

WHAT ABOUT BAPTISM?

Selected Scripture

(from May 2, 2004)

Introduction

One of the last commands our Lord gave to his disciples before leaving this earth to go back into heaven, is recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 - Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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."

One of the elements of the command we often refer to as the Great Commission was to baptize people. Over the centuries since that time a great deal of divergence has taken place among the various branches of the church regarding baptism. There are varying opinions regarding who should be baptized, how it should be done and the formula that should be used.

However, in one way or another the ordinance of baptism has been practised in the church since the very beginning. Today I do not imagine that I will settle all the questions and controversy about baptism, but I want to look at 3 questions:

1. Why do we baptize?
2. Does baptism save us?
3. What is the meaning or significance of baptism?

Why do we baptize?

This is not anything particularly profound. There are two basic reasons I want to give you.

1. It is Christ's command – Matt. 28:18-20 – go through the process – go with the message, baptize them, teach them to become mature. Christ said that we are to baptize people of all nations. It is implied that these would be those who have responded positively to the gospel.

2. It has been the accepted practice of the church since the very beginning. This closely follows on the heels of Christ's command. Acts 2:41 – Peter's message on the day of Pentecost – those who accepted it and believed were baptized. You can go through the book of Acts and you will see over and over that when people came to faith in Christ they were baptized.

Does Baptism Save Us?

Does baptism save? Does it wash away sins? Is there any sacramental value in baptism? Does it impart any special supernatural grace, which contributes in any way to the new birth?

The simple answer is "NO". But let us consider this in more detail.

1. Salvation is by faith alone – In the first 5 chapters of Romans Paul made this abundantly clear. After indicating the depth of human sinfulness and emphasizing the failure of the law to bring salvation, he made it clear that the only way a holy God declares sinners righteous is through their faith in Christ, the perfect sacrifice for sin.
2. So what about verses that seem to imply that baptism washes away our sin? We are only going to look at one passage. One principle always to keep in mind in the interpretation of Scripture is that God does not contradict himself. One can never take a single obscure, difficult to understand verse or passage and use it to say something that contradicts the clear teaching of the rest of Scripture. Acts 2:38 – *"Peter replied, '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.'"*

Peter is not here giving a detailed explanation of the way of salvation—he gives the convicted hearers a set of valid instructions—remember, this was the first mass evangelism of the New Testament era, and Peter was setting the pattern—confession of Christ and salvation, followed by the first act of obedience, water baptism. A.T. Robertson says much the same thing:

Repent – Change your mind and your life. Turn right about and do it now. You crucified this Jesus. Now crown him in your hearts as Lord and Christ. This first.

And be baptized every one of you – Rather, "And let each one of you be baptized." Change of number from plural to singular and of person from second to third. This change marks a break in the

thought here that the English translation does not preserve. The first thing to do is make a radical and complete change of heart and life. Then let each one be baptized after this change has taken place, and the act of baptism be performed "in the name of Jesus Christ".

What is the true meaning of baptism?

If baptism does nothing to add to our salvation, then what is the significance of it? Many things could be said here, but I want to point out 3 things:

1. It is an outward sign of our repentance and salvation – salvation is an inward act – an act of the Holy Spirit – cf. Titus 3:5 – the washing of regeneration. Baptism is a way of showing outwardly what has taken place inside us.
1 Cor. 12:12-13 – “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”
In salvation we are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ. We become part of His body. Water baptism is an outward symbol of that inward action.
2. It is a means of identifying ourselves with Christ. Romans 6:1-7
(Information from RBC booklet on Baptism)
In the first five chapters of Romans, the apostle stated clearly that salvation is received by faith and faith alone. Knowing that some people would misunderstand or deliberately misrepresent his teaching, Paul anticipated an objection by saying:
What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? (Rom. 6:1).
In answer to his own question, he went on to say in v. 2:
Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?
When a person receives the Lord Jesus as his Savior, he dies to the domination of sin. Yes, in Christ believers have died to sin, and this is the truth signified in baptism. By going down into the waters of baptism, we who have placed our trust in Christ testify that through our union with Him we have been buried with Him in His death.

Having died to sin, we are no longer under its condemnation or bondage. Then, our emergence from the waters of baptism signifies that through our union with the living Lord we have been raised from death with Him. We now have new life—that which gives us spiritual victory. Here is what the apostle himself told us:

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

Water baptism speaks of our identification with Christ. By that identification we are delivered from the condemnation and bondage of sin and brought into a life of peace with God and triumph over sin. Baptism, therefore, has served symbolically as an introductory rite from the Day of Pentecost onward. It is the new believer's first step of obedience. It is his public identification with Christ.

In his book *Epistle to the Ephesians*, F. F. Bruce made this statement in reference to the words in Ephesians 4:5, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism":

“Baptism in water continued to be the outward visible sign by which individuals who believed the gospel . . . were publicly incorporated into this spirit-baptized fellowship—“baptized into Christ” (Gal. 5:27). It must be remembered that in New Testament times repentance and faith, regeneration and conversion, baptism in water, reception of the Holy Spirit . . . admission to church fellowship . . . were all part of a complex of events, which took place within a short time . . . Logically they were distinguishable, but in practice they were all bound up with the transition from the old life to the new.” (Epistle to the Ephesians, Revell, 1961, p.70)

3. It is a testimony of our new life and our desire and commitment to follow Jesus Christ.
A public confession of our faith – *Matt 10:32-33 - “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”* In baptism we are doing just that – we are testifying to the fact that we have chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Baptism then is a step of obedience to the Lord Jesus. It is a testimony of our death to sin, of our severance from its domination in our lives, and of our pledge to live a new life through our faith-union with Jesus Christ. During the first century, baptism quickly followed salvation and was closely associated with membership in the local church.

No one should ever make the mistake of depending on baptism as a basis of his hope for heaven. Whether baptized by sprinkling, pouring, immersion, or all three, a person may still be unsaved. The only way you receive the forgiveness of sin and the gift of everlasting life is through personally receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour.

But once you have done that, wouldn't you like to take the next step of obedience in baptism?