

11. BAPTISMS

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The ceremony of water baptism is performed by immersion for the forgiveness of sins upon true repentance and acceptance of Christ's sacrifice.

After this ceremony, and as a result, one receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Baptism symbolizes the renunciation of the past sinful way of life, the burial of the old man in a watery grave, and the emergence of a new spirit-led man living with Christ's mind and following in His footsteps.

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

The New Testament places great stress upon the ceremony and symbolism of water baptism. It is a deeply-meaningful initiatory rite referred to in Hebrews 6:1 as one of the foundational doctrines of Christian belief. John the Baptist is the one who introduced water baptism as a ceremony through which one outwardly demonstrates his inward attitude of repentance and his desire to submit to God.*

*we know that at a later time baptism accompanied circumcision as a means of entry into Judaism for the proselyte. This rite was possibly but not certainly pre-Christian, so that its relationship to Christian baptism is debatable.

Christ placed His stamp of approval upon John's baptism and set the example for us by Himself undergoing the ritual (Matthew 3:13-17). The Father likewise expressed His favor with Jesus' baptism by saying through an angel immediately afterwards that Jesus was His beloved Son in whom he was "well pleased" (v. 17). Jesus' disciples continued to baptize in a similar manner to John until the death and resurrection of their master, when the practice took on newer and deeper significance. (John's baptism did not make available the Holy Spirit. Later we have an example which shows the necessity of rebaptism in the name of Jesus for some who had undergone only the baptism of John—Acts 19:1-6.)

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commanded that the apostles go into all nations preaching the gospel and baptizing the disciples. They followed Christ's command and themselves both stressed the importance of baptism and carefully explained its meaning in their preaching and teachings. Acts 2:38 is a fundamental scripture in this regard: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." This clearly explains one must be baptized in order to have his sins forgiven so that he may consequently receive God's Holy Spirit through the laying-on-of-hands ceremony (Acts 8:12-17).

The main prerequisites for water baptism are repentance and belief (i.e., faith) in the *person and message* of Jesus Christ. Repentance includes godly sorrow over one's past sins and wrong way of life and a deep conviction to obey God. To believe in the person of Jesus Christ means that one believes Christ was indeed the Son of God, Savior and Messiah. Hence, in Acts 8:37 it is noted that Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch upon his certifying the conviction, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

But this general belief about the person of Jesus Christ must be more specific before baptism. "One must come to acknowledge, accept and desire Christ as his personal Savior—he must fully and deeply *believe* that Jesus' death on the cross (stake) was to pay for his (the sinner's) own, individual sins. Thus, the faith in Christ required for baptism is far more personal than merely a general belief in God or a theoretical understanding (however accurate) of New Testament theology. One who has this faith in Christ and His sacrifice will demonstrate his true conviction and belief by his actions. He will begin to obey Christ, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven"

(Matthew 7:21). Peter said that God will give His Holy Spirit only to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). The apostle James also makes abundantly plain that faith and works go hand in hand (James 2:18 ff).

In addition to belief or faith in the *person* of Christ, one needs belief or faith in the *message* of Jesus Christ which is the gospel. It would not make sense to believe that Christ was the Savior yet disregard His message. Christ Himself commanded that all repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). Thus, one who wants to be baptized must not only be convinced of the reality of Christ as Savior of the world and Savior of the person's own life, but he must also believe the gospel. In every way *this faith* is "toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

Before baptism one must be deeply aware of the significance the act of baptism has in his own life. He must understand that baptism symbolizes a break with the old way of life and demonstrates a full commitment and determination to begin a new way of life obeying God. One who is baptized can never go back to the old way, or else he stands in jeopardy of losing out on eternal life and consequently being consumed in the lake of fire. One who will be baptized should thus carefully consider that he has the depth of conviction and the fortitude to put Christ first in his life, even before family and friends (Luke 14:25-33).

Upon such true repentance and faith, a person is baptized by a representative of Jesus Christ. The baptism is by complete immersion under water in accordance with the many New Testament examples of baptism and with the very meaning of baptism itself.

There is only one proper method of baptism described in the Bible. The word "baptize" comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means "immerse," "plunge into" or "put into." Many churches today practice baptism by sprinkling and pouring, even though the Greek words which normally indicate these actions are not used in the New Testament in reference to baptism. Usage of the time indicates the world has its classical meaning of "immerse." Complete submersion in water is the proper way to picture death and burial which Romans 6 shows is a major symbolic meaning of baptism (see below).

In addition, the mode used by John the Baptist and Christ's disciples showed there must have been a great physical similarity in their general baptismal procedures. The scriptural descriptions of certain baptisms reinforce that the method was total immersion. Christ was baptized in the Jordan, and upon baptism, *came out* of the water (Matthew 3:13-17); John baptized in Aenon because there was "*much water*" there (John. 3:23); Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch traveled in the chariot until they came to waters in general, and they both went down into the water (Acts 8:36-39). Finally, proof is found in the biblical meaning of baptism, analogous to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One must be totally immersed in water to symbolize having been buried with Christ in a watery grave (Rom. 6).

Peter drew the analogy between baptism and the flood in (1 Pet. 3:20). "And I cannot help pointing out what a perfect illustration this is of the way you have been admitted to the Christian 'ark' by baptism, which means, of course, far more than the mere washing of a dirty body: it means the *ability* to face God with a clear conscience" (Phillips). Baptism, then, does far more than removing figurative dirt from the body, meaning the removing of sin from our spiritual record—It actively gives one the *ability* to face our Creator with a clear conscience.

The RSV translates this verse slightly different, amplifying the intrinsically rich meaning: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an *appeal* to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (v. 21). Baptism in fact does both: it gives the repentant sinner both "the *ability* to face God" and is "an *appeal* to God." But this *ability or appeal* for a clear conscience can only be through the resurrection of Jesus Christ; "For there is in every true baptism the virtue of Christ rising from the dead" (verse 21, Phillips).

Water baptism is the most important (of the very few) New Testament ceremonies or rituals commanded by Christ and followed by the apostles and early New Testament Church. It is, in a sense, the formal initiatory rite to Christianity and is replete with profound spiritual significance and rich personal meaning for every true Christian and prospective member of God's kingdom. The biblical injunction of water baptism is an outward sign showing an inward attitude of repentance and faith toward Jesus Christ, and is the only way by which an individual can receive God's Holy Spirit which makes him part of the body of Christ. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body [the Church], whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

Baptism pictures and symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:2-6; Col. 2:12-13). Baptism is also symbolic of the repentant believer's own death, burial and resurrection from a watery grave, as already noted. In Romans 6 Paul explains that just as Christ died for mankind's sins and was buried, baptism, being plunged into a watery grave, as it were—is symbolic of the death and burial of one's old sinful life. And as Christ was resurrected in newness of life, when a person comes up out of the waters of baptism it is symbolic of his rising up out of his past "grave" to live a new, life free from the guilt of past sins and the death penalty those sins incurred.

"How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Rom. 6:2-8).

Paul explains again in slightly different terms the same principle in Colossians 2:12-13. ". . . and you were buried with Him [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith and the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God hath made alive together with Him . . ." Paul adds in Colossians 3:1 that since we have symbolically risen from the grave with Christ, we should set our orientation of mind on spiritual things instead of carnal, physical things. "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above . . ."

Of all the symbolic and deep spiritual meaning associated with baptism, there remain three fundamental reasons why a person should be baptized: to follow Christ's example, to have one's sins forgiven and to receive the Holy Spirit. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter clearly stated that one is baptized to have his sins forgiven. he clearly explained Christ was the Messiah and that in killing Christ the people had killed their Savior. "Now when they heard this, they were *pricked in their heart*, and said unto Peter and unto the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter's response was that they should "Repent and be baptized . . . for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (verse 38). Thus one is baptized because he wants to have his sins forgiven and covered by the shed blood of Christ.

In addition to his own baptism "with water unto repentance," John the Baptist made a brief reference to two further uses of the concept of baptism; referring to Jesus Christ, he said, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11). To be baptized with the Holy Spirit shows that a Christian must be "immersed" in it. The baptism of fire refers to the lake of fire which will totally "immerse" and burn up unrepentant sinners at the end of this age. John the Baptist compared those who will not obey God to "chaff" (v. 12) which would be burned up by Jesus Christ instead of being gathered to Himself as will the "wheat" (referring to Christians who obey God).

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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