

BASIC BIBLE KNOWLEDGE

12. BAPTISM

Text: Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:37-41

Definition:

“Religious rite of immersing person in, or sprinkling him with, water in sign of purification and of admission to the Church.” (Oxford Dictionary)

Origin of the Word: from the Greek “baptizo” meaning “to dip in” or “cleanse in water”.

Origin of Baptism

Ceremonial purification by washing with water was practised in Old Testament times during the Exodus. God gave clear instructions to Moses in these words:

“And Aaron and his sons thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shalt wash them with water” (Exodus 29:4).

In various other instances we read of ceremonial washing of uncleanness (Leviticus 14:8,9; Numbers 19:13; 2 Kings 5:10; 2 Chronicles 4:2, 6).

From these accounts we may regard Old Testament ceremonial cleansing as the forerunner of Christian Baptism.

BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When John came preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, he declared, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Those who heeded His warning were baptized of Him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Because of this particular aspect of His ministry, He became known as John the Baptist.

John the Baptist baptized Jesus

As the commencement of His ministry, our Lord Jesus came from Galilee to Jordan, to be baptized by John. John recognized Jesus as the sinless Son of God, so “John forbade Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus replied, “Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). John then baptized Jesus.

Why did our Lord request to be baptized? That it was not as a sign of cleansing of sin is certain. Jesus was the sinless Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. He was made sin for us, who knew no sin. The reasons for His going through the ceremony are these:

1. As a sign of humility. The dear Son of God was found in fashion as a man. Made in the likeness of sinful flesh, He humbled Himself.
2. It was to fulfil all righteousness. He gave His seal of approval to John's ministry of baptism, and set an example for others. His submission to John's baptism was by divine appointment.

JESUS COMMANDED TO BAPTIZE

In the Gospel accounts there is no record of Jesus having ever baptized anyone. However, His disciples were commanded to do so: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in Heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:18,19).

HIS COMMAND OBEYED

At Pentecost, the promised outpouring of the Holy Ghost came upon the Apostles. Filled with the new courage and power, Peter preached a mighty sermon to the assembled multitude. When the Jews realized that Jesus whom they had crucified was the Lord and Christ sent from God, they were pricked in their heart. They said to Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). 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" (Acts 2:38). On that day those who believed and were baptized were about 3,000 souls.

Since Pentecost, those who believe have submitted themselves, in obedience to our Lord's command to the sacrament of holy baptism.

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

BAPTISM is one of the two SACRAMENTS commanded by our Lord. (The other is HOLY COMMUNION). While it is only a SYMBOLIC CEREMONIAL ACT, nevertheless it has profound meaning in the life of a believer.

BAPTISM does **not** save anyone. Only FAITH in CHRIST can save. BAPTISM is the OUTWARD SIGN of an INWARD FAITH. Therefore, a person who does not have faith in CHRIST for salvation must not be baptized. On the other hand, he who believes and is saved already, should not hold back, but should seek PUBLIC BAPTISM in obedience to our Lord's command.

There are three main aspects to the meaning of BAPTISM:

1. **BAPTISM** signifies the washing away of sin and renunciation of one's sinful past. Paul explains this aptly: "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3,4).

BAPTISM, then, means,
CLEANSING FROM SIN, and
DYING TO ONE'S SINFUL PAST.

2. **BAPTISM** signifies entry into the NEW COVENANT and admission into the church of Jesus Christ. In OLD TESTAMENT times, God instituted a COVENANT with Abraham, signified by CIRCUMCISION as the outward sign of faith. This COVENANT applied only to the Jews.

In the NEW TESTAMENT, the COVENANT is extended to ALL - JEWS and GENTILES. With this, the rite of CIRCUMCISION lapsed and its place was taken by BAPTISM.

BAPTISM, then, signifies entry into this new COVENANT or AGREEMENT with GOD in CHRIST.

3. **BAPTISM** signifies. TOTAL COMMITMENT and LIFE-LONG ALLEGIANCE to JESUS CHRIST, to the EXCLUSION of ALL OTHERS.

It may be likened to MARRIAGE when the BRIDE gives herself exclusively to the BRIDEGROOM for LIFE. It is a happy, proud and expectant event. The same with BAPTISM. The believer publicly declares his love and allegiance for JESUS CHRIST, for HIS great and undying love. With profound happiness, pride and expectation, he gives himself totally and exclusively to CHRIST, our HEAVENLY BRIDEGROOM - for LIFE.

IMMERSION or SPRINKLING?

Both IMMERSION and sprinkling have their proponents, but when it is realized that the act is purely SYMBOLIC, the amount of water is unimportant. Baptists and some other denominations practise immersion. Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans and some others sprinkle.

Scriptural support can be found for either methods.

For example: John the Baptist was baptizing in the river Jordon, and Jesus, after He was baptized, went up straightaway "**out of the water**". The suggestion is that our Lord had been immersed. But this is by no means certain because the Jordan during the dry season of the year is practically dried up in parts, or at any rate very shallow. In these circumstances immersion would be a physical impossibility and sprinkling would be the most likely method.

So the debate goes on. The truth is that the method is not the important thing. Otherwise the Bible would have clearly defined it. Consider also the impossibility of immersion in the North Pole or for a sick or dying person.

CONCLUSION

We allow that both IMMERSION and SPRINKLING may lawfully be practised. Each believer must clearly understand the significance of the rite and be fully persuaded of the correctness of the method he chooses. Those who prefer IMMERSION should join a doctrinally sound church that practises it. Believers who have been baptized by IMMERSION in some other church may be received into membership of the BP Church without having to be re-baptized by sprinkling.

INFANT BAPTISM

Our church, as well as certain other (Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian) practise Infant Baptism i.e. baptism of infants and children. There are Scriptural grounds for this practice.

1. As a covenant between believing parents and God

When God called Abraham to be a father of many nations, He instituted the ceremonial rite of circumcision. “And God said to Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised ... and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:9-11). This was God’s agreement for blessing with His chosen people, the Jews.

In the New Testament times, the covenant of blessing was extended to the Gentiles, i.e. all nations and people who believed on Jesus. The ceremonial rite of circumcision was superseded by the sacrament of baptism. Later Peter confirmed this as the new practice for the Church. Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them (Acts 11:4). The baptism of the Holy Ghost was given to the uncircumcised non-Jews.

What is the significance, then of including children in the new covenant of baptism? It may be objected to on the grounds that the child does not yet understand its meaning, and is not able to exercise faith in Christ for salvation. (After all, we have agreed that baptism is only an outward sign of an inward faith).

Just as in Old Testament times, believing parents brought their sons in faith for circumcision, so likewise in New Testament times parents bring their children in faith for baptism. In both instances, the parents are claiming God’s covenant blessing for their children.

In bringing their children for baptism, believing parents are including them in God’s promise of blessing. At the same time, they promise God to faithfully bring up their

children in the fear and knowledge of God and in the doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ.

At a later stage, when the child is old enough to confirm his own faith in Jesus Christ, the Church then publicly receives him into membership at a Confirmation Service, also referred to as “Reaffirmation to Faith”.

2. **The Apostles practised Infant Baptism**

In several New Testament accounts, we have reason to believe that the Apostles Peter and Paul received children in baptism. At Pentecost Peter said to the new converts: “Repent, and be baptized **every one of you** ... for the promise is unto you, **and to your children**” (Acts 2:38, 39).

Paul at Philippi baptized Lydia **and her household** (Acts 16:15), and the keeper of prison, “**he and all his**, straightway” (Acts 16:33).

- 3 **The early Church Fathers and Reformers** upheld the practice of baptizing infants and children. We also cite the instance when our Lord said, “Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14).

CONCLUSION

We reaffirm, again, that baptism by itself does not save any one. A child is not born again by baptism. It is only a sign of the parents’ faith, that the child belongs to God.

For the child, the sign comes first, and the faith comes afterwards.

TO BE BAPTIZED OR NOT?

This is a difficult question for some, especially young people facing parental objection. However, under normal circumstances, a person should seek baptism only if the following conditions are fulfilled:

1. He has truly experienced the **NEW BIRTH** and has full **ASSURANCE OF SALVATION**.
2. He is ready to obey the Lord’s command in **PUBLIC BAPTISM**, and to enter into a life-long relationship with **JESUS CHRIST**.

Our Lord’s word serves to guide those who are encountering parental or other objection: “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me ... he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37, 38). Our love for God must come before all others. There may be initial difficulties, but no price is too high to pay in order to win Christ. He is the **LOVER OF OUR SOULS, THE ALTOGETHER LOVELY ONE**.

If He has so loved us, ought we not also love Him?

BIBLE KNOWLEDGE QUIZ

12. BAPTISM

Fill in the blanks:

1. Baptism means to cleanse or _____ with water.
2. There are two forms of baptism: _____ and _____.
3. Baptism is an outward sign of an _____ faith.
4. We are saved by _____ through _____. Baptism does _____ save.
5. Jesus was baptized as a sign of _____.

Underline the correct answers:

6. (a) The Apostles (b) The Church (c) Our Lord Jesus
commanded that those who believe should be baptized.
7. In baptism, a believer commits himself to follow Jesus
(a) on Sundays (b) for life (c) on good days.
8. The amount of water used in baptism is
(a) most important (b) immaterial (c) crucial.
9. A person should seek baptism
(a) when he is sure of his salvation
(b) when he has attended Church for one year
(c) when he wishes to join a church.
10. Public baptism is a testimony that the believer is now
(a) a member of the body of Jesus Christ
(b) giving up his job
(c) disowning his family.