

Baptism---Is-it-Really-Necessary?

1 Introduction

Suppose you could survey the people who live in the hundred homes nearest to your own house on the subject of Christian baptism. What kind of answer would you get in response to this question: “How should a person be baptised in order to meet the Bible requirements of salvation?”

It is likely that you would get a dozen different answers, and possibly even a hundred. Some would say that they don't believe it is necessary to be baptised at all to be saved. Others would answer that true baptism is to go forward three times completely under the water. Some would contend that a few drops of sprinkled water on the head would constitute a valid baptism, while others would insist on pouring the water over the candidate. A few would strongly hold that a proper baptism consists of a single immersion backwards into the water. Somehow, the subject of baptism has spawned a plethora of ideas on how it should be administered, and to whom. Yet, all believe that their method is based on the one book of authority—the Bible. How could this confusion of conviction result from reading the same book?

One man in Hollywood, California, insisted on being immersed in a huge tank full of rose petals. And if you think that's bizarre, consider the two latest incidents involving men of the cloth. One preacher gathered his new converts in a Baltimore Street and turned the fire hose on them, declaring them now baptised. Another minister met a lady in the grocery store who wanted to be baptised, and he sprinkled her right there on the spot—with a bottle of Coca-Cola.

In spite of all claims to the contrary, it is obvious that all of these people had made a very shallow study of the Word of God concerning this subject. Their radical modes of seeking salvation were based largely on pagan tradition or ignorance of the Scriptures. We, however, are not interested in such human inventions. It is in the testimony of the Bible alone that we find the real truth about the meaning and method of true baptism.

2 Two Requirements for Heaven

We first turn to the teaching of the Master Himself as He defined the terms for entrance into His Kingdom. “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” John 3:5. This statement is probably the most definitive and assertive that Christ ever made on any subject. His words are too clear to be misunderstood—that there are two absolute requirements for entrance into heaven. Every one of us must pass through these two experiences in order to be saved.

But what did Jesus mean by that statement to Nicodemus? What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? And what does it mean to be born of the water? The context of the conversation with the rich Pharisee leaves no doubt as to what the Master meant by those words. In verse 3 He described the spiritual birth in a very simple way: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” So to be “born of the Spirit” clearly refers to conversion. Then Jesus continued in verses 7 and 8 to describe the mysterious, silent work of the Spirit in its transforming mission.

Now we will show that being born of water refers to baptism. These two things are often closely tied together in the Scriptures. Conversion is the powerful inward change, and baptism is the outward physical sign that the change has taken place. Notice how Christ repeated the two conditions for salvation on another occasion, “He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Mark 16:16.

This believing unto salvation is the equivalent of being born of the Spirit, and it is coupled with baptism in the same way Jesus did it while talking to Nicodemus. It is faith in the saving merits of the cross that produces the miraculous change that baptism by water symbolizes.

Someone, at this point, might argue that because of the thief on the cross, baptism could not be one of the strict requirements of salvation laid down by our Lord. Did Jesus not promise that vile criminal a place in the kingdom? And he was certainly not baptised!

It's true that we have no record of the thief being baptised, for he certainly had no opportunity to do so after accepting Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. He could not come down from the cross where he was being executed by the Roman authorities. Had he been able to descend from that cross, he would have done many things. He would have turned from his life of crime, made restitution for all he had stolen, and walked in full conformity to truth he now understood. But since it was physically impossible to do any of those things, the obedient life of Jesus was imputed to him. That is why God could accept him and Jesus could give him such a glorious assurance of salvation. The baptism of Jesus was credited to him—an act that would have been required of the thief had he been able to fulfill it.

By the way, the same transaction would take place today if the circumstances were similar. Suppose a man should approach me this very day, requesting baptism. His desire is so urgent and compelling that he begs me to do it immediately. We get in my car to drive to a nearby lake where there is a convenient place to conduct the service. But on the way to the lake, there is a terrible accident. My passenger is killed in that accident. Would he be lost because he had not yet been immersed with his Lord? Of course not. He had made the decision and was in the process of obeying the Lord when he died. God never requires the impossible from anyone. However, based on what we have learned from the lips of Jesus, one can confidently conclude that if a person has the opportunity to be baptised and refuses to be, that man cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

3 How Many Modes of Baptism?

Are there many acceptable modes of being baptised? Not according to the apostle Paul. He wrote: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." Ephesians 4:5. Even though there are numerous counterfeit faiths, gods, and baptisms, there is only one that is true. How can we determine the genuine amidst all the claims of modern religionists?

The answer lies in the Word of God, and in the actual symbolism of the act. In other words, the mode of baptism is dictated by the meaning of baptism. Look carefully at Paul's description of the beautiful ceremony and what it actually represents: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life...knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." Romans 6:4-6.

Do you understand the significance of what Paul is saying? There has been a death of the old life of sin, which is identified as the "old man." Now that body of evil must be properly disposed of, and Paul says baptism is the occasion for "burying" that crucified nature. By going into the water to conduct a spiritual funeral and to celebrate the new life which has been begotten in the candidate through the Holy Spirit, Paul says we are also memorialising the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Himself. What a meaningful act on the part of newly converted believers! They are giving public witness to the inward transformation that has taken place in their life and are symbolically walking forth into the joys of a new life of obedience and victory.

Let me ask you something. How could one ideally symbolize this entire experience of death to sin, burial with Jesus, and rising to a new life? Think about it for a moment. There is no more perfect way to represent all those steps than to have the eyes closed, breath suspended, hands folded, and to be lowered gently beneath the water.

Does this not also explain the reason for such a finely detailed account of the baptism of Jesus?

Even though He had been filled with the Spirit while still in His mother's womb, Jesus urged John to baptise Him anyway. He said: "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Matthew 3:15.

Notice how the ceremony was carried out there in the Jordan River. "And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptised of John in the Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him." Mark 1:9, 10.

Contrary to the distorted depictions of the Hollywood movie version, the scene unfolded in the Jordan River and not nearby on the bank. The specific words are very important here. Mark describes their "coming up out of the water" after the baptism. Jesus was totally immersed in the water in order to "fulfill all righteousness" and to set a perfect example for His followers ever afterward.

Did His disciples continue this heaven-appointed way of baptising their candidates after Jesus went back to heaven? In Acts 8, we read how the faithful Philip dealt with the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert. An angel commanded Philip to travel south into the Gaza desert, where the prominent government leader was sitting in a chariot. There the Spirit told Philip to join the Ethiopian treasurer, who was reading from the book of Isaiah. When the man confessed that he did not understand what he was reading, Philip began to preach to him about Jesus, who fulfilled the messianic prophecy of the submissive Lamb.

Then we have this interesting conversation, recorded for us by Luke. "And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptised him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing." Acts 8:36-39.

It almost seems that the Spirit of God anticipated the uncertainty that some would feel about the manner of baptism, and therefore He moved upon Luke to repeat the words: "they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch." Here we have positive evidence that the early church practised total immersion, just as John and Jesus had so clearly demonstrated for them. In fact, in all the inspired accounts of apostolic evangelism and church activities, we have no indication that this practice ever varied from the pattern established by the two cousins at the Jordan.

Sometimes it was difficult for John the Baptist to carry out his special ministry because of the scarcity of water in that dry area. We are told that "John also was baptising in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptised." John 3:23. Again, the Bible includes this interesting bit of inspired information to show us that there is only one proper way to wash away sin and enter the body of Christ. John could not take a jug of water and fulfill his appointed ministry by sprinkling or pouring. He was compelled to remain in cities along the Jordan River where there was sufficient water for total immersion. The people had to come to him in order to have their old sinful lives "buried" in the waters of baptism.

But now let's look at the strongest possible evidence of Christ's position on this subject. In every instance where Jesus referred to baptism, He used the Greek word "baptizo" from which we derive our English word. Scholars and language experts have traced the history of that word through two thousand years of usage. They discovered that every possible branch of learning and communication has used it, and never once deviated from its original root meaning of burial or being totally covered up. Dr. Conant summarizes the conclusions of the researchers who did the exhaustive study. Concerning the word "baptizo," he said: "In all, the word has retained its ground meaning without change. From the earliest age of Greek literature down to its close, a period of nearly 2,000 years, not an example has been found in which the word has any other meaning. There is no instance in which it signifies making a partial application of water by affusion or sprinkling, or

to cleanse or purify, apart from the literal act of immersion as a means of cleansing or purifying.”

It is extremely significant that our Lord chose to use that word “baptizo” for baptise. There were other Greek words that could have been used which signify either sprinkling or immersion, but Christ did not ever employ such terms in describing baptism. He always used the only word which reflected the full symbolism of that solemn ceremony—death, burial, and resurrection.

4 Who Qualifies for Baptism?

In the light of this information, can we now determine who is an eligible candidate for Christian baptism? The Bible lays down three pre-conditions for anyone contemplating this step. Jesus said, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19, 20.

Since baptism is the outward witness of conversion, it is immediately clear why Jesus commanded that all should be taught before qualifying for that sacred rite. Without an understanding of the plan of salvation, none could participate in its bountiful provisions. Christ stipulated that every candidate should be instructed in His basic doctrines before entering the water of baptism. They would need to fully understand the meaning of what they were doing.

He further emphasized the urgency of this preparation work when He said, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Mark 16:16. No sins could be forgiven and no conversion effected without personal faith on the part of the candidate. Otherwise the physical act of baptism would be an empty mechanical ritual. The inspired Peter, on the day of Pentecost, gave support to the words of Jesus by adding a third prerequisite for baptism. He said, “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” Acts 2:38.

Now the picture is pulling into sharp focus. All the elements of accepting Jesus and being born again must be present before any person is spiritually prepared for baptism. Instruction, faith, repentance, and true conversion will always precede the public renouncing of the old life of sinful bondage.

Immediately we can see that infants do not qualify for this unique ceremony. It is impossible for a baby to meet the conditions laid down in these Scriptures. An infant cannot be taught and it is too young to be aware of sin or to repent. Therefore, we must conclude that all the ritualistic sprinkling of water on gurgling infants at christening ceremonies has absolutely nothing to do with Bible baptism. We can dedicate tiny newborns to God and pray for them and for their parents, but it should never be a substitute for Bible baptism.

Most people do not realize that even the Catholic Church baptised by immersion until the tenth or eleventh century. I’ve seen the ancient cathedrals in the East with large baptistries to accommodate several people at the same time. Those facilities gradually fell into disuse as the shift was made to receive every member of the family into fellowship of the church. Because tiny babies could not safely be put under the water, they were exposed first to maximum dousing, then ample pouring, then liberal sprinkling, and finally a touch of wetness between the eyes. Like many other divine ordinances, this one suffered and died slowly under the relentless pressures of cultural compromise and convenience. The pagan custom of sprinkling not only pervaded the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but passed finally into the various Protestant persuasions as well.

Several years ago while living in Bangalore, India, I was aroused from my bed early one morning by a loud and persistent knock on my door. My caller that day was a stranger to me, but his urgent appeal arrested my attention and sent me scurrying to get dressed. He desperately needed a minister, and I was the only one he could locate. He was an Indian Christian whose next-door neighbours had lost their little baby during the night. “Now” he told me, as we hurried to his house, “the pastor of my neighbour’s church will not have anything to do with the family or the funeral arrangements, because for some reason they had failed to have the baby sprinkled as an infant. I

want you to visit them and offer comfort and encouragement.”

I found the devastated family almost in a daze. The father was trying to construct a casket for the child from some rough boards. The grieving mother was weeping as she clutched the dead baby in her arms. As I helped the father finish the handmade coffin, he explained in more detail what his own pastor had told him about the baby. Because they had neglected to have an official baptism for their child, it was now supposedly doomed to a fiery punishment in hell, and the pastor would neither officiate at the funeral nor grant them a consecrated place of burial in the cemetery.

After we had placed the little body in the box, I gathered the family in a circle and conducted the most unusual funeral service of my life. After sharing words of comfort, I assured them that their failure to have a few drops of water sprinkled on their baby would have nothing to do with its salvation. In my outrage at the actions of their pastor, I made the statement that the little infant had much more assurance of salvation than the priest who had refused to be present that day.

Afterwards I took the box and the family in my van to a spot of “unconsecrated ground” where we laid the little baby to rest. What a pagan concept it is that man can sanctify the very ground that God cursed in the beginning because of sin! Such are the extremes to which empty traditions will carry people.

5 Is God Particular About the Mode?

There are many in the world today that sincerely feel that it is a moot point as to whether one is sprinkled, poured, or immersed in baptism. “What difference does it make? It’s only symbolic anyway,” they contend. “God is not that particular about the way we do it.” But we should carefully consider the question of how particular God really is. There are many dramatic stories in the Bible that prove that God is indeed very particular about His commandments. Consider, for example, how many of the 600,000 Hebrews who left Egypt actually entered the Promised Land. Or perhaps we should note how many did not reach their destination. The Bible reveals that 599,998 died before they could cross the river into their promised possession. Caleb and Joshua were the only survivors of the wilderness trek to complete the total journey from Egypt to Canaan, and the Scriptures say that it was only because “they followed the Lord fully.”

But let’s consider for a moment whether the symbolic nature of the practice makes the mode of baptism irrelevant. We cannot deny that there is a deep spiritual meaning attached to each stage of the physical event of being gently lowered beneath the water. But is there not a similar foreshadowing of spiritual truth in the communion bread and wine? In fact, that service points to the very same events in the life of Jesus that baptism commemorates. Yet how many of us would condone the blasphemy being practised by a contemporary underground church of young people who have substituted Coca-Cola and hamburger for the elements Jesus offered His disciples on that Thursday night? No matter that it all merely represented something; we believe it is vitally important to utilize the very same symbols that our Lord used when He introduced the service. Then why should we not feel the urgency to maintain the same symbolic form that Jesus used when He introduced baptism at the Jordan River long, long ago?

There is yet another text of the Bible which lends powerful support to the chain of evidence already presented. Paul wrote, “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.” Colossians 2:12. The recurrence of that word “buried” is a striking common denominator among the descriptive phrases about baptism in the New Testament. In order to represent the various aspects of what Jesus did for us, baptism must include a symbol of death, burial, and resurrection. Those are the major events connected with the atonement, and not one mode of baptism except immersion even approaches the required symbolic elements.

Why should anyone reject the only form of baptism that incorporates every feature of the plan of salvation, when Jesus Himself gave a practical demonstration of it as our perfect example? It

must be emphasized again that there is no magical or miraculous change in the life of a person at the moment of baptism. The death of that old man of sin must precede the funeral service and burial. Even the proper form of administering the ordinance does not guarantee the slightest change in the life of the candidate. That change must take place before the testimony of it can be truthfully expressed. The very worst sinner could be coerced into the baptistry and immersed 50 times with absolutely no effect. He would go down a dry sinner and come up a wet sinner. Unfortunately, religious leaders and pastors long have buried large numbers of people alive before they had met the requirements of being dead to sin.

Sometimes people ask if being immersed in baptism will bring them relief from satanic attack and make their daily life more pleasant and comfortable. I wish it were possible to give assurance that it would remove obstacles and resolve all problems, but that is not what the Bible portrays. Immediately after His baptism Jesus was driven into the wilderness where He experienced the awful encounter with Satan. It may well be that every newly baptised Christian will have to suffer similar struggles with the powers of darkness. The devil is enraged by the total commitment of those who choose to be baptised.

Is it intimidating to know that these harassing attacks may increase upon those who follow Jesus fully? Indeed, it should not be a frightening prospect to a single person, because special spiritual resources are bestowed upon each one who accepts the covenant of baptism. Every candidate walks out of the water in the strength of a new relationship that guarantees protection against all attacks of the enemy. The power that existed only in promises begins to flow into the daily life experience of these fresh young Christians. Paul wrote: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it." 1 Corinthians 10:13. What an amazing assurance we have in that promise! No child of God will be left to fight the battle alone. All the confederacies of Satan may be arrayed against us, but they cannot contrive a strategy that will separate us from the angelic legions that are assigned to defend us. God assumes the responsibility for creating an escape route by which we can elude the cleverest snare that Satan can design.

6 Is Rebaptism Ever Right?

There is another aspect of this subject that should be explored, and it has to do with rebaptism. Is it a denial of the original commitment if a person chooses to enter the water of baptism a second time, or perhaps even more? For what reason, if any, would it be important or even necessary to be baptised again? Does the Bible provide an answer to these questions? It does indeed. The very same inquiries apparently were raised in the early apostolic church, and Acts 19:1-5 explains how Paul dealt with it in Ephesus. "And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptised? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptised with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Observe carefully that John had already baptised these Christians at Ephesus. Not only was it a legitimate baptism, but also they had accepted Christ as the Messiah from John's careful instruction. But under Paul's questioning, they confessed to a lack of knowledge regarding the Holy Spirit. The message that Paul shared with them on this subject was of such a nature that they felt it necessary to be baptised again. With this Bible example before us, let's consider possible reasons for modern disciples choosing to be baptised again. Obviously if one discovers that his first baptism was not in

harmony with the example of Jesus, he should submit to the proper form in order to fulfill “all righteousness”. Sprinkling, for example, although performed under the name of baptism, could never meet the required symbolism of death and burial. This means that babies, regardless of the sincerity of their parents or godparents, must be considered unbaptised until they take the step after their own spiritual awakening at a responsible age. Sometimes it is difficult for sprinkled adults to grasp the idea that they have never really been baptised at all and should arrange for a true immersion baptism as soon as possible.

I once asked a man if he had ever been baptised. His reply was, “I don’t know, but I’ll ask my mother and let you know.” There can be no doubt that this man needed to be baptised again, regardless of what his mother said. Sometimes people tell me that they were baptised in their early years before they had really entered into the new birth experience. Thus, it had been merely a formal ritual done to please some friend or family member. Such persons, after entering a true conversion, should follow the meaningful burial-baptism to commemorate the death of sin in their lives.

What about the Christian who slips away from the faith and reverts to his former life of sin? It is without question that public apostasy, marked by open disobedience to God’s law, should be just as openly renounced by a renewal of the baptism experience. The personal witness of a turning around in the lifestyle is one of the important aspects of being baptised.

Another reason that some might feel the need for rebaptism is related to the experience of the Ephesian believers. Apparently they believed that the greater light of truth shared with them by Paul was of such a life-changing nature that they felt it necessary to be baptised again. Many may feel the same today as they learn new biblical teachings that revolutionize their way of believing and worshipping God. Some indeed discover that their previous Christian walk, though sincere, was actually violating some very important principles of Scripture. None should feel that they are denying their earlier experience by choosing to wash the past clean through a renewing of the baptismal experience.

With such an irrefutable array of reasons for making the decision for baptism and church membership, why do so many people hold back and procrastinate in taking the step? For many years, I have listened to excuses offered for not going all the way with Jesus, and particularly for not yielding the life in baptism. One of the most common expressions I’ve heard is this: “I’m afraid I can’t hold out, and I don’t want to be a hypocrite.” Surely, this cannot be a valid argument for anyone who has met the prerequisites of faith, repentance, and conversion. Such a person is very aware of the weakness of the flesh and the impossibility of measuring up to God’s standard in human strength. Everything depends upon prayer and a constant, intimate relationship with Jesus.

Is it possible for that prayer and faith life to weaken, plunging us into defeat? Of course, we can choose to neglect those spiritual exercises at any or every moment of our lives. Should that possibility discourage us from dedicating our lives in baptism? Not at all. Only if we are making plans to live for self would we be fearful of making those solemn baptismal vows of eternal faithfulness. But the truly con-veiled step out by faith in that public commitment, trusting fully in God’s power to uphold them. They recognize the possibility of stumbling as they grow stronger day by day, but they know the loving Jesus will be there to pick them up, forgive, and surround them with encouragement if they make a mistake. Those who are too fearful and faithless to begin the Christian journey are simply confirming their spiritual unpreparedness for the baptism experience. Let them wait until their faith is more firmly fixed upon Jesus than upon self.

How then can people really be sure that they are ready for baptism? Should they wait until they feel absolutely certain they will never make a mistake? Definitely not. In fact, feeling has nothing to do with their readiness. But they must be perfectly settled in their innermost soul that Christ has performed the new birth miracle in their lives. They must be able to comfortably put their own name into the beautiful messianic promise of Isaiah 53. Each proper candidate for baptism should be able to read verse 5 like this: But he was wounded for my transgressions, he was bruised for my

iniquities: the chastisement of my peace was upon him, and with his stripes, I am healed.

Some may be reading these words right now who have been lingering long over the decision to follow Jesus into the watery grave of baptism. Have you been afraid of disappointing your Saviour by some possible misstep or failure? Turn this very moment from such groundless, self-centred fears. Your walk with Jesus does not depend on your ability to overcome temptation and human weakness. If you think in terms of what you are able to do, you may remain in the twilight zone of indecision forever. You must focus every thought upon the strength and power of the One who invites you to be His friend forever. It is the unfailing nature of His promises that can give you perfect trust in living the Christian life.

Even the Philippian jailer was so moved by conviction and faith in God that he insisted on being baptised in the middle of the night with all his family. Paul, though a prisoner himself, performed the baptism for the eager new converts.

Ananias expressed the same urgency in his appeal to the newly converted Saul. He said, "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptised, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." Acts 22:16.

Is that the appeal that the Holy Spirit is pressing upon your heart this very moment? You love the Lord, and recognize that He has died for your sins. By faith, you have accepted His atoning death in your behalf. The transforming grace of Jesus has brought peace and assurance into your life for the first time. If all this is true, you need to make the most important decision of your life. The Spirit inquires, "Why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptised."

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