



Believer's

Baptism

Gary Inrig

BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

INTRODUCTION

Beginnings are usually worth celebrating. The birth of a child produces joy and causes us to express our pleasure by gifts and cards and expressions of love. The beginning of a marriage is marked by a ceremony and a celebration. The marriage vows are intensely personal but because it is a beginning that effects so many others, we unite in making a wedding a special occasion. We could extend the examples - the beginning of a new year, the beginning of a school year, the beginning of a new business or organization. Beginnings are special and we celebrate them.

No beginning is more significant than the beginning of a faith relationship with the God of the universe. When a person trusts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, that moment marks the end of the old life and the beginning of a new life that will last for all eternity. Because Jesus died to pay the penalty for sins, a believer receives the gift of forgiveness and begins with a new future. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

That is a beginning worth celebrating! The Lord Jesus established baptism as the means of celebrating and declaring God's new beginning. It is also a symbol of what that new life is all about, a pledge of commitment to live as a Christ-follower, and a command Christians obey in obedience to their Lord.

No one can read the New Testament without being aware that baptism held an important place in the life and practice of the early church. In the book of Acts, when an individual became a Christian, he or she was immediately baptized. In fact, someone has observed that there is no such person in the New Testament as an un-baptized Christian. However, what was once a source of identification and unity between Christians has become, through the centuries, a cause of division, and disunity, amidst a bewildering variety of practices and beliefs. Some baptize infants while others will only baptize older children and adults. Some baptize by sprinkling a few drops of water while others insist on complete immersion under water. Some groups teach that no

one will get into heaven who is not baptized, while others insist that baptism is important, it is not and must not be understood as a means of salvation.

These are important questions, some more so than others. Obviously a little booklet like this cannot deal with all the problems in depth. It is also to be noted that a particular form or understanding of baptism is not a requirement for membership in Redeemer Fellowship. When Christians differ, it is tempting to set aside the question as unimportant and dispensable. But since the Bible takes baptism seriously, so should we. The early Christians displayed their inward commitment to Christ by the outward sign of baptism. We may differ on the details, but we should not do so by ignoring what the Lord commanded or the church has always practiced.

There are four major questions about baptism that help us unravel what this symbol means:

1. Who is baptism for? (The recipients of baptism)
2. What does baptism do or mean? (The meaning of baptism)
3. Why should we be baptized? (The reasons for baptism)
4. How should baptism be done? (The method of baptism)

WHO IS BAPTISM FOR?

THE RECIPIENTS OF BAPTISM

Probably the most obvious difference between various church traditions revolves around the questions of whether baptism is for believers only or whether infants should be baptized.

At first glance, the question seems relatively straightforward. There can be little doubt that the New Testament indicates that believers (and believers only) were baptized. A quick survey of the following passages makes that observation clear:

Matthew 28:19,20

“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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
(those who are baptized are also to be taught, which seems to describe people older than infants)

Acts 2:41

“Those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptized...”

Acts 8:12

“ But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”

Acts 8:36-39

“As they traveled along the road, they came to water, and the eunuch said, Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized? And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.”
(The Ethiopian eunuch had been reading Scripture and had obviously believed Philip’s witness to Christ.)

Acts 9:17,18

“Placing his hands on Saul, [Ananias] said, Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” “Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.. He got up and was baptized...”(Saul was already a believer – “Brother Saul” - prior to his baptism.)

Acts 10:44,47

“While Peter was still speaking these words, The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.... Then Peter said, Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”

Acts 16:14, 15

“The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.”

Acts 16 32-34

“They spoke the word of the Lord to him [the Philippian jailer] and to all the others in his house.... Then immediately he and all his family were baptized.... He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God - he and his whole family.”

Acts 18:8

“Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.”

Acts 19:4,5

“Paul said...He [John] told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.”

These passages leave it beyond doubt that the first followers of the Lord Jesus followed a consistent pattern. Faith was an indispensable

prerequisite for baptism. As soon as possible and usually immediately, an individual who professed faith in Christ was baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Professing believers, all of them and only them, were baptized to identify themselves as Christ-followers.

If the witness of the New Testament is so clear, where does the practice of infant baptism come from? One well-known scholar, Kurt Aland, has determined after an extensive study of early Christian literature that no one can provide conclusive evidence of an infant being baptized before 200 A.D. However, after that time, it became the increasingly prevalent practice of the church.

Those who argue in favor of infant baptism lay great stress on three arguments, in addition to its longstanding place in church tradition. First is the suggestion that infant baptism is the Christian counterpart to circumcision, an initiatory rite which made a child a member of the covenant community. It is often suggested that Colossians 2:11, 12 makes this connection. However, there are strong reasons for doubting that the New Testament church saw baptism as the replacement for circumcision. The first century Christians hotly debated whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. No one ever said, of course they don't. They've been baptized and that's God's replacement. Jewish Christians did not stop circumcising their children, and Timothy was circumcised as an adult even though he had been baptized as a Christian, an incomprehensible act if baptism had taken the place of circumcision, one scholar writes.

A second argument is the use of the term "household" in passages such as Acts 16:14, 15; 16:30-34 and I Corinthians 1:16. The implication is that a household would have infants. But that is hardly an obvious implication. Only a fraction of households have infant children. More importantly, in Acts 16:34 the whole family is said to believe, and the same is true of Acts 18:8 where "Crispus and his entire household believed." In the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14, 15), she is pictured as the head of the household, apparently either single or a widow, making the possibility of her having infant children rather remote. In no mention of a household being baptized is there any suggestions of deviation from the standard practice of profession of faith, followed by baptism.

A third argument sometimes suggested by proponents of infant baptism is that to deny baptism to infants is to reject the Lord's

command in Matthew 19:14 “let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” The motivation behind such a use is praiseworthy. Little children need to be taught about the Lord and brought to Him as early as possible. But the passage has absolutely nothing to do with baptism. The Lord Jesus was placing his hands on these little children, not placing water upon them. Children need to be brought to Christ, not the baptistry.

The New Testament makes a clear and unbreakable connection between belief and baptism. Believers are baptized and baptism gives witness to their faith. Infant baptism changes this connection. An infant cannot truly believe and a parent’s or a godparent’s faith is not the same thing at all as personal faith. The change to infant baptism which became prevalent after the third century was probably well-intentioned. But it makes a significant change not only from the practice of the early church but in the understanding of the meaning of baptism.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM DO?

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

On the very first occasion the gospel was preached to Gentiles, an amazing thing took place. The Lord had supernaturally arranged the encounter between Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius, as Acts 10 reveals. As Peter declares the gospel to a group of Cornelius' family and friends in Caesarea, he declares the good news: "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Apparently, their hearts open to receive the Lord's promise because "the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message." These people have received the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. They are saved, new creatures in Christ. "So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ."

The order of these events is of great importance. These people were baptized not in order to receive the Spirit or the gift of salvation, but because they already had. Baptism does not accomplish their salvation; it bears witness to it. Water baptism is the outward and visible sign of the inward, invisible transformation of life.

No question is more important than the question of the significance of baptism. Some have suggested that baptism causes salvation. For example, one tradition has taught that baptism is a sacrament which removes original sin. This is often linked to infant baptism, and it is suggested that an un-baptized infant is in danger of eternal perdition, while baptized babies are forgiven. The best that can be said for such ideas is that they bear no resemblance to anything taught in the Scriptures. It dramatically changes the church's responsibility, from go into the world and preach the gospel to go into the world and baptize infants. An infant does not become a child of God by participation in a ritual. Furthermore, it is obvious that not every infant who is baptized grows up to be a Christ-follower. If the baptism of an infant brings about regeneration is the miracle of new birth canceled later in life, if that person turns from faith?

The Reformers, led by John Calvin, recognized that infant baptism did not cause salvation. He suggested, rather, that the baptism of an

infant anticipated salvation. He saw a strong continuity between the old covenant community of Israel and the new covenant community of the church. (It should be observed however that there is a major difference between the two. People entered Israel, physically and involuntarily. Entrance into the church is voluntary, spiritual, and internal, by saving faith, not physical birth). The suggestion was that baptism anticipates future repentance and faith.

I would never challenge the desire any parent has to see his or her child come to faith in Christ, nor would I doubt the importance of entrustment of a child to the grace and care of God. But the question cannot be ignored: Is that what baptism is meant to symbolize? Every illustration in the New Testament is of baptism bearing witness to actual faith, not future faith. And because the church is a community of those bound in genuine saving faith to Christ, baptism on the basis of family connection and a hoped-for future faith may lead a baptized child seriously to misjudge their relationship to Christ.

There is another view that sees baptism as necessary for salvation. Adults who have believed in Christ are not saved until they are baptized. This suggests that baptism is not merely important, it is indispensable. It should be observed that, in the early church, baptism consistently and immediately followed profession of faith. The two were, in practice, inseparable. But they are not inseparable in meaning. I cannot remember ever performing a wedding in which the couples have not exchanged at least one ring. In practice, the vows and the rings are inseparable. But in law, they are totally separable. It is the vows that establish the marriage bond. A ring is customary but not crucial, even though in some ceremonies the couple say “with this ring I thee wed.”

A couple who take their vows but do not exchange rings are every bit as married as those who do exchange rings. A ring is a visible symbol of a loving commitment. It is important but it is not indispensable.

Baptism is similar. We are saved entirely on the basis of what the Lord Jesus has done for us upon the cross. We are saved through faith, total reliance upon the Lord. Baptism must not be viewed as a human action that contributes to salvation. But baptism is not quite like a wedding ring. A wedding ring is totally optional. The Lord Jesus has commanded baptism for those who follow Him. It is the outward, visible confession of faith, expressed in actions, not words. Without faith,

baptism is valueless. With genuine faith, baptism becomes the dramatic expression of inner reality. To profess faith but to refuse baptism, especially if we acknowledge that Jesus commanded it, is to throw doubt on the credibility of our faith. Baptism, then, is the constant companion of salvation but not the cause of it.

One verse that has puzzled many is Acts 2:38 “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.” This appears to teach that baptism is required for forgiveness. However, as Luke makes clear in many other places, it is repentance that leads to forgiveness, repentance that is vividly expressed by baptism. Consider the following passages:

Luke 24:46,47

“The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.”

Acts 3:19

[Peter said], “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out...”

Acts 5:31

Peter replied ... “God exalted [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.”

Acts 10:43

[Peter said] “... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Baptism then is a symbol of salvation, not a cause of it or an anticipation of it. It is the visible sign to God, to believers and to the world of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because it is the outward sign of our entrance into a relationship with Christ and into the community of Christ-followers, it should follow, as closely as possible, our inward profession of faith.

WHY SHOULD WE BE BAPTIZED?

THE REASONS FOR BAPTISM

To some extent, the answer to this question should already be obvious. But let me suggest several reasons.

First, the Lord Jesus specifically commands baptism for those who are his followers. Baptism therefore is an act of obedience to Christ and is not optional for anyone who claims to be His follower. However, it is not simply an act of duty. Baptism is an expression of love for our Lord, since “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching” (John 14:23).

Second, the apostles commanded believers to be baptized. Peter did not suggest baptism to Cornelius. Rather, “he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (Acts 10:48)

Third, baptism dramatically illustrates salvation. The very act of baptism is a powerful display of what God has done in our lives: “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” (Romans 6:4). It therefore becomes a testimony to friends and family of our conversion experience: a means of declaring the gospel visibly.

Fourth, baptism is “the pledge of a good conscience towards God.” (1 Peter 3:21). As a pledge, baptism is a declaration of loyalty, in which a Christ-follower declares his allegiance to Jesus as Lord and renounces any competing claims.

HOW SHOULD BAPTISM BE DONE?

THE METHOD OF BAPTISM

The least important issue related to baptism concerns the method. That is not to say method is unimportant. It is to say it is secondary. The English word “baptism” is, in fact, a Greek word in English letters. The Greek word “*baptizo*” is used from a rather early period of Greek literature with the meaning “to immerse, to dip.” Thus a sunken ship was “baptized” and a piece of material submerged in dye was also said to be “immersed.” This is the common use of the word and certainly favors the idea of baptism by immersion.

Other evidence seems to support this:

1. When Naaman dips seven times in the Jordan, the Greek Bible describes this as “baptism” (2 Kings 5:14).
2. The first century Jewish ritual by which a Gentile converted to Judaism included baptism. This “proselyte baptism” was by total immersion.
3. There is stress in the New Testament on the presence of a body of water being present when baptism took place (Mark 1:9, 10; John 3:23, Acts 8:36-39). This hardly seems necessary if sprinkling or pouring was involved.
4. Some early second-century documents give detailed instruction about baptism, and suggest pouring only if there was an acute shortage of water.
5. The symbolism of baptism as burial with Christ strongly suggests immersion (Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12).

The Lord Jesus gave baptism to His followers as a means of declaring that we have committed ourselves to a new authority in our lives. The waters of baptism symbolize the end of the old lifestyle, and the fact that

the Lord Jesus has experienced the flood of God's judgment on our behalf. As we emerge from the waters, we declare our entrance into God's new life, made possible because our Lord is the risen conquering Christ. Baptism calls us away from the temptation to be a silent, private Christian into the public arena of declared loyalty to Jesus as Lord.

Our responsibility as Christians is not to follow the requirements of a church or to be true to particular traditions. Our responsibility is to study God's Word, develop a personal understanding of God's truth, and then to act, obediently and humbly, on that understanding. At Redeemer Fellowship, we want to respect the genuine and sincere differences that exist between true Christians on the subject of baptism. As I have indicated, we welcome all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to join us in membership. A specific experience of baptism is not a condition of membership. But we also want to encourage you to think seriously and prayerfully about baptism. It is the normal and divinely-commanded way of beginning our journey as a Christ-follower.

Should you desire to be baptized or to discuss baptism with one of the pastoral staff, you can indicate that on a welcome card or you could make an appointment through the church office. We schedule baptisms on a regular basis throughout the year. You will be asked to attend a class and to share your story of coming to faith in Christ. For the baptism itself, we will ask you to write a brief personal testimony that can be shared by you or read by someone else. Baptism is for those who can give a credible personal witness to faith in Christ. For that reason, we do not set specific age limits, but we do encourage parents to be cautious about their children being baptized prematurely. Clearly that is a judgment decision and we want to be sensitive to the uniqueness of each child.

Sometimes the question arises from those who were baptized as infants or before their conversion experience as to whether they should be baptized as believers. Clearly this is a personal matter that someone needs to seek the Lord about. However, should an individual be convinced that Biblical baptism is a witness to personal faith in Christ, then it seems more than appropriate to be baptized as a believer, in obedience to one's Lord.

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Redeemer Fellowship
PO Box 905, Redlands, CA 92373

www.RedeemerLomaLinda.org
RedeemerLomaLinda@gmail.com
(909) 747-9968