

Why Baptism Really Matters



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NO doubt many people today would say: “Why are you bothering with baptism? It’s only a ceremony, isn’t it? Having a few drops of holy water sprinkled on the head of an infant by a clergyman in church, or just having a bath? What real difference can it make? You’re wasting your time.”

The short answer is that the New Testament has a great deal to say about baptism, from the lips of Jesus himself as well as through his apostles. Now the plain fact is that the Bible is all we have. If we want to know who Jesus was, what he taught and what he commanded his followers to do, we must go to the Bible for the answers. To look elsewhere is to rely on the opinions of *men*, whether of individuals or of bodies of men in Synods or Councils. What the Bible has to say about baptism must be vital for us. If Christ and his chosen apostles have declared certain things about baptism, then we ought to want to know what they are.

The really important question must therefore surely be: What did Jesus command and teach and what did his apostles do as a result?

“Born of water”

To Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who came to him by night, Jesus said: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” When Nicodemus took these words literally, Jesus further explained: “Except a man be *born of water* and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3,5). But why should he say, “Except a man be born of *water* ...” unless it was a clear reference to baptism? John the Baptist had been actively preaching repentance and baptizing many in the River Jordan.

Jesus himself had been baptized by John saying, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15, RSV). There can then be no doubt that when Jesus said, “Except a man be *born of water ...*”, he was saying that to enter the kingdom of God, a man or woman must be baptized.

This is confirmed by the very clear command Jesus gave to his disciples as he was about to leave them on his ascent to heaven:

“Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, *baptizing them* into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: *teaching them* to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19,20)

The task of the apostles after Jesus’ ascension was a teaching mission which explicitly included baptism.

What the apostles did

But how did the apostles interpret these instructions in practice? Here the detailed account of their activities in the Acts of the Apostles is of great value. We follow them briefly:

2:36-38 Peter told his audience in Jerusalem that they had crucified Jesus, the “Lord and Christ”. Their consciences were stirred to cry:

“What shall we do?”

Peter’s answer is explicit:

“Repent, and *be baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.”

2:41 We are told how they responded:

“Then they that gladly received his word *were baptized ...*”

8:12 Philip preached the Gospel in Samaria:

“When they believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, *they were baptized*, both men and women.”

8:39 Hearing Philip explain the meaning of Jesus’ fulfilment of the scriptures, the Ethiopian eunuch significantly asked:

“What doth hinder me to be baptized? ... and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he *baptized him*.”

Philip must have told the eunuch of the meaning and necessity of baptism for him to raise the question at all.

9:18 Saul of Tarsus, struck with blindness when he saw the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus, received a visit from a faithful disciple, Ananias. When Paul heard Ananias' words,

“immediately there fell from his eyes as it were scales, and he received his sight; and he arose, and *was baptized*”.

16:14,15 Lydia, “one that worshipped God”, gave heed to Paul's preaching and “*was baptized ...*”

16:30-33 The Philippian jailor, having evidently heard something already of Paul's preaching in the city, cried:

“What must I do to be saved?”

Paul and Silas “spake unto him the word of the Lord”. As a result he “*was baptized ...*”

19:3-5 Paul found at Ephesus certain believers who had known only the “baptism of John (the Baptist)”. Paul explained to them:

“John verily baptized 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 baptized* in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Cornelius

The case of Cornelius (Acts 10) has been deliberately kept till last in this list because it has some remarkable features, of great interest to us in modern times. He was a Roman soldier who had come to know and worship the God of Israel. He was “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always” (verse 2).

What an admirable man! A worshipper of God, a man of good works and of prayer – surely he didn't need anything? The record shows us that he did. The Apostle Peter was commanded to visit him and make known to him “*words* whereby thou shalt be saved” (11:14). He explained the work of God in Christ: “Whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (10:43).

Now Peter had been reluctant to go on this errand, and so had his companions, all Jews, for they had a prejudice against accepting Gentiles into the body of believers. God had already countered this in Peter's case by granting him a vision (verses 9-16) teaching him that he was not to treat as unclean “what God has cleansed”. When Cornelius believed the word preached by Peter, God granted a further sign to convince the Jews: “The Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the word” (verse 44), to the astonishment of the Jews present. It was a special gift for the purpose of convincing the Jews that it was God's will to accept Gentiles into the faith. Peter's reaction is very instructive:

“Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized ...? And he *commanded* them to be *baptized* ...”
(verses 47,48, RV)

Notice the very striking fact that although Cornelius and his household had just received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter still “commanded” them to be baptized! Could there be a more impressive proof of the necessity of baptism?

It is therefore clear that baptism is not just a washing of the skin, but a meaningful step in the process of salvation.

How can we be saved?

On the face of it the problem seems impossible to solve. Clearly the great obstacle is the consistent failure of men and women to live the kind of life God had intended for them. The Bible calls this failure “sin”. It is a term we must not avoid just because it is unpopular and we don't like it. God uses the term Himself when commenting on human failures. In the Old Testament His prophets use it about the transgressions of Israel. In the New

Testament Jesus uses it and so do his apostles. The fact of human sin appears so clearly in the message God has left us, that we cannot just brush it off and claim that it does not matter. There is no doubt that God treats it very seriously indeed.

Furthermore, He has provided a way by which the great obstacle to the “salvation” of men and women, that is their own sins, can be removed for those who will hear and obey His word. He did it by first causing His Son, Jesus, to be born of Mary, a young Jewish woman of Nazareth, by the power of His Holy Spirit. The fact is clearly stated in the Gospel of Luke:

“The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” (1:35)

But the real purpose of God’s action in causing His Son to be born of a human mother in this way is expressed in the angel’s words to Joseph:

“Thou shalt call his name Jesus (or Saviour); for *it is he* that shall *save his people from their sins.*” (Matthew 1:21)

The death of Jesus

How could this be a means of “saving from sin”? The wonderful answer to this vital question lies in the life and character of Jesus and finally in his death on the cross. For consider his life. It is clear from the New Testament records that Jesus’ nature was exactly like ours. Inevitably he had the same nature as his mother, human flesh. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that he was, like us, “flesh and blood” (2:14). But that means he must have shared our experience in all its aspects. This is just what the letter to the Hebrews goes on to say:

“He himself suffered, being tempted ... He was *in all points* tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (2:18; 4:15)

To put it plainly, Jesus experienced all the desires common to human nature. He was under pressure to please himself; to seek his own comfort, the satisfaction of all his own physical needs, the

upholding of his own pride, the desire to be rich and powerful. But unlike every other man and woman who has ever lived, he did not succumb to his natural desires. He rejected them and preserved his faithful obedience to God.

Now the significance of this is very great. For the first time in history a human being conquered sin. Sin was defeated in the very territory where it reigns supreme, human nature. What men and women are unable to do for themselves, was achieved by Christ.

Being “without sin”, and yet being fully a member of the human race, Jesus could offer himself as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, RSV). In other words he voluntarily gave himself to the death of the cross as a sacrifice for sin. As a representative of humanity he upheld the righteous judgement of God and “condemned sin”. What is more he condemned sin in the nature which in every other case has succumbed to sin – “in the flesh”. In this way he made his life “an offering for sin” (Romans 8:3, RV). Wonderfully, since Jesus was himself sinless, God could equally righteously raise him again from the dead to a new life of immortality and power.

All the same, how does this help us? We do not live perfect lives and can never expect to, so long as we live with these bodies of sinful flesh.

God’s conditions

The answer does not lie in some miraculous act. God will not automatically “change us”, just because we say we believe in His Son. Nor is it because in some mystical way He will regard us as sinless for the sake of His Son’s self-sacrifice. It lies in His mercy and grace in forgiving sins, *on certain conditions*. The prime condition is that men and women who come to Him through Jesus must recognise the truth about themselves, and also see in the death of Jesus on the cross the vital atonement for sin. Then they must resolve to live their lives not according to the demands of their own nature for self-satisfaction, but according to the spirit of Jesus in “grace and truth”.

Then God will “cancel the charges against us”, and will receive us into a right relationship with Himself. Only then can He treat us as His “sons and daughters”, members of His family, of which the head is Jesus, His only-begotten Son.

Repentance and conversion

We are now better able to understand two Bible terms, both found in an appeal of the Apostle Peter to the people in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus’ ascension to heaven:

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ...” (Acts 3:19)

It is a great pity that the two important terms, “repentance” and “conversion”, have been so misused in modern times. True repentance means “to have a change of mind”, that is of *understanding*. When we enquire, “A change of mind about what?”, the answer becomes clear from what we have already considered. It is a change of mind about *ourselves*, an understanding of our failure to live up to the standard God designed for us in Biblical terms, that we are sinners. Then follows the command: “Be converted”, a term which basically means “to turn round and go in the opposite direction”. This is the practical result of true repentance. It is a realization that we need to redirect our lives, and to live more in harmony with the will of God and the commands of Christ.

But Peter went one stage further in his message to the people of Jerusalem:

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

It becomes clearer why Peter added the command to be baptized when we realise that in the days of Jesus and the apostles baptism was by total immersion in water. What it really means is explained by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. “Don’t you realise”, he says,

“that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into *his death*? We were *buried* therefore with him through baptism into death ...” (6:3,4, RV)

Or as he wrote to the Colossians:

“*Buried* with him in baptism ...” (2:12)

But surely it is only *dead* people who are buried, not those still alive? Exactly; that is just what Paul goes on to say. He reminds the Colossian believers of their natural condition before they came to obey the Gospel:

“You, being *dead* in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh ...” (verse 13)

Buried ... and raised

His meaning is clear. They had been as good as dead in the sight of God, because the natural desires of their flesh had been uncontrolled. They had “no hope” and no prospect but death. They needed to acknowledge this truth about themselves, and to go down into the waters of baptism as to their own death, recognising that the judgement of God upon sin is just. Then of course they could rise again from those waters with a new purpose in life:

“... that like as Christ was raised up from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in *newness of life*.” (Romans 6:4)

Or as he added to the Colossians:

“(Ye were) buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are *risen* with him ...” (2:12)

The parallel is clear. As Jesus rose from the dead to a new kind of life, an immortal nature, so the believer in him rises from the waters of baptism to a new life. The believer has still the same physical nature as before; but his *outlook* has changed. He recognises that if he lives to satisfy nothing but his own natural desires, he will end in eternal death. He now has a new objective: the will of God and the commands of Christ.

This is what Jesus meant when he said to Nicodemus: “Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). The Apostle Paul explains what this means in practice:

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts (or desires) thereof ... Sin shall not have dominion over you.” (Romans 6:12,14)

In other words, you must not let your natural desires dominate you and so bring you into a kind of slavery. Rather, he says,

“... yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead ...” (verse 13)

So the sincere believer has changed masters, because he has “changed his mind”, which is repentance in the Bible sense. He has a new life because he has a new outlook. This is how he is “born again”. The apostle presents this as becoming a different person:

“Put away ... your former manner of life, the old man ... and be *renewed* in the spirit of your mind ... Put on the new man.” (Ephesians 4:22-24)

“Jesus died for all, that they which live should ... live unto him who for their sakes died and rose again ... Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a *new creature* ...” (2 Corinthians 5:15,17, RV)

A new life

So baptism, as it is presented in the Bible, is a most significant event. In this way the believer recognises that he needs saving from death, and at the same time signifies his desire to live in the spirit of Christ. He embarks upon a new course of life, in faith that God will receive him as one of His children. All this is something that an infant of a few days cannot possibly do. The child is quite incapable of understanding and responding. Nor can anyone else “stand in” for him as a sort of sponsor. In the scriptures no substitutes are acceptable. We have to “work out our own salvation” (Philippians 2:12) – no one else can do it for us.

This is why there are no examples in the New Testament of infants being baptized; they are all of adults who fully understood what they were doing. In the early Church writings there are no references to infant baptism before about 150 AD. The account of Justin Martyr (who died in 165 AD) clearly applies to adults:

“As many as are persuaded and believe what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray ... for the remission of their sins ... (We) become children of *choice and knowledge* and obtain in the *water* the remission of sins ... (The believer) *chooses* to be born again and has repented of his sins (*Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, volume ii, page 59).

Tertullian (about 200 AD) is said to be the first person in history to mention infant baptism. He had the reputation of upholding apostolic traditions. It is significant therefore that he wrote against the growing practice of infant baptism; he was “a zealous opponent” of it, says Neander, the historian (*Church History*, volume 1, page 425).

Infant baptism unscriptural

All through the centuries since those days, and especially since the renewed interest in the teaching of the Bible at the Reformation in the 16th century, the practice of infant baptism has been a matter of dispute. The Roman Catholic Church has justified the practice because it was the tradition of the Church – an unreliable basis; others on the ground that the child is by this sacrament saved from condemnation and “regenerated by the Holy Spirit” – “sacramental regeneration” as it is called. This teaching cannot be justified from the scriptures and is a clear case of “salvation by ceremony” – just what Biblical baptism is not.

Dr. L. Lange, a leading German theologian, said frankly:

“It must be granted by every unprejudiced reader of Holy Scripture and Christian antiquity that the baptism of newborn children was *altogether unknown* to primitive Christianity” (*History of Protestantism*, page 221).

Dean Stanley, in another article, writes that:

“The practice of immersion, apostolic and primitive as it was ... was peculiarly unsuitable to the taste, the convenience and the feelings of the North and the West ... Not by any decree of Council ... but by the general sentiment of Christian liberty, this great change (to infant sprinkling) was effected ...

It is a striking example of the triumph of common sense over the bondage of form and custom” (*The Nineteenth Century Review*, October 1879).

In other words, the Church has radically changed the original, scriptural form of baptism sanctioned by the practice of the apostles of Jesus, because it was found inconvenient or unacceptable, or distasteful.

Hesitations

There are at least two fairly common reactions to what we have said so far, which deserve some consideration.

First, there are those who say: “I admit that all this is true, but I don’t feel the urge to be baptized.” Now this attitude arises principally in those who expect to be able to see religion mainly in emotional terms. If they feel a certain lack of response in themselves, they may conclude that they are not yet fit for baptism.

But this is a mistake. What God desires of us in the first place is that we set our minds to *understand* His word, and then to accept the truths He has set out in it, and to decide to try and serve Him. There is an important reason why this is the constant method of the word of God. The man who understands certain important truths and then sets out to allow them to influence his life, becomes a different person. If he persists in the course, he will become a different *character*, by the “renewing of the spirit of his mind”, as Paul put it. The change will be permanent. God will be able to use the new person in His service, both now and in the age to come.

God’s command

But ultimately, if we know God’s command is that we should be baptized, then we should obey it. Otherwise we are rejecting the word of God itself. The really deep appreciation of what we have done will come later, as we experience in our own lives the truth of God’s view of our sins, and are better able to appreciate “the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7) in His forgiveness of them.

But the first necessary step is to humble ourselves before His word and do what it says.

Then there are some who say, “I agree that all this is true, but I can’t live the life”, implying “So I don’t want to start”. Of course – let us be frank – this could be just an excuse, a way of evading a clear command. If the person so saying admits the truth of the scriptural case for baptism, then he is plainly rejecting the will of God.

But it could be that he is conscious of the life of truth and mercy and holiness involved in trying to follow Christ, and feels he would never be able to live up to it. And so he would be condemned. But this is based upon a serious misunderstanding – the idea that God is expecting us to live perfect lives. God is well aware of the weaknesses of our nature. The psalmist has put it so well in Psalm 103:

“For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him (that is, reverence and worship him) ... Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” (verses 11-14)

We are not dealing with a cold Dictator, but with a merciful Father, who does not desire that any should perish, but that all should be saved and come “to the knowledge of the truth” and to “repentance” (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). In short, He is ready to forgive the failings of those who confess them and earnestly desire to serve Him. For their encouragement Jesus is their intercessor at the Father’s right hand.

We should believe in the mercy of God and set out to obey His commands. Baptism is the first decisive step.

The privilege

Our baptism is the sign that we have understood “the truth”, that revelation of God’s will for us. It opens out before us a life with new prospects: a new way of regarding our own life, a new path to tread in an uncertain and troubled world; a new sense of strength to make the important decisions of life; a new sense of

peace with God, who will “reconcile us to himself in Jesus Christ”. For when we believe the Gospel, our status is changed. We are no longer alienated from God by our sins, but become His sons and daughters, precious in His sight, and heirs of the kingdom that Jesus will establish on the earth when he returns.

It is an outstanding prospect. We should not carelessly cast it away.

FRED PEARCE

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