



WATER BAPTISM

“...Repent and be baptized 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.” [Acts 2:38](#)

This is Peter’s answer to the question of what we should do in response to the gospel. First, he says we must repent, which we looked at in the previous session. Next, he says we must be baptized, which we will consider in depth in this session.

With all of the mystery, confusion, debate, and division in the Church over the centuries regarding the necessity, method, and effect of water baptism, someone unfamiliar with Scripture might be surprised to find out just how straightforward the Bible is on the subject. Why has this clear and simple command so often been the subject of contention? Perhaps because it’s so important! From the beginning, the Devil’s strategy has been to lead us to question and doubt God’s commands, and ultimately to disobey Him. In fact, if we want to know the issues God considers of greatest importance in the advance of His Kingdom, it may be that we need look no further than those that the Devil has attacked most vigorously over the years.

Thankfully, in every generation there have been saints who have stood for the truth on this issue, though in some cases it cost them everything. Water baptism is an issue that has produced many martyrs. As we approach this session, let us seek God for a glimpse of the revelation and conviction they had on this vital subject.

NEW TESTAMENT WATER BAPTISM

Water baptism in the Bible was simply a symbolic act of response whereby an individual was briefly but fully immersed into a body of water. The first time we encounter water baptism in the Scripture is in [Matthew 3:5-6](#):

“Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him [John the Baptist], and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

Here we find John the Baptist baptizing in the Jordan River those who had responded to his challenging message to repent. Curious though dunking people in a dirty river may seem to us, no one queried it at the time. Although it is the first biblical mention of water baptism, it was a practice well known to the Jewish people, albeit for a different reason. One of the conditions for those wishing to convert to Judaism (along with circumcision for males) was that they had to be ceremonially immersed in water, symbolic of cleansing.

However, the surprising thing about John's baptism was that it was intended for his Jewish hearers. As part of John's prophetic calling to "prepare the way for the Lord," he was calling the people to repentance—a change of mind resulting in a change of life—symbolized by water baptism. He also made clear that this baptism was preparatory to a greater baptism:

"John answered them all, saying, 'I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" Luke 3:16

He was, of course, speaking of Jesus. We will look in a later session at baptism in the Holy Spirit, but for now we should note that Jesus was Himself baptized in water by John. This was not for the forgiveness of sin, as Jesus was without sin, but rather to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15) and to set an example for all that would follow Him.

DOES BAPTISM HAVE TO BE BY FULL IMMERSION?

Yes. The word *baptize* is a transliteration (a simple adaption of a word from one language to another) of the Greek word *baptizo*, primarily meaning "to dip, immerse, submerge, or plunge into a liquid." It was used to describe the action of plunging a material into dye, and of the submerging of a ship. Baptism must, therefore, be by immersion.

Furthermore, there is no biblical example of baptism by any other form. Nowhere in the New Testament is it suggested that a mere handful of water is sufficient. All the evidence is that there needed to be a large and plentiful supply of water—enough, in fact, to entirely cover the person being baptized.

"...and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water..." Acts 8:38-39

"John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there..." John 3:23

WHAT ABOUT BAPTIZING INFANTS?

Not once does the New Testament refer to such a practice. This is not surprising since, as we have seen, baptism is to follow repentance, which requires the ability to make a decision. In every instance, it was those who had become believers (which, again, requires a certain level of mental development) who were commanded to be baptized. It is not wrong for children, even young children, to be baptized, but only when they have a clear faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and because they want to obey Him by baptism.

Therefore, the only babies to be baptized are "spiritual babies," i.e., those who have just been born again.

WHY SHOULD BELIEVERS BE BAPTIZED?

A desire to follow the example of Jesus should be reason enough, but the most simple and straightforward answer to this question is that Jesus commands it!

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..." Matthew 28:19-20

This command of God is often referred to as “The Great Commission” and has always been accepted as a succinct description of the mission of the Church. Though the Lord brought many teachings during His ministry on earth, water baptism was one of the very few ordinances (i.e., commanded practices) that He gave to the Church. This is why we teach that every born again believer needs to be baptized.

It is such an integral part of the right response to the gospel that in the New Testament professions of faith in Christ are usually followed more or less immediately by water baptism. Take the following verses for example:

“So those who received his word were baptized...” Acts 2:41

“...And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.” Acts 18:8

So closely is water baptism linked with believing in Jesus that some scriptures, like Acts 2:38, place them side by side when talking of becoming a Christian. Here are other examples:

“And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Acts 22:16

“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Mark 16:16

However, it is important to note that the balance of Scripture makes clear that an individual is not born again by being baptized. In nearly 200 scriptures, like the ones following, faith alone is referenced as the means to salvation.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” John 1:12-13

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

We don’t get baptized to receive forgiveness and new life, but rather because we’ve received forgiveness and new life.

THE “LOST” RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Although much confusion developed over the centuries regarding how water baptism might be practiced, its necessity for every professing Christian was not questioned until fairly recently in Church history. Bearing in mind the clear scriptural mandate for baptism, how is it that in our day it seems to have become merely an “optional extra” for many Christians?

Part of the problem, of course, has been the prevalence of infant baptism. Many who have subsequently come to faith in Christ have assumed that the act done for them as a baby can suffice in response to the command of Jesus. However, modern evangelistic methods have also (albeit perhaps unwittingly) served to diminish the importance of baptism in the eyes of many.

In the early to mid 1700’s, men like John Wesley, George Whitfield, and Jonathan Edwards emerged (in what became known as “The Great Awakening”) with an emphasis on prayers of repentance/commitment, which came to be understood as the active response to the gospel and the means of conversion to Christ. This emphasis continued with the outstanding revivalists of the 1800’s such as Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and R.A. Torrey. In the twentieth century, the likes of Billy Graham have spearheaded what has become the standard practice of evangelistic crusades with “altar calls” leading to the refined and formularized “Sinner’s Prayer”—but little or no instruction on the need to respond with baptism. The required response to the gospel has ceased to be water baptism and has become the prayer of commitment.

All these ministries and evangelistic methods have been used by God to bring millions of people into an authentic salvation experience, and we do not believe that these servants of God in any way intentionally minimized the importance of water baptism as a response to the gospel. However, consideration of the development of this methodology does help us to understand why baptism has been relegated in its importance as a response to the gospel.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM DO FOR THE BELIEVER?

Having seen that baptism does not save us, one might ask whether it has any effect on us.

Some church traditions believe that water baptism is “sacramental,” i.e., that something is conveyed/imparted to the person being baptized irrespective of the state of their own mind or heart. However, water baptism is clearly intended to be an outward expression of an inward reality. It is both symbolic and an act of obedience. If the person being baptized is truly born again, there is nothing they receive in water baptism that has not already been given to them in the new birth. If a person not yet born again were to be baptized (an infant for example), they would simply go from being a dry sinner to a wet one!

However, the fact that water baptism is symbolic in nature does not make it unimportant, nor does it mean that God does not use the practice as a means of conveying grace and revelation to those who approach it in faith. God in His wisdom gave us water baptism, and when rightly practiced, it imparts multiple blessings to the life of the believer. For many, it is water baptism that brings home the truths of the great salvation they received when first they believed. Consequently, they go on to experience a new measure of freedom and victory thereafter.

Scripture has much to say of the symbolism and imagery connected to water baptism, and the truths of which it speaks so vividly. Let’s look at some:

DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” [Romans 6:3-4](#)

The immersion into the waters of baptism is described here as a picture of the death and resurrection of Jesus and our association with Him in it. We are “buried” under the water, marking the end of the old life. Then, just as Jesus came out of the tomb, we come up again to start a new life of victory.

CIRCUMCISION OF OUR HEARTS

“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart...so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” [Deuteronomy 30:6](#)

“...REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED 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.”

Acts 2:38



In Old Testament practice, Israelite boys were circumcised as a physical sign of belonging to the nation of Israel. But even in those days, God was clearly after His people's hearts, and He made promises that would be fulfilled in a better covenant that would come.

In the new covenant, those who are born again receive a spiritual circumcision, or circumcision of the heart, which is confirmed in the waters of baptism. Through our faith in the finished work of the cross, the power of the old ways has been cut off. Like all God's blessings, this must be received by faith if we are to live in the good of it. Again, it is water baptism that Scripture references to help us grasp this reality.

“In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV 1984)

THE WATERS OF JUDGMENT AND RESCUE

At times, God has used overwhelming waters to bring righteous judgment upon those who are unrelenting in sin and rebellion. Most drastically, this is seen in the account of Noah's life. God caused the whole earth to be engulfed in the flood, but through faithfulness and obedience to God's command, Noah and his family were rescued.

“...God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you...”
1 Peter 3:20-21

Again, water is used in the dramatic escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 13-15). God brings His absolute judgment upon the Egyptian slave masters as they try and pursue His people into the Red Sea:

“The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.” Exodus 14:28

This is another prophetic picture of the total defeat of the Devil, who once held us all in the slavery of sin.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul specifically uses baptism terminology and imagery to describe the principle of God's people being rescued and united under Moses' leadership:

“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” 1 Corinthians 10:1-2

Many see this as a foreshadowing of our union with Christ through baptism in water and the Holy Spirit.

REVELATION THROUGH OBEDIENCE

Although there is great significance and revelation to be seen in these scriptures, it is important to note that God does not require that newly converted believers grasp all of this wonderful biblical imagery before they respond to the challenge of being baptized. God wants to establish in us a pattern of obedient response to Christ that is not conditional on understanding. Are we able to demonstrate that we know how to take orders from the Lord in this first, clear-cut command?

We live in a culture that has deified knowledge and independence and that increasingly rejects the very idea of obedience, let alone obedience where there has not been a full and acceptable explanation of what is being required. However, we are challenged to live a different way:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” Proverbs 3:5



Those who learn to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7) understand that it is often the narrow door of obedience that leads to the broad place of revelation, and revelation is far greater than mere understanding.

BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION

In Hebrews 6:1-3, “instruction about baptisms” is one of the subjects listed as elementary and foundational to the life of the believer, which must be in place for there to be progress towards maturity.

Baptism is foundational in that it establishes something significant in our lives and in our testimony, confirming our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and our submission to Him as Lord. Memories of the occasion when we received the Lord may become a little hazy in time, but there can be no forgetting being plunged under the water! Baptism, therefore, sets up a spiritual milestone to which we can look back with assurance.

In addition, it tells the other people who witness it or hear about it that we are serious about our faith. They may doubt our words, but when they see us submit to baptism, they know that we mean it.

In closing this session, we leave you with six reasons we believe water baptism matters:

- 1. It is the direct command of the Lord Jesus Christ**
- 2. It is clearly taught in Scripture as foundational**
- 3. It establishes a pattern of obedience in the life of the believer**
- 4. If practiced correctly, it conveys great revelation and blessing**
- 5. The Devil has vigorously attacked it over the centuries**
- 6. One day, we will encounter those who laid down their lives to maintain this New Testament practice**

We are committed to seeing individual lives and the Body of Christ built according to the New Testament pattern. Because of this and for all the reasons given in this session, we would expect everyone who professes Jesus as Savior and Lord, and who wishes to be part of this congregation, to have been baptized in water as a believer, or to be baptized at the earliest opportunity. So, have you been baptized by immersion as a believer?

RECOMMENDED READING

1. Supplemental Reading: “Water Baptism Within the Context of Church History”