

Christian Baptism

by David Stewart

The Mode

The word “baptism” has a vague meaning in our modern society. This is reflected by our English dictionaries which define the term as “a Christian ordinance marked by the symbolic use of water which is applied by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling.” However, this is *not* the meaning of the word in the New Testament; it is not used with such flexibility. “Baptism” is actually a transliteration (letter for letter representation) of the Greek word *baptisma*. Lexicons of the ancient Greek language define *baptisma* as “a dipping, washing, immersion.” The concept of pouring or sprinkling had no connection with the word! A few versions have removed the ambiguity in English by rendering the word as “immersion.”

Ritual washing where the whole body was cleansed had its roots in the Old Testament (Exodus 29:4; 40:12; Leviticus 8:6; 14:8; 15:16; 16:4, 24, 26; 17:15; 22:6; Numbers 19:7, 19; Deuteronomy 23:11). In the first century, some Jews regularly immersed themselves for ceremonial purity. Archaeological examples of Jewish ritual baths from that period still exist today. Also, ritual bathing was likely required of Gentiles who became proselytes to Judaism.

When the prophet John came on the Judean scene, he was immersing people in preparation for the coming kingdom. John “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water” (John 3:23). “Plenty of water” would not be needed for sprinkling or pouring. Jesus himself was immersed by John at Bethany beyond the Jordan (Matthew 3:16; John 1:28). Eventually, John became lesser as Jesus became greater; Jesus’ disciples baptized more people than John did (John 3:22—4:3).

After the resurrection, Jesus commanded Christian baptism for those who would accept his gospel (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16). When the church (kingdom) began on Pentecost, about 3,000 people were immersed into Christ (Acts 2:38, 41). Due to the availability of ritual baths in Jerusalem and the apostles’ early start in the morning (Acts 2:15), this monumental task would have been easily accomplished.

The apostle Paul called baptism “a burial”—a term which would make no sense if it referred to pouring or sprinkling (Romans 6:3, 4). The Ethiopian eunuch aptly illustrates the practice of immersion: (1) He saw a body of water, (2) he went down into the water along with Philip, (3) he was immersed by Philip, (4) and they came up out of the water (Acts 8:36-39).

The testimony of the early church supports immersion. The most ancient Christian baptistries that have been discovered were designed for immersion.

The Purpose

Our modern religious world gives various reasons for Christian baptism, but many of them fall short of the biblical teaching. A prior commitment to the “faith only” position which developed in the Reformation (1500s) causes many people to misinterpret passages about baptism. Some maintain that “one is saved before baptism” and that “baptism is an outward sign of an inward work of grace.” Others contend that baptism is just another good work of the Christian life. Still others say that baptism is for joining a particular denomination. However, what does the New Testament say concerning the purpose of baptism?

In anticipation of the establishment of the church, Jesus told his disciples, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Immersion is required to become a disciple of Jesus. By submitting to it, we surrender ourselves to the ownership of the triune God. In Mark’s Gospel we read, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Immersion goes hand-in-hand with faith as prerequisites to salvation. A trusting faith in Jesus that is obedient in immersion results in salvation.

The establishment of the church by the preaching of the gospel (Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection) included the command to be immersed. Peter told those who believed in Jesus, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). They were not saved at the point of belief (Acts 2:37). They had to change their hearts and submit to immersion in water to receive God’s forgiveness.

Throughout the Book of Acts, people received salvation through immersion (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). It was the urgent response of the Ethiopian eunuch who heard Philip preach Jesus (Acts 8:35-39). Paul was not saved by “faith alone” when he encountered Christ on the Damascus Road. Rather, it was three days later when he obeyed Ananias, who said, “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16; see 9:18). The power for the cleansing of Paul’s guilt was in the death of Christ—but he could only receive it by being immersed.

Looking back on the immersion of their readers, New Testament writers reminded Christians of their changed status. Paul told the Romans that they had been “buried with [Christ] through baptism into death” and had been raised with him to “live a new life” (Romans 6:3, 4). In baptism, we contact Jesus’ saving grace. We reenact his death, burial, and resurrection. We die to our sinful selves and are raised a new person in Christ.

Salvation is found only “in Christ” (Acts 4:12; Ephesians 1:3-14), and we come “into Christ” by faith and immersion. Paul wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26, 27). Outside of Christ we are in the rags of sin, but in Christ we take on his righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God adopts us as sons by our relationship with his natural Son, Jesus Christ. We then become the heirs and beneficiaries of God's promises.

Jesus, as our high priest, poured out his blood to give us free access to God. The writer of Hebrews admonished, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:22). The Hebrew Christians had contacted the cleansing blood of Jesus when they were immersed in water. Paul also spoke of immersion as a "washing" that has justifying and sanctifying effects (1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26). Justification (being made righteous) is brought about by Jesus, while sanctification (being made holy) comes by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Jesus had spoken to Nicodemus beforehand saying, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). When a believing person is immersed, he receives the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38). The fact that we are saved through immersion and given God's Spirit is clear from Titus 3:5: "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." The person who has been immersed has God's Spirit dwelling in him. Anyone without the Spirit does not have Christ or eternal life (Romans 8:9-11).

When we are immersed into Christ, he adds us to his body—also known as the kingdom or church (John 3:5; Acts 2:41, 47). One cannot be forgiven, indwelt by the Spirit, or a part of Christ's church without Christian immersion. "For 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" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Immersion is not a meritorious work by which we save ourselves apart from God. It is, however, an obligatory response to the saving work of Christ. We are not saved by "faith alone." We must repent and be immersed to receive God's salvation. In immersion, God blesses us by uniting us with Christ, forgiving our sins (justification), giving us a clear conscience, renewing us by the Holy Spirit (sanctification), and adding us to the body of Christ.

The Subjects

There are various ideas today concerning who should be baptized. What does the New Testament say about the proper subjects of Christian baptism?

Since immersion is "for the forgiveness of sins," that is, salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38), one would necessarily have to be a lost sinner. An infant has no concept of what is right or wrong and therefore should not be immersed. He is neither lost nor saved, but safe. Only until one understands the difference between good and evil can he become a sinner. Children develop differently, so this happens at various ages depending on the child.

Faith in Jesus as God's Son is also a prerequisite to immersion: "Whoever *believes* and is baptized will be saved, but whoever *does not believe* will be condemned" (Mark 16:16; emphasis added). Every conversion experience we read about in the New Testament involves an individual's personal faith in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Christians are described as "believers" or "the ones who believe" (Acts 2:44; 4:32; 10:45; 15:5; 16:1; 21:25). Salvation only comes through faith (Galatians 3:26, 27; Ephesians 2:8). In infant baptism, the subject has no personal faith in or knowledge of Jesus Christ. The same can be said of the dead person for whom another is baptized in proxy baptism.

There were households recorded in Acts who obeyed the Lord in immersion: Cornelius' relatives and friends (10:24, 48), Lydia's household (16:15), the jailer's family (16:33), and Crispus' household (18:8). However, we should not think that any infants or young children (who were incapable of understanding the gospel) were a part of those families. The ones converted were able to hear the preaching of God's Word (10:44; 16:32), believe it (16:34), and respond in immersion.

One's faith is expressed in a confession (Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9, 10; see Matthew 10:32; 1 Timothy 6:12). Again, this is something that is impossible for infants and the dead to do for themselves. Modern religious practice requires someone else to speak for them. God requires us, however, to speak for ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:10).

A final prerequisite to baptism is repentance toward God. For salvation to take place, repentance must accompany immersion (Acts 2:38; see Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 3:19; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). If one does not have a change of heart, immersion is of no spiritual value. Of course, an infant has no sin to repent of, and the dead are past the point of this being a possibility (Hebrews 9:27).

According to the New Testament, the recipients who qualify for immersion are sinners who believe in Jesus Christ, confess their faith, and turn from sin in repentance. Have you been immersed into Christ, being added to his body, the church? Are you clothed in the righteousness of Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit?

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