

WATER BAPTISM TEACHING:**Introduction**

The subject of water baptism has been historically perhaps one of the least understood doctrines of the New Testament. Much false teaching based on the traditions and reasonings of men has obscured the meaning of this important doctrine. Some teach that water baptism is really not important at all. According to Hebrews 6:2, the doctrine of baptisms is part of the foundation which must be laid in the Christian life. We will therefore take time to see what the Bible has to say on this matter.

WHAT IS WATER BAPTISM?

The word "baptism" is in Greek "baptisma" while "to baptise" is in Greek "baptizo". It is obvious that this word has not really been translated but simply copied into the English language. In Greek "baptizo" means "to immerse, cause to be dipped, to submerge, to overwhelm". To baptise something in water means to put it under the water. Therefore in the Biblical sense, to baptise a person in water literally means to put that person wholly under the water.

Water baptism for the Christian symbolises and appropriates our death, burial and resurrection with Christ. It means identification with Christ.

"Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:4).

It is clear then that the tradition of sprinkling people or pouring water on them is true neither to the clearly understood meaning of the Greek Word, nor to the symbolism of burial. Only immersion in water shows a burial.

The practise of water baptism appears in the Bible first with the appearance of John the Baptist. "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism for the remission of sins. And all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mark 1:4,5)

Baptism in those days was understood to be a rite of initiation into something new. To be water baptised was a sign of adherence to the teachings of the respective teacher. John taught repentance for the remission of sins. Those who received his teaching had to repent (turn from sin), confess their sins (Mark 1:5) and "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:7,8). There had to be a change of heart before John would willingly baptise the people coming to him for baptism.

Christian baptism is a dedication to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and to be His disciple. (Mathew 28.19). To be baptised you must do something practical. You must humble yourself. In Christian baptism you must identify yourself with Jesus Christ. As He dedicated himself "thus to fulfil all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) so must you when you are baptised in water. You make a covenant with God to submit yourself to obey the Spirit of God to the point of death, dying to the deeds and lusts of the body and all that

is old, to let the past be buried and to rise up to live to fulfil all righteousness - not through your old life but in the new life given by God.

In order to make this dedication, it is obvious that first there must exist real repentance in your heart. You must also have confessed your sins to God. With this baptism you commit yourself through the power of the new life of Jesus within you to "bear fruits worthy of repentance".

WHO IS WATER BAPTISM FOR?

Baptism is for those who have now come to a place where they have repented of their sin and believe with all their heart in the Lord Jesus Christ. We see this clearly both from the teaching and the example of the New Testament.

"Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." (Acts 8:36,37).

Baptism is not for those who believe half-heartedly the gospel. To believe with all the heart implies firstly sincerity. To be baptised simply to please a priest or a preacher is not what God wants. God only wants baptised those who have a sincere trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, who really want to die to the world, the flesh and the devil and live for God. Before baptising people, we must be confident that this is their desire.

However, this does not mean we should be so cautious in baptising people that we refuse to do it until a person's character in Christ is well proven. No. Even Simon the Magician was baptised by Philip the evangelist and continued with Philip for some time until Peter, to whom God gave greater discernment, rebuked the foolishness of the magician, who wanted to buy the ability to impart the Holy Spirit with money (Acts 8:13, 19-24). Simon still needed to repent, to humble himself more deeply. Church history tells us that he did not do this - but rather became the author of many heresies which plagued the church in the years to come.

Nowhere in the book of Acts is it recorded that people were made to wait or to sit through week-long courses before they were allowed to be baptised. Wholehearted faith, genuine repentance, and the intention to live for Jesus was all that was required. It was not the understanding of the doctrines of faith or repentance that was required, but the real presence of faith and repentance that was necessary in the hearts of those who were to be baptised.

Water baptism is for those who believe. "He who believes and is baptised shall be saved." (Mark 16:16). No promise is made to those who are baptised without believing. Many people are "baptised" as babies, by immersion in the Orthodox Tradition or by sprinkling in the Catholic, Anglican, and Reformed traditions. However, there is no example in the New Testament of babies being baptised. A baby, as yet without understanding, cannot believe the gospel, cannot repent, cannot confess its sin. It is not yet responsible for its actions, and God, who is infinitely just, does not condemn to damnation babies who die. "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 19:14). Innocent babies and very small

children belong to God. "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 18:10).

Some argue that sincere Christian parents should have their babies baptised, since God's covenant extends to natural families. But Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:35). Jesus did not even recognise his own natural family at that time, since they did not have faith in Him at that time.

But what about the Philippian Jailor? He was baptised with all his family! Yes, but from a careful examination of the passage (Read Acts 16:30-34) we observe the following:

1. Paul's instruction was first, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household". (Acts 16:31). Believing on Jesus had to precede water baptism.
2. Paul then preached to the whole household the word of the Lord. (Acts 16:32). There had to be a foundation for faith in Jesus. All the household heard the word of the Lord.
3. There were fruits of repentance. "And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes." (vs 33)
4. Next they were all baptised. It says nothing of babies here. Rather, in verse 34, it says, "having believed in God with all his household." It is clear then that ALL BELIEVED before they were baptised. Since babies cannot believe, it is clear that here is no example of the baptism of babies. We see rather a model for the salvation of whole households. This is the way God would like to work today!

In the first and most significant day of the church, Peter, having preached the gospel to the people, was asked, "What must be do?" And the response?

"Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of the Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." (Acts 2:38).

Repentance had to precede baptism. And clearly, faith in Jesus also preceded this baptism, since no-one would have allowed himself to be baptised in the controversial name of Jesus if he did not indeed believe the message of Peter and put his trust in Jesus for salvation.

Once again we see that repentance and faith preceded baptism. The same thing can be seen in all the following passages from the book of Acts:

Acts 8:12,13: The conversion of the Samaritans.

Acts 8:37 The Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 9, Acts 22:8,16 The conversion of Saul (Paul).

Acts 10:44-48: The conversion of Cornelius, his relatives and close friends. *

Acts 16:31-34 The conversion of the Philippian jailor and his household

Acts 19:1-6 The case of the Ephesian disciples.

* In the case of Cornelius, we can know that these people believed the message of Peter about Jesus, since God sovereignly poured the Holy Spirit out upon them and they were baptised in the Holy Spirit. These people, especially Cornelius were already god-fearing people and obviously God had prepared their hearts to receive the Holy Spirit. Other Jewish believers recognised what God did as proving that these Romans had been granted "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). It is clear from this passage that someone who is genuinely baptised in the Holy Spirit is a candidate also for water-baptism. The order of baptisms is not consistent in the Bible. It is possible to be baptised in water before being baptised in the Holy Spirit. The reverse is also possible.

WHAT DOES WATER BAPTISM MEAN?

As we have begun to see, Christian water baptism means a dedication to fulfil all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). It is the biblical expression of a commitment to die to the world, the flesh and the devil and live for God alone.

It is a death, burial and resurrection. (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:11,12). Death to the old nature, the old ways, habits and lifestyle. Burial of all these things. A new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what baptism is about.

It is identification with Jesus Christ, and a recognition of Him as your master and you as his disciple (Matthew 28:19). It means you commit yourself to obey Jesus Christ. If you have never been baptised in water as a believer and you do not want to be, it shows that you are either ignorant of the nature and meaning of water baptism, or that, more simply, you do not wish to humble yourself and obey the Lord Jesus Christ. Water baptism is a separation between the old life of disobedience and the new life of obedience through the Spirit.

Water baptism is commanded. Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16). Peter commanded it. (Acts 2:38). "And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord." (Acts 10:48). We see that the apostles acted with far greater authority than the average preacher of today in this regard. This is because they knew it was the Lord's will for those who believed to be baptised. Paul baptised believers (Acts 19:1-5), and he himself was commanded to be baptised (Acts 22:16). Even Jesus Himself submitted to baptism. (Matthew 3:13-17). If you wish to be a disciple of Jesus and have never been baptised as such, NOW is the time for you to DO IT. Find a mature Christian who is willing to baptise you.

Water baptism for the Christian also means that we have died to the world, that we belong to God, that we put away the things of the old life, and that we have a new life from God. Water baptism, when rightly understood and practised, is a part of our salvation. (1 Peter 3:21). The actual performance of the act, done in faith, breaks the power of sin and the world over the believer's life.

Just as the people of Israel were said to be baptised into Moses in the sea when they crossed the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1,2), and were thereby delivered from the power of Egypt (the world), so the Christian who submits himself to water baptism will find

himself in a real way delivered from the power of the world. Satan will challenge this and test the consecration that is made at baptism, just as he did in the life of Jesus (see Matthew 4:1-10). That is why we must have our minds made up to be faithful to Jesus before we are baptised.

Baptism in water also shows forth the idea that our sins are washed away. (Acts 22:16; Acts 2:38). Just as baptism is a washing, it declares to the world that our sins have been washed away. In itself it does not wash away our sins, but only inasmuch as it expresses our faith in the working of the blood of Jesus, shed for us (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). It is the blood of Jesus that does the real purifying work. Baptism shows forth not only a death, burial and resurrection in Christ, but also a washing away of our sins through the blood of Jesus.

IN WHAT NAME ARE WE TO BE BAPTISED?

Jesus commanded that disciples be baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). All things we do are to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, however (Colossians 3:17). The early church baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38), in the name of the Lord (Acts 10:48), in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). How do we reconcile this? Not once is the same wording of the name used in these passages! The answer is simple. All these names have one and the same significance. It shows we are baptised in the name of Jesus, not simply in the "name of God". Jesus, or the Son, must be recognised in the wording of our baptism. The Scriptures confound any attempt to impose a formula of wording for baptism. This is because water baptism was never intended to be something merely formal, but rather a real identification INTO a person - Jesus Christ. God did not want all this arguing about how to say the name in baptism.

FALSE DOCTRINES ABOUT WATER BAPTISM (OPTIONAL READING)

Once we know the truth about water baptism, as declared and shown forth in the New Testament, we should be equipped to discern many of the false doctrines on this subject which have plagued the church almost since its beginning. Refer to the teaching above to see why these doctrines are false. Here is a list of some of them:

1. Baptism can be sprinkling, pouring or anything you like as long as it is done with water.

2. Babies should be baptised because this is what makes them Christians. If they die unbaptised they will go to hell. We have refuted this idea earlier in the section on "**Who Should Be Baptised?**" There we saw that the whole teaching of the Bible is that water baptism must follow repentance and faith.

3. You cannot be saved or forgiven unless you are baptised in water.

This might be true in a situation such as in the early church where water baptism was understood as an essential part of obedience to Christ. Then, to refuse to be baptised was a refusal to submit to Christ. However, in many situations today and in protestant church history the same cannot be said. In situations where ignorance or false doctrines

have confused the issues, it will be seen that water baptism was not essential for salvation. The salvation army in England for example, which brought many alcoholics to living faith and genuine change in England, and did much to glorify Christ and destroy the works of the devil, did not practise water baptism, for reasons I do not know. However, repentance and faith in God have always been the two fundamental and essential conditions for the receiving of salvation. These must precede baptism, and then, when they do, and the Scriptural doctrine of baptism is clearly presented, the person will always submit to the requirement of baptism.

Those who teach this idea of salvation through baptism try to draw support from the statement of Jesus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5). They want to say that being born of water is being baptised in water. But this is not what it means. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were never baptised in water yet Jesus said they entered the kingdom of heaven. Born of water probably refers to being born of the Word of God, since to be born again is to be born of the word and of the spirit (1 Peter 1:23). The Word of God is compared to water in Ephesians 5:26 also, no doubt because, like water, it has cleansing power. Real faith comes by the Word. Therefore one needs to be born of the seed of the word in order to be saved. The alternative idea, that "born of water" refers to natural birth, is possible, although it might seem to say that all unborn babies cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven, which seems inconsistent with the idea of God's justice.

We cannot agree with those who condemn to damnation all Christians such as Luther, Wesley, Booth, Finney and others who showed a manifest repentance and faith in Christ and yet did not completely practise the Biblical idea of baptism as it is found in the New Testament.

However, this should not be taken as an excuse for those who do not wish to humble themselves and submit to the Biblical practise of water baptism. Now that light on the issue has come, to refuse baptism as a believer and disciple is to refuse to do the will of God and to fulfil all righteousness (Matthew 3:15; 28:19; 7:21)

4. Baptism is not important. (It is optional)

Neither can we agree that the practising of this foundation doctrine is unimportant (Hebrews 6:2). This false idea would imply that obedience to Christ's commands is not important - something which a true disciple of Christ could never accept. Jesus clearly commanded water baptism in Matthew 28:19, and so did Peter (Acts 2:38).

5. If you are not baptised with the words "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" your baptism is not valid. You must then be re-baptised with this formula.

This false doctrine is popular especially amongst those who deny the doctrine of the Trinity and believe that Jesus is at the same time the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We have seen that throughout the book of Acts the wording of the name is different. The emphasis is not on a formula of words, but a person. Since it is argued that the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ what difference does it make which form is used? And if we baptise as Peter did in the name of the Lord Jesus, does that mean we have failed to baptise in the name of the Holy

Spirit, as Jesus commanded? All this doctrine is rooted in a foolish argument about words, which promotes division and strife, rather than the faith and love which is in the Lord Jesus.

6. Baptism in water is baptism into a local church.

Those who teach this idea often require those wishing to be baptised to sign papers stating that they agree with all the doctrines of their respective local church. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever insisted on this sort of thing. Baptism is in the name of Jesus Christ, not into the name of a local church or denomination. It is true that every serious Christian must belong to a local church if one exists where he lives. However, being baptised by a particular pastor or elder does not obligate the person being baptised to remain in that particular local church. Nor is it right for pastors to demand such a commitment at the time of baptism, since this confuses the nature of the commitment of baptism, which is to Christ and not to a particular local church.

7. Only Pastors have the right to baptise.

This cannot be so since there is no record in the New Testament of anyone except apostles or evangelists performing Christian baptism. Philip was an evangelist and not a pastor when he baptised the believers at Samaria. (Acts 8:12; Acts 21:8). This idea is related to the doctrine mentioned above, that baptism is baptism into a local church. Yet the believers in Samaria did not as yet have a local church when they were baptised, but only the informal gatherings around an evangelist. Yet when Peter and John, apostles, came down, they did not rebaptise the believers in water but rather prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Ghost. These apostles knew that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was what these new believers needed. It is not recorded how the church in Samaria was later organised.

We should release that Jesus gave the command to baptise to the original apostles, and yet they were instructed to teach DISCIPLES to obey all that Jesus had commanded the apostles, including the instruction to baptise and teach the same things further on so that every generation of disciples would have the same instruction (Matthew 28:18-20). From this we can see that every baptised disciple who is following the teaching of the Lord has the right to baptise new disciples in water. However, such disciples should submit in this matter to their pastor and elders so as not to create disunity in the church. If the pastor of a church insists on baptising all the converts in that church, he should not be opposed by church members. However, if he neglects to baptise those who should be baptised, a real disciple who desires to follow the Lord in the waters of baptism should find someone who will baptise him according to the will of God. If the pastor lacks the wisdom of Jesus and Paul who both knew they were not sent primarily to baptise (John 4:2; 1 Corinthians 1:14-17), then in time of revival he may well wear himself in his efforts to baptise all converts

