

Baptism – Right and Wrong

The terms ‘baptism’ and ‘sprinkling’ are often used interchangeably. The following article shows that, in fact, they are quite different. It looks at the various issues from a biblical viewpoint.

The Commandment of Jesus

There can hardly be a more emphatic statement than the following words of Jesus:

He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

He clearly linked the issues of belief and baptism with salvation, and taught that both are essential if we hope to be ‘saved’.

At the age of about 30, Jesus himself was baptised “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Then he sent the twelve disciples to baptise on his behalf (John 4:1–2). After his resurrection Jesus commanded them to go and:

Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us time after time that, when people arrived at a clear understanding of the Gospel, they obeyed it by being baptised:

Those who gladly received his word were baptised (Acts 2:41).



Early baptismal bath excavated in Ephesus

When they believed the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised (Acts 8:12).

To do this, they “went down into the water” (as in Acts 8:36–38). The people being baptised went under the surface of the water and were fully immersed in it.

How do we Know What is Right?

So why do many people today say that babies should be baptised, or ‘christened’?

Babies are too young to receive or understand the message from God; they can't even understand human speech or read. Why is it said that the baptism of adults is a mere ritual and is unnecessary – or maybe optional? Or that a few drops of water are enough to constitute baptism?

The answer lies in our attitude to the Bible. We need to be clear whether we believe that it is inspired by God, as it claims:

Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

If so, we'll believe that it really is God message to us that every word is true. We'll also have no doubt that its message is as relevant to us today as it ever was. It follows therefore that Biblical baptism is as essential in the twenty-firstst century as it was in the first.

The Bible explains what baptism is, what it is for and for whom it is intended in the following ways. These are four 'R's:

1. Remission

The Apostle Peter told his listeners:

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

Remission of sins means the forgiveness for those times when we disobey God. This is only possible because God has accepted the death of His Son as the one sacrifice by which He is able to 'remit' our sins.

It's no different today. One way of describing forgiveness is 'washing' or

'cleansing' from sin. At times we realise that we can only remove dirt from our bodies by taking a bath. In the same way, when we see how sinful we are in God's eyes, we know that we need to be cleansed of our sin.

In this way, the Apostle Paul was told to "*be baptized, and wash away your sins*" (Acts 22:16).

2. Resurrection

Baptism symbolises a new start in life. In Romans 6:1–11 Paul wrote to those who had already been baptised and compared the event to a death and a resurrection.

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 (Romans 6:4).

Jesus' mortal life ended in the grave, from which he rose three days later and was made immortal. The experience of new believers is modelled on this. They 'die' in a watery grave and 'rise' seconds later to a new way of life.

Paul wrote to some more believers that they'd been:

...buried with [Jesus] in baptism, in which you also were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:12).

This is what Jesus meant when he said:

The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live (John 5:25).

3. Release

Back in Romans 6 Paul continued in verses 12–23 to say that, when they were baptised, they had renounced sin. He reminded them that, having been “*slaves of sin ... you became slaves of righteousness*”.

It was an idea more familiar to them than to us, as many of them could have been slaves, servants or masters. Today most of us are either employees or employers, so we can understand it too.

Baptism symbolises an end and a beginning in another way – freedom from a cruel slave–owner. Sin has no hold over those who are baptised – they fare set free from it and their sins are forgiven.

4. Rebirth

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

When Nicodemus heard the Lord Jesus say this, he failed to understand him. He asked, “*How can a man be born when he is old?*” (v4). Jesus explained that, by being “*born again*”, he meant “*born of water and the Spirit*” (v5).

Being “*born of the Spirit*” is the change that occurs in someone’s thinking and attitude as a result of reading the Word of God (the Bible, which has been given to us via the Holy Spirit).

Peter describes this process as being “*born again ... through the word of God*” (1 Peter 1:23). But Jesus also stressed that being

“*born of water*” is an essential requirement of those who seek eternal life in God’s Kingdom.

Rising from the waters of baptism, that person is now a child of God – the latest new arrival in God’s family. Paul wrote:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:26–27).

Faith alone is not enough – we must be baptised to demonstrate that faith.

There is a popular misconception that we’re all the children of God from birth. Instead, the Bible teaches us that it is a status that is given to us when we believe and are born of God by immersion in water:

As many as received him [Jesus], to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12–13).

In one of his letters John rejoices:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! (1 John 3:1).



Real Baptism

Remission of sins, resurrection, release, and rebirth – they're all part of Bible baptism. But they're not involved in the sprinkling of children, which was neither taught nor practised in New Testament days.

There's no suggestion in early Christian writings until about 200 AD that children should be baptised, and it's clear from these that this was new thinking. It was gradually adopted. Not until the fifth century AD is there evidence that immersion in water was being replaced by sprinkling.

What About Children?

It's good that parents should be concerned about their children's spiritual welfare. But this concern mustn't override God's commandments. The best thing that a parent can do is to give them a good education in God's Word. As Paul wrote:

Bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Then, when they're mature enough to understand and make up their own minds, let them choose to ask for baptism without any pressure.

These words of Jesus are often quoted with regard to this:

Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them (Luke 18:16).

He explained what he meant in the next verse: it was his way of teaching that we must become 'child-like', with simple trust



in God. But there's no suggestion that he advocated baptising children.

Similarly, the fact that the jailer and his household at Philippi in Acts 16 were baptised should not be taken to imply he had young children who were baptised with him. We are told that they all believed (verse 34). We don't even know whether he had children. His 'household' was probably his servants.

A Vital Truth

Baptism is for those who, having reached maturity, decide to commit themselves to Christ in hope of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The correct form of baptism is vital, too. It should be a complete submersion in water, not a sprinkling on the head, which does not follow Bible teaching. It's not up to us to replace Bible teaching with our own ideas of what is best.

Baptism is essential to salvation – let's get it right.

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