



Christian Baptisms



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PUBLISHED BY



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Printed in New Zealand 2014

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Christian Baptisms

Introduction

The subject of Christian baptism is sometimes controversial, because many people have differing thoughts about this practice. Some doubt that it is important, while others debate how it should be done.

According to the Bible there are actually three forms of baptism. The first and main form understood by people involves water. There are also clear references to Baptism of the Holy Spirit, and with fire at Pentecost. (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; Acts 2,3). John pointed to Jesus as the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33)

Our purpose here is to examine what the Bible actually does say about these topics, and to see if we can sort out the myths from the Biblical commands and practices. It is very important for all who call themselves Christian to be certain of what God requires from us in this issue of baptism, as in all things.

What does “Baptism” mean?

The Greek word for baptism is *baptizo*, from which we get ‘*baptisma*’, which is the process of immersion, submersion and then emergence, according to Vines Expository Dictionary. The root word is ‘*bapto*’, which means to dip. This is the word that is used in the Bible to speak of John’s baptism, of Christian baptism, and also the baptism of suffering that Christ underwent at Calvary, (see Luke 12:50).

From this we also get another term, ‘*baptismos*’, which is used to speak of the ceremonial washing of articles. This act of baptism uses the same word the Greeks used to signify the dyeing of a garment by full immersion in a vat of dye.

When a garment is dyed to change its colour this new colour goes right through the fabric. The original colour is overcome and replaced. One biblical illustration of this is the reference in Isaiah 1:18, in which the Lord says,

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

This means that our sins are forgiven and removed.

This leads us to a very important point. Baptism, on its own, does not mean that we are changed or forgiven. Baptism states the fact of an event that has already happened. Baptism must be an outward sign of an inward reality. The inward reality is that we have recognised that our sin separates us from God, that we have surrendered to Jesus and invited Him to be Lord and Saviour of our life. The Bible calls this “being born again,” (John 3:3).

So why be baptised?

- A. Baptism is a command. **“He who believes and is baptised will be saved...”** (Mark 16:16). Belief **MUST** precede baptism.
- B. We are commanded to follow the example of Jesus. **“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps,”** (1 Peter 2:21).
- C. Baptism identifies us with Christ, His death, burial and resurrection. **“...All of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death. 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 6:3-4 NIV).

Who should be Baptised?

Certain standards were required prior to baptism in the New Testament. Let us look at some of these. John **“went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,”** (Luke 3:3).

Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Matthew 28:19).

Jesus also said “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptised will be saved...” (Mark 16:15-16).

Jesus commanded this to all believers in Him; not just clergy.

Peter said to them “Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”... “Then those who gladly received his word were baptised...” (Acts 2:38,41).

“...And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised,” (Acts 18:8).

There are many other similar passages, but there is a distinct pattern emerging. First, people believed because they were taught the Word of God, then they repented, and only then were they baptised.

John the Baptist challenged people to **“Bear fruit worthy of repentance...”** prior to baptism, (Luke 3:8). It hardly needs to be said that a person cannot repent of sin if they haven't heard God's Word first. So repentance and surrender to Christ is necessary prior to baptism in the New Testament.

In Acts 10:45-48, Peter's immediate response was that these people needed to be baptised. That followed their obvious conversion. In Acts 22:12-16, a religious man was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus and blinded. Ananias came to Saul/Paul three days later and physically healed his sight. This allowed time for reflection and repentance. Ananias then prophesied over him, and only then told Saul/Paul to be baptised.

Baptism was an immediate result of conversion, usually done the same day. In fact, there is no such thing as an unbaptised Christian in the New Testament.

How is Baptism to be done?

Water is used to perform baptism. How much? John baptised Jesus and many others in a river. The Disciples used this same method while Jesus was there, and this continued through the Book of Acts by the Apostles. Some references don't say how this was done, while others mention a pool was used. There are many references to “coming up out of the water,” such as Matthew 3:16 and Acts 8:39.

Believer's baptism by full immersion was the only Christian practice recorded for the first twelve or so centuries after Christ. In Old Testament times when a Gentile (non-Jew) converted to the Jewish faith they undertook a ritual immersion - *mitkveh*.

What about Infant Baptism?

Some Christian denominations practice “infant” or baby baptism, usually by ‘sprinkling’ with a few drops of water. This is sometimes called ‘Christening’. In the Orthodox (Greek and Russian etc.) Churches, infants are baptised by immersion up to their neck.

During the Dark Ages (when the church had adopted paganism and Anti-Semitism as a life-style, and thereby devalued itself by becoming a political organisation instead of being life-changing through the Holy Spirit), a particular problem arose. People practising witchcraft got the weird notion that if they sacrificed a person who hadn’t been “baptised”, that person would go to hell rather than heaven. Children were at obvious risk. (This concept has no Biblical basis to it, of course.) The Bishop of Rome at the time simply declared that baptising infants would overcome this dilemma, which it largely did.

In a council of the Church held at Ravenna in 1311, Pope Clement 5th declared that, *“It is a matter of indifference whether immersion or sprinkling is used.”*

One of the ablest Roman Catholic theologians, Rev. S.J. Hunter, SJ, in his *“Outlines of Dogmatic Theology,”* remarks, *“It is impossible for infant baptism to be discussed directly between a Catholic and a Baptist. They have no common ground. The Baptist urges that the Scriptures everywhere teach faith as a prerequisite to baptism. The Catholic defends his practice as to infants by the authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church, which the Baptist refuses to recognise,”* (Vol.3, page 222).

Rev. Hunter goes on to say, *“The great bulk of Protestant sects employ infant baptism. Yet there is no trace in Scripture of Christian baptism being administered to anyone who was not capable of asking for it. **The practice of infant baptism, therefore, cannot be defended on Scriptural grounds,**”* (Vol.1, page 148). (Emphasis added)

“The change from the ordinary rite – from immersion to sprinkling – was made by the authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church, which is sufficient,” (page 216).

The Roman Catholic Church has consistently claimed that the official teaching of their Church is equal in authority with the Bible. The Reformation, started by Martin Luther and others, was the result of those who chose to believe the authority of the Bible above all other authority. This is what Rev. Hunter is commenting on above. Roman Catholics practice infant sprinkling because their church says they can, and they make no pretence to obey Scripture.

Other Christian denominations who practice infant sprinkling cannot claim the authority of the Bible for their practice of sprinkling infants, as Rev. Hunter points out. There is no apparent reason for this practise other than that Pope Clement said they could do it that way.

The ‘baptism’ of babies gives a false sense of spiritual security to its recipients, who are often strangely resistant to later appeals, as if inoculated against the gospel. It was Martin Luther who termed infant baptism as *“Unbeliever’s Baptism.”*

Fundamentally, “Christening” or “infant baptism” is the dedication of a child to God (or to that church denomination) with water. As such, it fails the Biblical standard of baptism that requires a person to be old enough to believe in Jesus Christ and who personally accepts and affirms what Jesus did on Calvary’s cross for them.

Confirmation by an authority such as a bishop in later life is a poor substitute for the Biblical model. Recipients of ‘Christening’ or infant sprinkling need to be informed that they have not yet received

Christian Baptism. When they come to faith in Jesus Christ they still need to obey the Biblical command to be baptised.

Did it replace circumcision?

There are those who claim that infant baptism took the place of the Jewish rite of circumcision. But only male infants were circumcised eight days after birth. Circumcision was the seal of a covenant between God and the nation of Israel. God had chosen them for a special work. The written law, under significant penalty, bound them to circumcise every male child. There was no female equivalent. Regardless of gender, all children were dedicated to the Lord. This also happened with Jesus when He was a baby. Christians through the ages who practice believer's baptism usually dedicate their children as well. (Luke 2:22-23)

“In Him (Jesus) you were also circumcised, by 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).

This is plain enough. An eight-day old boy doesn't know he has a sinful nature and needs to repent and put his faith in God. And why should girls miss out on salvation? They shouldn't! Baptism is not a substitute for the Old Covenant practice of circumcision. Jesus and the Apostles never even hinted that it might be.

The New Testament refers to five cases of “believing households” being baptised. (John 4:53, Acts 10:2, 16:32, 18:8, 1 Corinthians 16:15). Children are not mentioned in any of them, but every reference said that every member of the household believed God. It would be safest to assume, with no contrary evidence available, that all family members were old enough to repent of their own sins prior to baptism by immersion. Any claims to the contrary are unfounded speculation not supported by the Biblical text.

Baptism and the New Covenant

Baptism, on the other hand, is a sign of the New Covenant established between God and the believer. When a person accepts Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, he or she enters into a new relationship with God. In obedience to the command and example of Jesus, the believer submits to baptism as an outward sign of this change. Jesus and the Apostles emphasise the fact that this change is a personal and voluntary one.

Baptism by Proxy

As I am completing this writing, there is news that Mormon Church leaders have apologised for their proxy baptisms of many Jewish people killed during the Holocaust of World War Two. Mormons believe that people can be converted to their version of eternity after they have died. This false doctrine has no Biblical basis at all, and is rejected and denied by Hebrews 9:27, which says, **“It is appointed for men to die once, and then to face judgement.”** This false practise of proxy baptism comes from a faulty understanding of 1st Corinthians 15:25, where Paul the Apostle is explaining about resurrection. Paul nowhere supports this practise of proxy baptism. Neither do any other writers of Scripture.

Baptise in what name?

Jesus instructed the Disciples to baptise in **“the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,”** when He gave them the Great Commission, (Matthew 28:19-20). This makes sense when we consider that we are called to proclaim the Kingdom of God, so it should be done in the name of God as revealed through His tri-unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are references in the Book of Acts where Peter and Paul told people to be baptised into the Name of Jesus. This was to distinguish Christian baptism from the baptism of John, (see Acts 2:38, 8:16, & 19:3-5). These do not cancel or negate the clear teaching of Jesus given in Matthew 28. There are some religious groups who baptise people in the name of Jesus only. These people wrongly reject the deity of both the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is most common amongst groups that could best be described as cultic, due to their erroneous understanding of clear Bible teaching on these and related topics.

Baptism is not the same as church membership, and should not be confused with it. Baptism will neither save nor condemn a person. Salvation is through Jesus Christ, not through baptism. **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,”** (Acts 4:12 NIV).

Who Can Baptise others?

Prior to John the Baptist, self-baptism was the usual method in Hebrew society and religious life. There seems to be no evidence of one person being baptised by another prior to John. However, after John, the standard procedure involving baptism was that the new convert was baptised by the person who had just explained the Gospel message and led them to Christ. In cases where a large number were involved, a team might be used to assist with mass baptisms. The only requirement was for two believers to act as witnesses to the event. This seems to be the minimum required for a person to receive New Testament baptism.

However, in many traditional church denominations ordained clergy, such as a pastor, minister or priest, usually performs baptism. (Note: a significant proportion of these denominations do not practice Believers or New Testament/Biblical baptism, but a form of sprinkling. This clearly shows where denominational tradition, rather than the Bible, has replaced the normal form. Jesus Himself commanded us to go and make disciples, and then to baptise them in Matthew 28:19. The order of the actions is very clear – commitment to Jesus Christ must come before the water of baptism.) One of the biggest problems is that people baptised in this newer and non-Biblical form were baptised into a denomination or church, but not into the Kingdom of God. This is a vital difference not widely recognised, but it does need correcting to fulfil the clear instructions of Jesus Christ.

In nations like India, where the Kingdom of God is growing at an exponential rate, those who lead people to Christ have the express duty and responsibility to baptise those converted, and then to do the follow-up discipleship, where they train the new converts to do the same. This is the original New Testament model and is a major factor why God’s kingdom is growing there so fast.

An Interesting Account

Before we summarise this topic, let me provide a true and compelling account. A family from England went to live in Thailand for the father’s work. Just along the road from their house was a Buddhist monastery. The children sometimes visited the monastery. One of the boys decided after some time to become a Buddhist monk, and learned what that required. He was good at what he did, and in his later teens was invited to return to England to help establish a Buddhist centre there. He did this, but his family, nominal Anglicans, remained working and living in Thailand.

After some months in England, this young man met up with some real Christians, and had many discussions with them about matters of faith. After reflection, this young man decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ, and so he abandoned Buddhism. After making a decision to follow Jesus

Christ, he was disciplined about what that meant. Part of this included instruction on Biblical baptism. He decided he should do this, and did so.

Some months later, circumstances allowed him to return to visit his family in Thailand. After a few days with his family, he decided to go to the monastery and visit his old friends, the monks who lived there. As he walked into the monastery several monks he had known met him. They looked very shocked to see him. When they recovered from their shock, one told him that they knew he had died and could not explain how he now appeared to them alive. The young man asked when his death had supposedly occurred. They had been keeping him in their prayers, until a particular date when they sensed he had died. He assured them that he was actually alive, and had not died. But the date they named was not his conversion to Christ, but the date of his baptism. For reasons only God can explain, the day and time of his baptism was exactly when the monks lost him in the spiritual realm. While I have no explanation for this event, it does indicate significance in our spiritual journey when we obey Jesus Christ's command to repent, believe and be baptised.

In Summary

- * Baptism is a command for all believers in Jesus Christ. It is not optional.
- * Baptism in water is taking a public stand with God and righteousness against the devil and sin.
- * Baptism is a challenge to the powers of darkness. It says, ***“Now I am living for the Lord Jesus!”***
- * Baptism is an act of faith calling on the grace of God for strength to overcome in all things with which we struggle.
- * If Jesus needed to be baptised then we also need to. (His need was to provide an example to follow in obedience and surrender. Jesus' baptism was a sign of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, of authority and the commencement of His ministry.)

Excessive ritual is unnecessary. However two questions should be asked of anyone who is requesting for baptism. These are:

- 1. Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead?**
- 2. Do you come willingly to be baptised, in obedience to the command of the Lord Jesus Christ?**

When these are both answered in the affirmative, the time and place of the baptism may then be arranged, whether formal baptismal pool in a church building, a river, the sea or a home pool.

Let all Christians obey God in these important issues so that Jesus Christ would be glorified through His Body – the people of God!

“Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let everyone of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” (Acts 2:38, 41 NKJV).



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