

# Baptism

## Introduction

The subject of baptism often arouses strong emotions amongst Christians with disagreements about how necessary it is, how it should be done, when it should be done and why it is done. These disagreements mostly arise from differing traditions of how baptism is practiced. It is important, therefore, that we examine scripture carefully and try to let it instruct us, rather than simply try to justify our tradition.

## Our Traditions

Many of us have been taught something along these lines: Salvation is by *faith alone*, and not by any act or merit on our part. Baptism is a *public* declaration of our commitment to follow Jesus. It is a *symbol* of sharing in Jesus' death on the cross and rising again with Him in His resurrection. Baptism must be undertaken seriously and *after proper instruction*, so that a person properly understands what they are doing. Some people teach that baptism counts even if it took place before the person was a believer.

Jesus said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" **Mark 7:9**. It is vital that we set aside our traditions and seek to obey Jesus in this most important act of obedience.

It is helpful to start by listing the various aspects of baptism that we need to examine:

- What does baptism actually *do*?
- Is baptism *required* for salvation?
- Must baptism be by *full immersion*?
- Must baptism *follow* a conscious desire to be a disciple of Christ?
- *When* should baptism take place?
- Are baptism classes required first?
- Who should *do* the baptising?
- Must baptism be done in a *public church* setting?

At the end of this study is a list of all the New Testament scriptures that shed any light on baptism in Jesus name.

A review of these scriptures leads to the following:

## Jesus Practiced and Commands Baptism

Baptism "fulfils righteousness" (Matt 3:13-15). Even Jesus needed to be baptised. He is the "pioneer of our faith", whom we are called to follow.

Jesus ... was gaining and baptising more disciples than John. (John 4:1)

Jesus commands His followers to be *baptised* and obey *all* His commands. (Matt 28:19-20).

## Baptism is associated with Salvation

Whoever believes *and is baptised* will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)

Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water (baptism) and the Spirit (baptism in the Holy Spirit), he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

'Repent *and be baptised*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. (Acts 2:38-41)

When they believed ... they were baptised. Acts 8:12

Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised. (Acts 18:8)

God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises *baptism that now saves you* also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. *It saves you* by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1 Peter 3:20-22)

Peter doesn't say that baptism *symbolises* our death and resurrection with Jesus, but that the flood *symbolises* baptism. Baptism is the real thing, and Peter twice says that "baptism saves you".

## **Baptism was immediate and often private**

The eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' (Acts 8:36-38)

Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water ... So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:47-48)

Lydia ... was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. (Act 16:14-15)

## **Baptism is Serious**

"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:37-39)

Before a person is baptized they should be asked to think seriously about this scripture. If they cannot enthusiastically say "Yes" to Jesus' demand here, they have not understood who Jesus is.

## **Baptism joins us to the Body of Christ**

We were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body. (1 Cor 12:13)

All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Gal 3:27)

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4-6)

## **Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins**

'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*. (Acts 2:38-41)

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and *wash your sins away*, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16) (*Paul's testimony*)

## **Baptism is for cutting us off from our sinful past to live a new life**

We were *baptised into Christ Jesus' death*. We were buried with him ... in order that we may live a new life ... united with him in resurrection. For our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. If we died with Christ, we will also live with him. (Rom 6:3-8)

Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, *having been buried with him in baptism*, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11-15)

## Baptism into Jesus must *follow* faith in Jesus

Two incidents recorded in Acts are very instructive about baptism in more complex cases. These people had been baptised, but needed to be re-baptised:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus ***accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John***. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and ***explained to him the way of God more adequately***. (Acts 18:24-26)

Here we read of Apollos who was a leading disciple of Jesus. He had been baptised as a believer and was *accurately* teaching *about Jesus*. There was no doubt about the authenticity of his faith or discipleship. Nevertheless Priscilla and Aquila explained the faith ***more adequately***. In the passage that immediately follows, Paul similarly encountered some disciples of Jesus who had been baptised as believers, but whose baptism had been for repentance, rather than into Jesus for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Paul instructed them to be re-baptised into Jesus and we can be confident that this is what is meant by Priscilla and Aquila explaining the way of God more adequately. In the light of Paul's instruction, it is inconceivable that Apollos did not respond to this enlightenment by being re-baptised.

Apollos' faith was *accurate* – in so far as it went, but it was *inadequate* in that his believer's baptism had been for *repentance*, and not into Jesus for the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The inadequacy of his baptism, even though it was by full immersion as an adult believer in Jesus as the Messiah, is surely important. He and the other believers at Ephesus did not simply need hands laid on to receive the Holy Spirit; they had first to be re-baptised.

## Baptism into Jesus must be followed by Baptism in the Holy Spirit

Paul found some disciples at Ephesus and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then ***what baptism did you receive?***' '***John's baptism,***' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' ***On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus***. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. (Acts 19:1-19:6)

These two passages surely present a clear biblical example for us, that where baptism has not been performed into Jesus for the baptism in the Holy Spirit, then the appropriate act of obedience and faith is to be re-baptised.

Paul was surprised to discover these believers were not giving evidence of having been baptised in the Holy Spirit, so asks them "Then what baptism did you receive?" If they had replied "Baptism into Jesus" we may assume Paul would simply have laid hands on them to be baptised in the Holy Spirit – as Peter did at Antioch. This begs the question: under what circumstances should we re-baptise people? What constitutes an *inadequate* baptism?

The problem does not seem to lie with the one performing the baptism. John the Baptist told people to repent and follow Jesus who would take away their sins. He told them to believe in Jesus as God's Messiah. He also told them that Jesus would baptise them in the Holy Spirit. John's baptism was not deficient in instruction or expectation. But for some reason these disciples had not been instructed about the Holy Spirit when they were baptised ("we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit"). It seems that this omission rendered their baptism deficient in its effect. The defect could not be corrected by teaching and prayer alone. They had first to be re-baptised.

This establishes two important principals:

1. The act of baptism may be defective due to the recipient being ignorant about the Holy Spirit.
2. Instruction followed by re-baptism is the appropriate response.

This passage, along with others, also shows two important truths about receiving the Holy Spirit:

1. It should be evident, both to an individual and to others, if a person has received the Holy Spirit.
2. Receiving the Holy Spirit following baptism is not automatic; it requires prayer.

We will look more at what the scriptures teach about receiving the Holy Spirit in a separate study.

## Conclusion

Neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer ever says that baptism is a symbol. It is always presented as the *means* by which a person enters the Kingdom of God. The death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead is what *Jesus* did so that we could be saved, but what *we* must do is be baptised in water and the Holy Spirit. We can agree that salvation is by faith alone, but saving faith is expressed by obedience, and Jesus commanded baptism in water and the Holy Spirit.

Since the NT presents baptism as the *means* of entering the Kingdom of God, it is never separated from conversion, as a separate event. The notion that someone can be saved, and then instructed in preparation for baptism, is totally absent. If preparation classes are deemed necessary, they should be re-classified as salvation classes, not baptism classes.

So, although salvation is occasionally described without mention of baptism, the overwhelming evidence of the NT is that baptism was considered to be an integral and necessary act in a person's salvation. To separate baptism from salvation is something that the Bible does not permit us to do. No one who wishes to be obedient to Jesus can excuse themselves from baptism.

If a person is baptised in ignorance of its meaning, they should be re-baptised and then have hands laid on to be baptised in the Holy Spirit.

*Through baptism* our sins are washed away and forgiven by the death and resurrection of Jesus. *Through baptism* we become part of Jesus' body. *Through baptism* we are cut off from our past slavery to sin and given a new life in Christ. *Baptism* is generally a pre-requisite to baptism in the Holy Spirit.

So what are the simple biblical answers to our opening questions?

- What does baptism actually *do*? – It saves us ... (see previous paragraph)
- Is baptism *required* for salvation? – Yes!
- Must baptism be by *full immersion*? – If possible, otherwise, as close to immersion as is possible (this was early church practice)
- Must baptism *follow* a conscious desire to be a disciple of Christ? – Yes!
- *When* should baptism take place? – Immediately following the confession of faith.
- Are baptism classes required first? – No! Only the Gospel must be understood. BUT: it is serious. It is committing to following Jesus in priority over all else (dying to self).
- Who should *do* the baptising? – Usually the one who led the person to faith.
- Must baptism be done in a *public church* setting? – No. It should be done at any place convenient.

How does our teaching and practice need to be changed in order to obey the scriptures regarding baptism?

## Scriptures:

Matt 3:13-15 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented.

Matt 28:19-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Mark 16:15-16 He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water (baptism) and the Spirit (baptism in the Holy Spirit), he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

John 4:1 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptising more disciples than John (Jesus - actually the disciples - baptised those who wanted to follow Him).

Acts 2:38-41 Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, 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. ... Those who accepted his message were baptised.

Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women.

Acts 8:36-38 As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.

Acts 9:18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised,

Acts 10:47-48 Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Act 16:14-15 One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home.

Acts 18:8 Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised.

Acts 18:24-19:6 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

Acts 22:16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptised and wash your sins away, calling on his name." (*Paul's testimony*)

Rom 6:3-8 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

1 Cor 12:13 For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body

Gal 3:27 for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Eph 4:4-6 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Col 2:11-15 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh, was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who

raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

1 Peter 3:20-22 God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.