

# Biblical Baptism

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**This tract answers questions such as:**

**What does baptism mean?  
How important is baptism?  
How is one to be baptized?  
Is baptism necessary for salvation?  
Is infant baptism biblical?  
Why be baptized?  
and other important questions.**

## Introduction

Every serious student of the New Testament would agree that baptism is a very important teaching. The question is: Just how important is it? Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Matthew were, "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..." (Matthew 28:18-19). Peter was asked by the people, "What must we do to be saved?" He said, "Repent and be **baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). Anything linked this closely with the Great Commission and salvation is of utmost importance.

Despite the Bible's clarity regarding the importance of baptism, it continues to be one of the most misunderstood doctrines in the church today. Well-recognized Christian denominations vary greatly in their understanding of baptism and its importance. For example, the Church of Christ teaches that if you are not baptized "for the remission of sins," then you are not a true Christian. I had a Church of Christ friend tell me in college that Billy Graham is not a Christian for this reason. The Lutheran and Catholic Church practice infant baptism and teach that it is at the moment of baptism that the baby becomes a "child of God." The Presbyterians emphasize the covenant relationship which God establishes with the infant at the time of baptism. They see New Testament baptism replacing Old Testament circumcision. Others like the Baptists, Assembly of God, and many independent churches hold to what is called believer's baptism (i.e., that baptism is an outward sign of an inward change, and thus should be done only after an individual has believed in Christ as Savior and Lord).

I was raised in a church that practiced infant baptism. I became a follower of Jesus Christ when I was 17 years old. During college someone challenged me to examine what the Bible teaches concerning baptism. At that point, I could not simply rely upon what my church or father (who happened to be the pastor) taught. I had to go to God's Word for myself, and that is what I am encouraging you to do through this tract. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

I have entitled this tract "Biblical Baptism" because I desire to go back to God's clear Word for the answers to some basic issues such as: What does baptism mean? How is one to be baptized? Is baptism necessary for salvation? Who should be baptized? Is infant baptism biblical? Why be baptized? And who should do it? I do not pretend to have the whole truth on

this subject. There are some issues that are not crystal clear. However, I have found the Bible to be convincingly unambiguous on the aspects of baptism THAT are most important. It is my prayer that as you carefully read this tract, the Holy Spirit will give you insight into His precious Word, so that you might be fully obedient to Christ in this area.

## What Does Baptism Mean?

The English word baptism comes from the Greek word *baptismos* which means to dip, immerse, or plunge something underneath water. The word's secular use was for the dipping of cloth in a dye in order to color the cloth. It was also used for the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another (Vines Expository Dictionary, p. 97). In addition, the word referred to the sinking of a ship. Martin Luther stated, "Baptism is *baptismos* in Greek, and *mersio* in Latin, and it means to plunge something completely into the water so that the water covers it" (Works, Vol. 25, p. 29).

This literal meaning of the word is a beautiful picture of what baptism represents, namely the Christian's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Romans 6:3-4 tells us: "Don't you know that all of us who were **baptized** into Christ Jesus were **baptized** into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through **baptism** into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." I have heard that years ago in England some baptismal tanks were built with 8 sides so as to appear as a coffin. This was to clearly portray the baptismal candidate's death to his/her old life. Baptism is a picture of the Christian's crucifixion with Christ (Galatians 2:20), death to sin and the old nature (Romans 6:6), and the resurrection to newness of life that occurs the moment one repents and places his/her faith in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

## How Is One To Be Baptized?

The meaning of the word *baptismos* gives us a hint as to the most proper mode of baptism. As Luther stated, the word clearly means to "plunge something completely into the water." Every baptism in the New Testament THAT gives any hint as to how it was done indicates that baptism was done by immersion only. John the Baptist baptized where there was "plenty of water" (John 3:23). After Jesus was baptized He came "up out

of the water..." (Mark 1:10). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, God's Word says, "Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away..." (Acts 8:38-39).

Furthermore, immersion, as opposed to sprinkling, most clearly communicates the truth of our total identification in the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). When the individual goes under the water, this represents his/her death to sin and self. Coming up out of the water represents our resurrection and newness of life. Baptism by sprinkling just doesn't portray these truths as vividly. **The most biblical mode of baptism is immersion.**

In addition, another aspect of baptism that is meaningful is the use of water. Water is used to wash and cleanse. For those of us who have received Christ by faith, the blood of Jesus has washed our sins away and cleansed us from all sin and defilement. The use of water in baptism is a wonderful representation of this cleansing power of the blood of Jesus. Baptism by sprinkling simply falls short of adequately representing the Christian's complete cleansing. "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16).

### **Is Baptism Necessary For Salvation?**

It is not the actual act of being baptized that brings about the cleansing from sin. Rather, it is the "calling on His name" or "pledge to God for a clear conscience" that brings about salvation. "And this water symbolizes **baptism** that now saves you also-not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 3:21). The act of baptism in no way saves a person. Salvation is always based solely on the work of Christ at the cross and our faith in that work (see Ephesians 2:8-9).

Some groups will use such passages as 1 Peter 3:21 to say that baptism saves us. However, this very verse specifically states that the actual act of baptism does not save anyone. The key issue in this verse (as is the key issue in salvation) is the appeal to God for a clear conscience. To teach that one must be baptized to be saved is adding to the work of Jesus. Whenever someone adds anything (including something as important as baptism) to the cross of Christ, they are teaching a different gospel (see Galatians 1).

Jesus told the thief on the cross that "today you will be with me in Paradise," and this person was never baptized. Furthermore, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:17, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel." If baptism were necessary for salvation, I do not think Paul would here separate baptism from the Gospel.

There are certainly a few passages in the Bible (like Acts 2:38 and Mark 16:16) that at first glance appear to make baptism essential for salvation. Let us examine both of these carefully.

Concerning Acts 2:38 ("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."), we must remember that in the first century, as opposed to today, baptism was done very quickly after receiving Christ. Therefore, in speaking of the salvation experience, it would be very easy to mention baptism with salvation. This would be similar to someone today speaking of their salvation as the time in which they "went forward" at a Billy Graham crusade. Obviously going forward is not what saved them, but they may go forward to indicate that they want to place their faith in Christ for salvation. Therefore, when that person talks about their experience he/she may refer to it as the day they "went forward and got saved." This may be the way in which Peter says "repent and be baptized...And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Concerning Mark 16:16, we must remember that this verse is very debatable because many of the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark do not even contain these verses. Most of our Bibles will mention this fact in a footnote on the same page with Mark 16:16. In many of these more reliable manuscripts, the book of Mark ends at vs. 8 of chapter 16. However, if vs. 9-19 are to be included in Spirit-inspired Scripture we might note that the first part of this verse says "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," but the second part of the verse says "but whoever does not believe will be condemned." The second part of the verse does not say "whoever does not believe and is not baptized will be condemned."

Acts 2:38 and Mark 16:16 are the only verses that even come close to suggesting that we have to be baptized in order to be saved. On the other hand, Scripture contains hundreds of verses which speak only of Christ's death and our faith in His work to save us. Let us not be misled by those who confuse the Scriptures and add to the cross of our wonderful Lord. Acts 10:47 says: "Can anyone keep these people from being **baptized** with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." In other words, these people were saved and had the Holy Spirit to prove it, and yet they were not baptized.

A pastor from Haiti that I met a few years ago said it well: **"A person does not need to be baptized to be saved, but if a person is saved he/she needs to be baptized."** Baptism is necessary for obedience. Have you been baptized since you trusted in Jesus?

### **Who Should Be Baptized?**

The verses that we just looked at do point to something very important, and that is how the Word of God always speaks of baptism in the context of salvation. More specifically, baptism is to immediately follow one's acceptance of Christ. Once again, Peter said in Acts 10:47, "Can anyone keep these people from being **baptized** with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Those who are to be baptized are those who have received the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:41 we read "those who accepted his message were **baptized**." First, they accepted the message, and then they were baptized. In Acts 8:12 "when they

believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were **baptized.**" Baptism did not come before believing, but rather after placing faith in Christ. God's Word is clear: **Baptism is the next step of obedience after receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.**

### **Is Infant Baptism Biblical?**

Therefore, to baptize someone before they are able to receive Christ is taking baptism and putting it into a context in which it was never intended to be placed. To be quite honest, I see absolutely no biblical support for infant baptism. If you know of any, please let me know. Often people use Jesus' words "let the little children come to Me" (Luke 18:16) as support for infant baptism. The problem is that this verse has nothing to do with baptism. Jesus was simply referring to the kind of faith we are to have when we come to Him (see Luke 18:16). In addition, when the book of Acts talks of entire households being baptized, let us remember that none of these passages mention the ages of the children. Thus, we cannot assume that infants were included in these "households." Furthermore, many of the passages THAT refer to entire households being baptized also mention that the entire household believed (see Acts 2:39-41; 16:31-34; & 18:8), meaning that the entire household was old enough to exercise saving faith. The biblical pattern is faith in Christ and then baptism.

Since a baby has no ability to make a decision to place his/her faith in Christ, it is reversing the biblical order to baptize an infant. Why put something that is biblically associated with salvation in the context of an infant that has no ability to exercise saving faith? Those who practice infant baptism will stress the faith of the parents, but God's Word never suggests that one can enter the kingdom of God upon the faith of another. In addition, when churches teach that the baby becomes a child of God at the moment of baptism, they are giving the parents as well as the child a false and unbiblical assurance of eternal salvation. I went to church every Sunday for 17 years without ever hearing that I needed to personally receive Christ as Savior and surrender my life to Him. This is because it was assumed that I was a Christian since I had been baptized as an infant. This assumption is presently leading many astray in churches that practice infant baptism.

Some would argue that it is OK to baptize an infant as long as you don't teach that the baby is saved. In other words, it is OK to use baptism to dedicate a child. Once again, to do so reverses the biblical order. In addition, once the child does receive Christ as Savior and Lord, they are still commanded to be baptized. If you want to encourage them to fully obey the Word of God then you should encourage them to be baptized again.

### **Why Do So Many Churches Baptize Infants?**

You may ask, "If the biblical evidence so strongly supports baptism after salvation, then why do so many churches practice infant baptism?" I have often pondered this question. It is my belief that these churches have put tradition before the Word of

God. I think Jesus would say to such churches today what He said in Mark 7: "Their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men...You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions"(Mark 7:7b-9). It is much easier to continue doing things "because we have always done them this way" than to seriously filter all of our traditions and practices through the Word of God. We must be willing to change any tradition that is not supported by Scripture.

### **Why Be Baptized?**

So, if the Bible does not support infant baptism and does support believer's baptism, then why should we be baptized? The first and foremost reason is in obedience to our Lord. Jesus Christ commanded us to be baptized. It is an essential part of discipleship. "Go and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28-19). If this is the only reason someone is baptized, it is a good enough reason. If you are a Christian and have not been baptized since you believed, God's Word commands you to be baptized. Christ will be pleased with your obedience. Others will be blessed by your statement of faith. You may respond, "But I don't fully understand it." We do not have to fully understand something (in this case you may never) to obey it.

You may ask, "What if I was 'baptized' as an infant and have since received Christ?" In light of the above discussion, you must ask yourself: "Was my infant 'baptism' biblical?" If you conclude that it was not, then you have not been biblically baptized and need to be baptized by immersion as the Bible teaches.

Is it biblical to be baptized a second time even though Ephesians 4:4 says "one baptism?" I think so, because in Acts 19:1-5 Paul re-baptized some disciples at Ephesus as a result of getting their doctrine straightened out. I got my doctrine straightened out in college. As a result, I was baptized by immersion.

Secondly, we are to be baptized as a way of following Christ's example. I am amazed that the perfect Son of God was baptized. He certainly did not need to repent nor be cleansed. However, He was baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). As His followers, we are to "walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:67). This would certainly include following His example of being baptized. It will help us fulfill our righteousness.

Thirdly, baptism serves as a seal of our righteousness. In light of the above discussion, I see baptism as the act that seals the salvation experience. As I have previously stated, one does not need to be baptized to be saved and go to heaven. However, it so closely corresponds to one's salvation that you could say baptism seals the justification experience and begins the sanctification experience. Let me explain. Justification means to be declared righteous. This takes place the moment we trust in Christ alone for our salvation (Romans 5:1). Sanctification is the process of becoming like Jesus through trust and obedience (Romans 8:29). Baptism is the first step of obedience for a new

Christian and begins the lifelong journey of becoming like Christ. This is probably one of the reasons why new Christians in the book of Acts were baptized immediately after being saved (see Acts 8:36-38; 16:14-15, 31-34). Should we not do the same today?

Fourthly, baptism testifies to others and the devil that we are a follower of Jesus. Romans 10:9-19 says, "If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Baptism can be one way (not the only way) to confess with your mouth that Jesus is your Lord. Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father" (Luke 9:26). Through your baptism, boldly proclaim to others that you are a follower of Jesus Christ. Allow the church the privilege to rejoice with you in your salvation.

Church history also contains records of baptisms being the event in which the new believer would renounce the devil and all of his works (see The Apostolic Traditions of Hippolytus). Some candidates would make a bold declaration to the devil, as if he were present himself: "I renounce thee Satan, and all thy service and all thy work," or "I renounce Satan, and all his works and all his angels and all his pomp" (The Baptismal Liturgy). Through your baptism, boldly proclaim to the devil that you are no longer his slave. You have been taken out of the kingdom of darkness and placed into the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13). I often ask those that I baptize, "Do you renounce the devil and all of his works in your life?" After which they say, "I renounce the devil and all of his works in my life."

### **Who Should Baptize?**

Just as all Christians are given the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 to go into all the world and make disciples, so are all Christians called as part of the Great Commission to baptize those disciples. Many today think that baptisms must be done only by an ordained pastor. This idea is nowhere found in God's Word. I do think some precautions are necessary in order to assure that the person being baptized is truly a child of God and understands what he/she is doing. However, I do not think this precaution means that a pastor has to do the baptism. As a pastor myself, I often encourage parents to baptize their children and those who have led a person to Christ to baptize that person

they led to Christ. Baptism is part of making disciples.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this tract is to assist you in being obedient to our wonderful Lord. It has not been my intention to inappropriately criticize other churches, but merely to expose teachings and practices THAT contradict the perfect Word of God. May you be led by the Spirit and His Word in your walk with Jesus.

**Have you been baptized by immersion since you believed in the Lord Jesus?** If not, don't you think it is time to do so? Obey Jesus and be blessed.

*"Whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me. He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).*

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