

Baptism

A Biblical Perspective

by Tim Clark



Disputes Over Christian Baptism

The New Testament Scriptures define two ordinances in the church. They are Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both of these have been debated as to their purpose and effect since their inception. Yet of the two, baptism has generated the most violent dispute. Disagreements have led to division within various fellowships, as well as to the very death of some whose positions were viewed as "heretical".

The settling of this issue is bound up in the very understanding of the terms "heretical" and

"orthodox". If we are to come to any conclusions regarding baptism, we must first establish the authority by which any given position will be judged as either true or false. In this matter of authority, there are only two possible sources to which we may appeal. The first is that of human authority, the second is that of the Divine. As unbelievable as it may seem, the heart of the debate over baptism is not based upon varying interpretations of Scripture. The real debate centers on whether or not the teaching's of men are superior to God's. On the one hand are those who base the authority of their doctrinal teaching on the rulings of church

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councils or respected theologians. On the other hand are those who maintain that only Scripture can authoritatively answer the questions surrounding this practice. A clear example of this basic debate are the words of Roman Catholic Bishop, and Professor of Theology at Notre Dame, John L. McKenzie. Writing in regard to baptism, he states "The Roman Church has certainly modified the rite..." ([The Roman Catholic Church, Double-](#)

day, pg. 176). The Roman Catholic Church is not alone in this matter. Many Protestant denominations have taken liberties with their teaching on Christian baptism, making the basis for their appeal that of mere human authority and ecclesiastical councils. For those who view the church as the center of authority, such a position can be viewed as "orthodox"-no matter how much at variance with Scripture it may be. On the other hand, those who view the authority of the church as resting in the "Word" (both written in Scripture and revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ), nothing less than a position drawn from that Word may serve as orthodox teaching, all others must be denounced as heresy.

In addition to the question of authority, two disputing perspectives have been drawn up concerning the nature of baptism. One group views baptism as merely symbolic (an illustrative ritual), while the other understands it to be substantive (an act that is accompanied by real effect). The defense of these positions fall directly along the lines of human and Divine authority, respectively. A careful study of the Scriptures themselves will bear this point out.

Baptism In The New Testament

The scope of this study does not permit the mention of every human notion of Christian baptism. As a matter of fact, such a discussion would be counter to the expressed intent of providing a Biblical perspective on the subject. Man-made notions of Christian baptism will only be mentioned in regard to their opposition to clearly stated Biblical truths.

The New Testament actually speaks of three distinctly different water baptisms. Understand-

ing each of them will help to immediately settle certain questions. The three water baptisms of the New Testament are the baptism of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, and Christian baptism.

Of John's baptism several important observations may be made. First, it was a baptism that was preceded by repentance (Matthew 3:6, Mark 1:5, Luke 3:8). Second, it was a baptism that had the effect of the "forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). Third, it was a baptism that was *expressly devoid of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16). John's ministry and baptism were preparatory for the soon and coming ministry of Christ (John 1:31). Those who submitted themselves to John's baptism were opened to the words that Jesus then brought to their hearing (Luke 7:29-30). While it would be a mistake to equate John's baptism with Christian baptism (that supplanted it), (Acts 19:1-6) it is interesting to note that no where in the account of Scripture is it portrayed as *symbolic*. As a matter of fact, the Scripture clearly states that it was a baptism for the "forgiveness of sins".

Of Jesus' baptism, we must draw some important distinctions. First, Jesus' baptism was unique, for it (unlike John's baptism of others) was *not* preceded by repentance. Scripture clearly teaches that Christ was sinless, having no need of repentance (2 Corinthians 5:21). John himself acknowledged the irony of the sinless Savior coming to receive baptism (Matthew 3:14). So why was Jesus baptized? Scripture records for us Jesus' own answer to that question: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this *to fulfill all righteousness*." (Matthew 3:15). For reasons that should be obvious, Jesus baptism was a one-time

event that only He could experience.

The final water baptism we find in the New Testament is Christian baptism. Christian baptism was first introduced by Christ himself in the giving of the Great Commission. It was to be a baptism "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19). It was a baptism that was to be preceded by faith. Its result was salvation (not merely the forgiveness of sins) (Mark 16:16). The most significant distinctive of Christian baptism however was its fulfillment of John's promise of baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, John 1:33). The realization of Christian baptism took place on the Day of Pentecost that immediately followed Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:38).

Baptism In the Book of Acts

The New Testament book of Acts is actually the second volume of a history of the early church drawn up by Luke, the disciple/physician. Luke's Gospel gives a history of Jesus' earthly ministry, while Acts provides a history of the establishment and expansion of the early church. It is in this book that we find the early practice of baptism in the church. We see who received it, how it was done, why it was done, and the effects of its practice. These accounts provide us with a sure, *authoritative*, understanding of the practice of baptism.

Beginning in the second chapter of Acts, we find that baptism was offered in response to the question of the gathered crowd: "What shall we do?" (2:37). Already, the people had come to the realization that they had rejected and crucified the Messiah Jesus. Their inquiry of Peter was clear

indication of a newfound faith in Christ. Peter's response to them was two-fold- "Repent and be baptized". Peter goes on to say that the effect of their repentance and baptism would be forgiveness of sin and the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38). Luke adds the historical note that about 3,000 people responded to the preaching of Peter and were baptized (2:41).

The next conversion account we see is that of the Ethiopian in Acts 8. Here, we find a foreign emissary returning to his home after a pilgrimage to worship in Jerusalem. Confronted by Philip the evangelist, the Ethiopian receives the Gospel message with joy and immediately seeks the benefits of Christian baptism (8:36).

Immediately after the account of the Ethiopian's conversion, we encounter the most famous conversion of them all- that of Saul of Tarsus (later known as the Apostle Paul) (Acts 9). Having been confronted by Christ himself while on a mission to the city of Damascus for the purpose of persecuting Christians, Saul is struck blind and led into the city where he fasts and prays for three days. At the conclusion of that time, a man by the name of Ananias delivers the Gospel to Saul, along with this injunction, recorded by Luke "And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his (Jesus) name." (Acts 22:16). Once again, we see that faith clearly preceded baptism and that baptism affected the cleansing of sin.

In Acts chapter 10 we find a unique reversal of events in the conversion account of the household of Cornelius. Upon hearing the Gospel message proclaimed by the Apostle Peter, the hearers of the message were imbued with the same gift of languages that had

accompanied the Apostle's declaration of the Gospel on the day of Pentecost! Witnessing the fact that God had most certainly set his approval upon the reception of Gentiles into the church (a historic moment to say the least!), Peter ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (10:48).

In Acts chapter 16 we find two additional conversions recorded. The first is that of a businesswoman by the name of Lydia (16:14). Upon responding to the message brought by the Apostle Paul, she and the members of her household were baptized. The second account is that of the conversion of the city Jailer who had been given charge over Paul and his companion Silas. When stunned by the occurrence of a rather unnatural earthquake, the Jailer inquired of the Apostle: "What must I do to be saved?" (16:30). Seizing the opportunity, Paul instructed the Jailer and his household to "Believe in the Lord Jesus", with the result that they were "immediately baptized".

In Acts chapter 18, we find Paul proclaiming the Gospel in Corinth. "...Many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized." (18:8).

In Acts chapter 19, we happen across a group of disciples that had received the *wrong* baptism! Having responded to the preaching of Apollos, (a Jewish follower of Christ who knew only the baptism of John [18:25]), they knew nothing of Christian baptism and the reception of the indwelling Holy Spirit (19:3)! Having corrected their understanding, they were all baptized into the name of Jesus (19:5).

Of these accounts, the following observations may be made: First, baptism was always preceded by a presentation of the Gospel message and predicated upon a faith response to it. In no

instance do we find infant baptism or baptism that is not actively received by the candidate. Second, nowhere in these accounts is baptism presented as a symbolic rite. When defined, it is linked with the forgiveness of sin, the reception of the indwelling Holy Spirit and identification with Christ.

The Doctrine Of Baptism In The New Testament

In the inspired letters to the churches, we find several important doctrinal insights regarding baptism. A survey of these statements is necessary for a complete understanding of baptism.

In Romans chapter 6, Paul answers the question of a Christian's "right" to sin by emphatically stating that those who have been baptized into Christ, have died to sin by participating in his death (6:3).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul rebukes an immature church, torn with division, by reminding them that they have become partakers of the "one Spirit" through their baptism into Christ.

In writing to the Galatians, Paul reminds them that in their baptism, they have been "clothed" with Christ (3:27).

To the Colossians, Paul states that Christian baptism is a "circumcision" of the sinful nature- wherein through faith, we share in the burial and resurrection of Christ (2:10-13).

In 1 Peter 3:18-22, we find the only reference to the word "symbol" used in Scripture's discussion of baptism. Ironically, the symbol referred to in this passage is *not* baptism! The symbol is the waters of Noah's flood that served to point to Christian baptism! As a matter of fact, baptism is portrayed in this passage as instrumental to the salvation process!

It is abundantly clear from these passages that baptism is substantive in its effect upon our lives. It is God's ordained point of contact for the application of the blood sacrifice of his Son. Far from being a meritorious work, it is the point at which human faith comes in contact with the saving grace of God made available through Jesus. The invitation of the Apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost still stands open to all who have come to faith in Christ as Savior... *"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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."* Acts 2:38-39

A final note..

Baptism in the New Testament was exclusively performed by the total immersion of the candidate in water. As a matter of fact, the word "baptism" is not a translation of the Greek word used in the text, but rather a transliteration of the word "baptidzo" which literally means to plunge, dip, or wholly overwhelm.

What Others Have Said...

John Calvin (Presbyterian): "For he commands all who believe to be baptized for the remission of their sins. Therefore those who have imagined that baptism is nothing more than a mark or sign by which we profess our religion before men, as soldiers wear the insignia of their sovereign as a mark of their profession, have not

considered that which was the principal thing in baptism; which is, that we ought to receive it with this promise, 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved' - Mark 16:16" Institutes, Book IV., Chapter 13.

John Wesley (Methodist): "By water, then, as a mean, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again: whence it is also called by the apostle, 'the washing of regeneration.' Our church, therefore, ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which added thereto makes it sacrament." Treatise on Baptism, 1825.