BAPTISM

From the opening pages of the New Testament, the Christian is confronted with the concept of baptism. Whether you read the record of the early church in the book of Acts or the teaching of the epistles, it is evident that baptism is very significant. Our Lord Jesus Christ clearly told His disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit," and yet this simple act of obedience has always had much controversy surrounding it.

We hope this brief statement will be helpful in answering questions you may have and help you gain a clear understanding on what the Bible teaches regarding baptism.

OUR LORD INSTITUTED BAPTISM

Our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ met with His disciples before returning to heaven and said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you ; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19). It is evident from the concluding words of the passage, "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," that this command was not for the apostles alone.   Although the apostles did not live to the end of the age, it is certain that the church (made up of all true believers in Jesus Christ) will exist until the Lord returns for His own, and therefore our Lord's command is to all Christians. Until Christ returns we are all to be baptized, and we are all to be involved in making disciples. This matter of making disciples involves a whole variety of activities, but the Lord singles out two central ones: baptizing and teaching. In other words, they publicly confess Him as Lord, initially through baptism and continually through obedience to His teaching.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM?

This is an important question, and yet so many are confused right at this point. Many people assume that baptism somehow saves them or "cleanses" them or washes away their sins or gives them "peace with God." Let us be very clear on this crucial issue. Only Jesus Christ can save. Jesus said, in John 14:6, "no one comes to the Father, but through Me." Only the blood of Jesus Christ shed at the cross can cleanse or wash away sin. No religious ceremony, no matter how right and good in its proper place, can in any way make a sinner righteous before our holy God. Salvation is by God's grace through faith in Him alone. Romans 5:1 says, "therefore having been justified (declared righteous) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The whole teaching of the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8,9).

We emphasize this because so many blindly assume that baptism somehow saves them. Before we talk about what baptism does signify, let it be repeated: baptism cannot save. It was never given to save. Baptism cannot cleanse from sin. It was never intended to.

What, then, is the significance of baptism? Baptism, first and foremost, is identification with Jesus Christ. It is publicly and openly identifying with the One who died for our sins and rose again. It is a symbol of the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

In baptism the believer gives public confession to the great gospel truth that Christ died for his sins. He also confesses and acknowledges that his old life was crucified with Christ when Christ was judged for his sins, that he was buried with Him, and that he has arisen to a new life in Christ.

In the New Testament the act of baptism signifies the believer's death to the old life and his resurrection as a new creature in union with Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The appeal for a holy lifestyle is based on the fact that "we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Colossians 2:12 states, 'having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." Baptism publicly pictures the end of the old life and the beginning of the new life of the believer.

Identification with Christ is at the same time identification with His body, the church. The picture of the believer's death and resurrection with Christ refers not only to his union with Christ but also to a unity of Christ composed of many members. The truth behind this is stated in 1 Cor. 12:12 "for even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ." A Christian not only publicly acknowledges his identification with the Head (Christ), but he at the same time acknowledges his identification with the body (all other believers). In his baptism he identifies publicly with the fellowship of believers. Not only is his transition from the old life to the new life made public in baptism, but the transition from union with the world to union with the community of believers is proclaimed as well. In his baptism the believer takes his stand with the disciples of Christ. It should be noted that this identification with Christ's body (the church) is ultimately an identification with all Christians, not merely a local assembly or congregation.

Hence, one is not baptized into a local church or even a world-wide denomination, but rather into the church universal, the family of God. In summary, baptism signifies a two-fold identification. First and foremost, identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Secondly, identification with His people, the church.

WHO SHOULD BE BAPTIZED?
Since baptism is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, it follows that only believers in Christ are candidates for baptism. The consistent pattern in the New Testament is hearing the gospel, believing, and being baptized.

THE METHOD OF BAPTISM
Throughout history a wide variety of modes of baptism have been practiced by various groups. The three most common have been immersion, sprinkling and pouring. Although the Bible does not describe in detail "how" people were baptized, the word for baptize in the original language means "to dip or to immerse," and therefore immersion best suits the meaning of the term. Our identification in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ is best portrayed by immersion.

SHOULD I BE RE-BAPTIZED?
Many people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ after hearing the gospel and then wonder whether they should be baptized because they have already been baptized as an infant. The answer is yes, since the Biblical teaching regarding baptism is that it is for believers. When a person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as their

Savior and Lord they are a "new creature" (1Cor. 5:17). They "pass from death to life" (John 5:24), are "born of God" (John 1:12,13), and should be obedient to Christ's command to publicly acknowledge their new life in Christ through baptism. This is not a renunciation of their earlier "baptism" (which in some cases was initiated by sincere, godly parents) but rather an acknowledgement that baptism is something God commands the *believer* to do, not something his parent can do for him. For these reasons it is recommended that a person be baptized as a believer and new creature in Christ, regardless of whether or not he or she has been "baptized" as an infant.

CONCLUSION

It is the distinct privilege of every person who believes in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord to publicly confess Him through baptism. Baptism is a picture of the believer's identity with Christ in the great events of His death, burial, and resurrection. In his baptism the Christian boldly proclaims to the world that he is a new person in Jesus Christ, his old life is past, his new life is one of following his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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