

# **Understanding Baptism**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the New Testament passages that refer to baptism. Because baptism is commanded by Jesus Christ as the first step of faith, it is important that every Christian understands its meaning. Reading what scripture states is therefore imperative. I recommend that the passages identified in this brochure be read and that the conclusions I have drawn from the passages be examined in the light of scripture itself. There are not a lot of actual texts in the New Testament that address what baptism means. It is consequently an easy challenge to read every passage in order to take ownership for what we believe on this important Bible teaching. Jesus himself obeyed God in baptism and commanded us to do likewise.

## **Lessons from Old Testament Examples**

### **Lessons from Noah – I Peter 3:20-22**

The Old Testament story of God's relationship with Noah (Genesis 6:5-8) indicates that God, because of his grace and love for Noah, provided a way of escaping judgment. God instructed Noah to build an ark upon which Noah and his family would be carried to safety. Peter sees in this story parallels to what is represented in the act of water baptism. The following points can be deduced from I Peter 3:20-22:

- a. God's commitment to judge all people for their sins is a reality faced by everyone both during the time of Noah and today.
- b. The water itself represents an instrument of salvation used by God to save. God is the one who accomplishes salvation but there is a definite

concept of safety that comes through the waters of the flood as well as baptism.

- c. It is stressed by Peter that the water in baptism does not accomplish anything of itself; it is something altogether more inward.
- d. There is a definite expression of the heart indicated on the part of the one being baptized which makes the baptism significant (an appeal [pledge] for a good conscience). Through the act of baptism we are petitioning God for a cleansing from all sin.
- e. The person of Jesus corresponds to the safety provided by the ark. There is confidence in God's gracious response to our petition because of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross. Thus we are considered baptized into Jesus Christ.

### **Lessons from Abraham – Colossians 2:11-14**

Abraham had a relationship with God that was based upon his willingness to trust God. Genesis 15:6 states that Abraham “believed God.” This is the same requirement for salvation as found in the New Testament for Christians. Both in Hebrew and Greek the word *faith* is used as the requirement for a healthy relationship with God. Abraham “believed the Lord; and He (God) reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Faith was and still is the way we come to God and accept God's grace.

Abraham's relationship with God was based upon God's promise to Abraham. But God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and all of his descendants (Genesis 17: 11). Circumcision represented the sign (or symbol) of God's covenant

with Abraham.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians likens what happens in the life of a Christian to what happened in the act of circumcision. The following points can be made from this text:

- a. Christians have received a form of circumcision performed by Jesus Christ. As circumcision represents the cutting away of part of the physical body, so Christ has cut away part of the Christian that is alienated to God. Christians have undergone a spiritual surgery under the direction of God in order to secure their eternal life.
- b. This spiritual circumcision is accomplished when a person identifies himself with Jesus Christ.
- c. Baptism is highlighted as the initial point of identification by the Christian with the work of Jesus Christ.
- d. Baptism represents a type of burial for the Christian which precedes the hope of resurrected life.
- e. The hope of resurrected life is explicitly related to “faith in the working of God.”
- f. Baptism consequently symbolizes death to sin and resurrection to life for the Christian. But it is only effective through faith in the working of God.

### **Lessons from Moses – I Corinthians 10:1-13**

Moses led the people out of their bondage to the Egyptians. Paul likens their different experiences following Moses to a type of baptism (vs. 3) as they

were delivered through the waters of the sea and received help for their basic physical needs by God. In spite of this common experience among the people of Israel, Paul teaches that their experience provided no security for the people apart from their choosing to live lives pleasing to God. The following points can be made from this passage:

- a. Paul is teaching that Israel had experienced a “baptism” into Moses. As with Christian baptism, this involved water along with a common dependence upon Jesus Christ (vs. 4).
- b. In spite of the grace evident in this baptism and provision by God, it did not secure God's unconditional protection. God still judged Israel's rebellious and sinful behavior.
- c. Paul states specifically that this is an example to us (vs. 11). It would follow that Christian baptism offers no security for individuals who choose to live a life of rebellion. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. He desires people who sincerely want to follow him and live lives pleasing to him. Baptism offers no hope apart from a heart after God.
- d. A formulaic, ritualistic understanding of baptism as unconditionally effective is therefore ruled out.

### **Conclusions from Old Testament Examples**

God is a covenant-making God who binds himself to his people by physical signs and who gives us physical expressions for remembering his saving acts. His sign to Noah was the rainbow (Genesis 9: 12). His sign to

Abraham was circumcision (Genesis 17: 11). He established the Passover meal as a yearly reminder to the Israelites of his salvation in Egypt (Exodus 12). In like manner, baptism represents important aspects of the new covenant established by Jesus Christ. Its correspondence to the Old Testament signs is not one-to-one as similarities are limited. While there are similarities with the Old Testament signs, the meaning of baptism in the New Testament appears to be much more developed. From the above passages we see that:

1. Baptism expresses the desire for forgiveness by the one being baptized.
2. Baptism expresses identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. Baptism expresses confidence in the salvation secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Old Testament covenantal signs fall far short of this depth of meaning. Baptism is much more than a sign of the New Testament covenant.

## **Specific New Testament Considerations**

### **John the Baptist – Mark 1:3-8; Matthew 3:1-11**

It is important to distinguish the baptism of John the Baptist from baptism into Jesus Christ. John's baptism is distinguished by several key elements:

1. John's baptism prepared people morally for the coming of the Messiah by offering them opportunity to turn from ungodly thoughts and behavior (confession and repentance) and petition God through baptism for forgiveness. The waters

of baptism always represent a request for cleansing (Mark 1:4-5; remember what we saw in I Peter 3:20-22).

2. John's baptism did not offer them the baptism of the Holy Spirit which would be available with the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1:8). Because of this, John's baptism did not offer the confidence of forgiveness that would be possible through baptism into Jesus Christ. After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's grace is viewed as an accomplished fact for those who are baptized into Him.

**The Baptism of Jesus – Matthew 3:13-17;  
Mark 1:9-12**

The fact that baptism represents an appeal for forgiveness can be confusing when we consider the fact that the sinless Jesus was baptized. Obviously, if Jesus was sinless, an appeal for forgiveness through baptism would be unnecessary. Jesus, however, felt baptism was a necessary step for anyone seeking to serve God. He stated "for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3: 14-15). Several important observations can be made about the baptism of Jesus:

1. Through the act of baptism Jesus identifies himself fully with human beings even though he is sinless.
2. At the point of Jesus' baptism the Spirit of God descends upon him in fulfillment of Old Testament promises (Isaiah 11:1-3; 42:1-3). Jesus had never been separated from the Holy Spirit, but baptism in some way marked the beginning of his ministry and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to accomplish his ministry.

3. Jesus is declared from heaven to be the “son of God” at the point of his water baptism (Mark 1: 11). This does not mean that he was not God's son previous to this, but his “sonship” was expressly emphasized at this point. What was true before is now clearly revealed (Psalm 2:7).
4. God states that “In thee I am well pleased” (Mark 1: 11). This identifies Jesus with the suffering servant in Isaiah 42:1 and specifically described in Isaiah 53. Jesus' baptism therefore commences a ministry by the son of God, who empowered by God, would fulfill the promise of forgiveness given in Isaiah 53.
5. The baptism of Jesus was the starting point in the ministry of Jesus. It was a clear declaration of his identity and purpose in life. All that he accomplished as God's faithful servant followed this empowering event in his life.

The baptism of Jesus Christ informs the Christian understanding of baptism as a fundamental expression of truths relevant to the Christian life. The following points can be made:

- Christians, like Jesus, become sons of God through identification with Jesus Christ in baptism (Romans 8; Galatians 3:26-27).
- Like Jesus, Christians receive God's Spirit when they are identified with Him through the act of baptism. The public display of commitment to Jesus is made in baptism and God's response is the giving of His Spirit (Acts 2:38).

- As Jesus identified himself with us through baptism, so we identify ourselves with Jesus Christ and all other Christians through baptism (I Corinthians 12: 13; Galatians 3:27-28).

## **Conclusions**

The above passages offer a considerable amount of information to be processed in developing an understanding of Christian baptism. Much of what we have concluded is evident in the teachings of Romans 6-8 (the most often quoted text in reference to baptism is Romans 6:1-11).

But it is important to note that for the newly converted, such depth of understanding would be very difficult prior to making the decision to be baptized. A simple understanding of cleansing from sin and identification with the saving work of Jesus Christ would suffice as reason for entering the baptismal waters.

As Christians grow in their relationship to God through Jesus Christ, the depth to which we have been transformed in Christ will become more apparent and appreciation for what baptism represents enhanced. This simple act of obedience is associated with the supernatural involvement of God in the lives of those who respond to him.



## Implications

The passages studied in this pamphlet are relevant to important topics related to baptism. The following questions are relevant to a consideration of the relevance of “infant baptism” and “sprinkling” as a form of baptism.

### Infant baptism

Can the baptism of an infant reflect the implications of the baptism of Jesus considering that Jesus chose to be baptized as an adult?

If baptism is petition for forgiveness, can it be performed on someone incapable of expressing their need for forgiveness?

Can the act of baptism be separated from the disposition of the heart?

Some Christians consider baptism to be similar to the Old Testament rite of circumcision. Is this a fair conclusion from Colossians 2:11-14? Why is baptism not called a “sign” of the covenant? Is baptism anywhere divorced from the idea of repentance?

Can the full meaning of baptism be appreciated when it is not accompanied by faith in the one being baptized?

### Immersion

In what sense can sprinkling represent death and resurrection as represented in New Testament teaching (read Romans 6:1-11)?

Why was “much water” necessary if sprinkling was practiced (John 3:23)?

If water represents cleansing, in what way does the amount of water reflect the degree of cleansing?

### **Sign of the Covenant**

Arguments for infant baptism and sprinkling both hinge heavily on equating baptism in the New Testament with circumcision in the Old Testament. The terminology used is that baptism is the sign of the New Testament covenant. However, even though there is reference in the New Testament to the Old Testament sign of circumcision, it does not appear that baptism is clearly taught as a corresponding sign. This is a very important issue to those who practice infant baptism. For them, because Abraham's descendants were circumcised shortly after birth, it is reasonable that we do the same. But the symbolism behind baptism would indicate it is something much more significant than a sign to the one who chooses baptism. It would appear that the New Testament writers fall short of directly equating the two.

### **A Summary of What Baptism Means**

1. Baptism embodies God's challenge to repentance and faith.
2. Baptism offers the blessings of the covenant.
3. Baptism plunges us into the death and resurrection of Jesus.
4. Baptism initiates us into the worldwide Christian Church.
5. Baptism commissions us for the work of the kingdom.

## NOTES

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