

Scriptural Baptism



by Robert G. Dockery

The subject of Baptism is one of the most hotly debated issues in the religious world. Virtually all religious groups which claim to follow Christ believe in and practice some form of baptism. But there is widespread disagreement over what is valid baptism and what its purpose is in God's plan of Salvation.

Men are divided as to the meaning of Baptism—some teach that sprinkling or pouring are valid forms of baptism; others hold that only immersion will do. There is controversy over the purpose of Baptism—some say that it is a “sacrament” which produces a mysterious change in the person who receives it; others insist that it is a symbolical way of showing that a person has already been saved from sin; still others hold that it is an act of obedience which results in salvation. There is disagreement, too, over the proper candidates for Baptism—some baptize infants; others insist that only responsible, accountable individuals should be baptized. Perhaps there is no single religious topic where men have so persistently and thoroughly disagreed with one another as they have with regards to Baptism.

But what does the Bible say? This must be our concern. This must be the authority we appeal to in order to solve all of our religious differences. In the 269 chapters of the New Testament, some form of the word “baptize” or “baptism” appears more than 100 times. Clearly, God has given us enough information on the subject of baptism for us to understand exactly what its significance is. The importance of baptism is further emphasized by the fact that our Lord Himself found it necessary to be-baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness.” (*Matthew 3.15.*) The significance of Baptism is also demonstrated by the fact that it is invariably mentioned in connection with the cases of conversion recorded in the *Book of Acts*. The fact that it is always mentioned shows the importance which is attached to it!

It goes without saying that the New Testament does not teach contradictory conclusions about Baptism. God is not the author of con-

fusion (*1 Cor. 14.33.*) Uncertainty over baptism is not because God has not spoken plainly, but because men have not listened carefully! In our study we want to attempt to answer three crucial questions about Baptism by examining what the Bible has to say on the subject!

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Some equate sprinkling or pouring with baptism; others insist that immersion is the only scriptural form of baptism. It should be evident that all of these could not be Baptism in the Biblical sense because the scriptures affirm that “*There is one Baptism.*” (*Ephesians 4.5.*) The question is “What was the one baptism of the New Testament?” Without hesitation we Can answer that New Testament Baptism was clearly and only immersion.

- 1) ARGUMENT FROM THE GREEK WORD. The Greek word for baptize is *BAPTIZO* which is defined by Thayer as “to dip... immerse, submerge...” He goes on to say “In the New Testament it is... an immersion in water.” The Greeks used the word in a non-religious sense to describe the sinking of a ship or the plunging of a spear into a body. The Greek word still has the meaning of immersion. The practice of the Greek Orthodox Church confirms this. Early translations of the Bible (Peshitta, Arabic, Polyglot) always employed a word meaning “immerse” to translate the Greek word *BAPTIZO*.
- 2) ARGUMENT FROM SUBSTITUTION. The Greek word is used in the Active Voice and demands an object which receives the action. Sprinkling and pouring are passive’ Verbs which shift the action to an indirect object. (You can baptize a man or immerse a man but you cannot sprinkle a man—you sprinkle water.) Substitute “immerse, pour, sprinkle” for baptism in *Romans 6.4*. Which fits? (“Therefore we are buried with him by immersion-sprinkling-pouring”—Which?)

- 3) ARGUMENT FROM HISTORY. Ruins of early church buildings (such as the Church of St. John the Divine at Ephesus) invariably have baptistries (pools, really) and not fonts. Early Christian writers such as Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose, and Chrysostom document that immersion was the rule in the early church. In fact, sprinkling was not officially recognized by the Catholic Church until the Council of Ravenna in 1311.
- 4) ARGUMENTS FROM SCHOLARS. The Catholic Encyclopedia states: "The most ancient form... was unquestionably immersion." Martin Luther said: .. On this account I could wish that such as are baptized should be completely immersed in water, according to the meaning of the word..." John Calvin: "The word Baptize means to immerse, and it is certain... immersion was observed in the early church." John Wesley: "We are buried with him, alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion,"
- 5) ARGUMENT FROM THE SCRIPTURES. The New Testament associated Baptism with "*much water*" (*John 3.23*). John baptized Jesus "*into*" the River Jordan (*Mark 1.9*.) Philip and the Eunuch went down "*into*" the water and came up "*out of*" it. (*Acts 8.38-39*.) The New Testament emphasizes Baptism as a burial. (*Romans 6.3-4*, *Colossians 2.12*.)

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?

Many churches teach that infants should be baptized because they are born in a depraved condition due to the taint of original sin. This has been a cherished doctrine which many have clung to devotedly. Luther recognized that it was an innovation but could not bring himself to part with it.

Some have tried to find a Biblical justification for the practice of Infant Baptism in the statement that Lydia "*was baptized and her house-*

hold..." (Acts 16.15.) But notice the unwarranted assumptions such people must make:

- 1) Must **assume** she was married. (Household can refer to servants—*Phil. 4.22.*)
- 2) Must **assume** she had children.
- 3) Must **assume** they were present. (After all, she was on a business trip.)
- 4) Must **assume** her children were infants. (It was not customary for babies to travel.)
- 5) Must **assume** they were baptized. (The whole is sometimes used to refer to only a part—"The congregation sang a hymn" when not all sang.)

What can be established from the scriptures?

- 1) BAPTISM IS FOR SINNERS. (*Acts 2.38, 22.16.*) Children are born in innocence; Sin is not hereditary! "*The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father...*" (*Ezek. 18.20.*) 1 John 3.4 calls sin a "*transgression of the Law.*" It is something committed, not something inherited! Jesus said of children: "*Of such is the kingdom of heaven.*" (*Mark 10.14.*)
- 2) BAPTISM IS FOR THE TAUGHT. (*Matthew 28.19-20.*) Those who cannot understand what is done cannot benefit from it.
- 3) BAPTISM IS FOR BELIEVERS. (*Mark 16.16, Acts 8.36-37.*) How can baptism have any meaning when it is divorced from Faith?
- 4) BAPTISM IS FOR THE PENITENT. (*Acts 2.38.*) Repentance involves a recognition of wrong and a turning away from it.
- 5) BAPTISM IS FOR THE OBEDIENT. (*Acts 10.48.*) "*And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...*" There can be no obedience without the intention of offering it!

In New Testament times, only responsible, accountable individuals were considered proper candidates for baptism. To do anything else violates the very spirit and purpose of the act of Baptism!

WHY BE BAPTIZED?

In a sense, this is the most crucial question of all. It little matters who is baptized or how they are baptized if it is not done for the right reason. It is hardly surprising, in view of this, that it is precisely at this point that the battle over baptism rages most fiercely.

What exactly does Baptism do...? What is it for...?

- 1) BAPTISM MEANS SALVATION. (*1 Peter 3.21.*) We do not believe or practice “water salvation,” The power is not in the water, but in God who chooses to exercise it in that way. Baptism is the time and place that we come into contact with God’s grace.
- 2) BAPTISM MEANS UNION WITH CHRIST. Paul says in *Romans 6.3* that we are baptized into Christ, One translation says: “*We are baptized into union with Christ.*” Paul goes on to say in *Galatians 3.27* “*For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*” Entrance into Christ and all that it implies is achieved in the act of Baptism. (*cf. Romans 8.1, Ephesians 1.7.*)
- 3) BAPTISM MEANS SUBMISSION TO THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST. Jesus said: “*All power is given unto me in heaven and earth.*” (*Matthew 28.18.*) Immediately after making this statement, He told His followers to “*Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them...*” (*Matt. 28.19.*) Clearly, the command to be baptized is rooted in the authority of Christ. Jesus insisted that there was no genuine submission to His Lordship without obedience to His commands. (*Luke 6.46.*)
- 4) BAPTISM MEANS ENTRANCE INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST. In *1 Corinthians 12.13*, Paul writes: “*For we are all bap-*

tized into one body..." The one body is the church. (*1 Corinthians 12.12; Ephesians 1.22-23.*) Baptism is the act of obedience which causes God to add us to the church.

- 5) BAPTISM MEANS PARTICIPATING IN THE DEATH, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION. (*Romans 6.3.*) In the act of baptism, we become the people for whom Christ died; we gain the benefits which His death makes possible; we recreate His death, burial, and resurrection by obeying the "form" or "pattern" of the doctrine which is delivered to us. (*Romans 6.17.*) It is Baptism which ties us to the cross of Christ.
- 6) BAPTISM MEANS BREAKING WITH SIN. In *Romans 6.4*, Paul notes that we are baptized into death. The "death" here contemplated is our death to sin. (*cf. Romans 6.5.*) It is baptism which stands squarely between a man and forgiveness of sin. Salvation from sin is impossible without Baptism. (*Acts 22.16.*)
- 7) BAPTISM MEANS NEWNESS OF LIFE. Baptism is closely involved in the process of the New Birth. (*John 3.3,5.*) We are raised from Baptism to walk "*in newness of life.*" (*Romans 6.4.*) Baptism is not an ending; it is a beginning—the starting point of the Christian life. It is in Baptism that we are born again!

The things which are associated with Baptism in the New Testament clearly show that it is essential, not optional. Salvation is contingent upon it! There is no real submission to the Lordship of Christ without it! Baptism is necessary for salvation.

CONCLUSION

Baptism is a subject of vital importance. What we believe about baptism is of eternal significance. Baptism is vitally concerned with sin, forgiveness of sin, and a right relationship with God. Baptism is not a mere ceremony, symbol, or church ordinance. It is a solemn act of obedience to God. It was required in the Book of Acts of the crowd on

Pentecost, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian Nobleman, Cornelius, Saul of Tarsus, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and the Corinthians. To reject Baptism is to reject a clear commandment of God!

If Baptism is important enough to be mentioned more than 100 times in the Bible, it deserves our most careful consideration! The importance attached to Baptism in the scriptures should cause every living soul to desire to render this act of obedience to God. *"And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized and wash away thy sins..."* (Acts 22.16.)



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