture and it contradicts what Scripture does teach about baptism. Spiritual baptism happens only to those who actually believe. Infants cannot believe. Water baptism offers no spiritual benefit to a person because it serves only as a public testimony after a person has received Christ. Infants cannot receive Christ and have no testimony to give. It is therefore totally inappropriate to baptize infants.

There is scriptural precedent, though, for dedicating children to the Lord. Mary and Joseph went to the Temple forty days after Jesus was born to fulfill the post-natal laws of purification. In doing so, the special language of Luke 2:22 describes something they did in addition to the required animal sacrifice. It says, "*they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord.*" Since children are an heritage of the Lord (Psalm 127:3) and parents are commissioned to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6; Ephesians 6:4), it is appropriate for parents to acknowledge these things publicly and present their children to the Lord with a commitment to fulfill these duties -- thereby dedicating their children to the Lord with the hope that when they come to the age of understanding they will personally receive Christ as their own Savior.

### Conclusion

The Bible says there is only one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). This is true. A person is placed into the body of Christ only once and he becomes a participant in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ only one time. Christ sacrificed himself only once to accomplish the work of salvation and satisfy God regarding man's sins. Man believes the Gospel and receives Christ as Savior only one time and is thus baptized by the Holy Spirit into one body only once.

Water baptism symbolizes this once for all time relationship between Christ and those who believe in him. It does not produce this relationship; it merely serves as an illustration of it. Water baptism properly takes place after salvation because it testifies of something that has already happened. If a person, who is not saved, is immersed into water, it means nothing and it provides nothing spiritual to the participant.

Everyone who receives Christ as Savior ought to be baptized into water. It does not add to one's salvation; and failure to be baptized into water does not prevent anyone from going to heaven. It does in a sense, however, provide a test of the genuineness of one's faith. It is possible to profess to having received Christ as Savior without actually having done so. Some might profess to believe as an intellectual exercise. This is sometimes referred to as head-knowledge as opposed to heart-knowledge. Others might profess to believe just because people around them expect them to and not because they really believe in their heart. A willingness to be baptized into water with a group of people watching does provide some evidence that the profession is sincere. An unwillingness to be baptized into water, apart from a water phobia, raises some questions as to the sincerity of the profession of belief.

Jesus told his disciples that they were to "*teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*" (Matthew 28: 19-20). If Jesus instructed his disciples to baptize believers, then it is a matter of simple obedience to Christ, for all those who have believed in Him to testify of this by publicly being baptized into water. It serves as an open declaration to all who witness it of one's identity with Jesus Christ. And, it just might be the testimony of faith in the Gospel that will encourage someone else to receive Christ as their Savior.

