

NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISM

By Dub McClish

Perhaps there is no teaching of the New Testament over which more controversy has raged than the subject of baptism. This is not the case because the New Testament is ambiguous on the subject, nor because men are incapable of understanding its teaching. As we explore this subject it shall be our premise that God is the author of baptism through the teachings of the Bible. In the final analysis, it makes little difference what any man says on the subject, but it makes all of the difference what God says. If the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of baptism is unimportant, then how can anyone logically contend that the teaching of the New Testament on any subject is important? The Lord, through His Word, must be allowed to define both the action and purpose of baptism.

The “What” of Baptism

In the minds of most people, baptism is an act that may be administered in any of three ways: sprinkling water on the candidate, pouring water on the candidate or immersing the candidate in water. Some English dictionaries state that baptism is administered by any of these three actions (Neilson, 216). However, we must remember that modern English dictionaries merely reflect the **current** usage of words, rather than their original meanings.

Consider the following evidence in the New Testament, apart from the original meaning of the word *baptism*. The baptism of John, (which involved the same action as the baptism commanded by Christ and administered by His apostles both before and after the cross), required “much water” (John 3:23).

The most detailed account of an actual baptism is found in Acts 8:38–39: “And they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And...they came up out of the water....” The apostle Paul twice uses the term *burial* to describe what takes place when one is baptized (Rom. 6:14; Col. 2:12). The foregoing evidence obviously points to only one action—immersion.

A study of the Greek word translated *baptism* yields the same conclusion. *Baptize* and its related forms was not an English word, originally. It was transferred into English directly from the New Testament Greek word, *baptidzo*. One may consult any standard lexicon of the Greek New Testament and learn that *baptidzo*, means to dip, plunge, submerge, or immerse when used literally (*Analytical*, 65; Baur, 131; Thayer, 94). When used figuratively (e.g., Mark 10:38), it means to overwhelm. If this Greek word were translated, rather than merely transliterated, our English New Testaments would read “immerse” everywhere they presently read, “baptize.”

For those who truly believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, the description and definition of baptism in the New Testament is sufficient, regardless of what mere men may say on the subject. However, it is worthwhile to notice a sampling of what religious leaders have said the subject. The reader is asked to please understand that we do not cite the following for the purpose of embarrassing anyone or to “prove” some to be right and others wrong. The words of men prove nothing independent of the Word of God. Our only purpose is to exalt the truth of God’s Word. Consider the following:

- **Martin Luther** (“Father of the 16th century Reformation,” founder of the Lutheran Church): “The term *baptism* is a Greek word; it may be rendered into Latin by *mersio*—when we immerse anything in water, that it may be entirely covered with water” (Brents, 280).
- **John Calvin** (16th century reformer, a founder of the Presbyterian Church): “The word *baptize* signifies to immerse, and the rite of immersion was practiced by the ancient church” (Brents, 280–81).
- **John Wesley** (founder of the Methodist Church): “*Buried with him*—alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion” (Brents, 334).
- **Catholic Dictionary**: “In Apostolic Times the body of the baptized person was immersed, for St. Paul looks on the immersion as typifying the burial with Christ, and speaks of baptism as a bath.”

All of the above quotations have two things in common: (1) They are unanimous in their definition of baptism as immersion; (2) They all come from members of religious bodies that have substituted sprinkling and/or pouring for immersion. Loyalty to their scholarship requires them to refute their own practice, however. None can rationally argue that New Testament baptism was or is anything other than immersion. To adopt any other view requires a denial of explicit New Testament teaching.

The “Why” of Baptism

There are two basic schools of thought on the purpose of the baptism commanded by Jesus Christ: One holds that baptism is an act of obedience of one who has **already been saved**, providing access to denominational membership after salvation has been granted through faith alone. In this view, baptism is part of one’s obedience to Christ **because** he is already a Christian. The other view contends that baptism is the final act of obedience to which one submits **in order to be saved** or forgiven of his past sins. In this view a person is not saved until he is baptized, at which time the Lord adds him to His church **because he is saved**. What does the Bible say?

Jesus told the apostles that as they preached the Gospel, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). Note the order: (1) believe, (2) baptized, (3) saved. The

order is not: (1) believe, (2) saved, (3) baptized. In this verse, Jesus definitively makes baptism a condition of salvation, as plainly as He makes faith.

When the apostles began to fulfill the command to “go preach,” they told believers, “Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins” (Acts 2:37–38). What relation does repentance sustain to remission (forgiveness) of sins? (Notice that baptism is in the same relation to forgiveness of sins as is repentance.) To be consistent, those who argue that forgiveness **precedes** baptism instead of **following** it must also hold that forgiveness **precedes** repentance instead of **following** it. However, there is not a single instance in all of the Bible of God’s granting or promising forgiveness prior to repentance. *Remission of sins* appears **after** baptism and as a consequence of it in this passage, even as *salvation* appears **after** baptism in Mark 16:16. Ananias commanded Saul of Tarsus: “...be baptized and wash away thy sins... (Acts 22:16). This statement makes no sense at all if Saul’s sins were forgiven **before** he was baptized.

The objection is sometimes raised that to insist that immersion in water is a Scriptural condition of salvation equals a doctrine of “water salvation” or salvation by means of water. If that is the case, then such Scripture passages as Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 22:16, et al., must be blamed for the teaching, rather than those who believe what these verses clearly state. However, such verses attribute no merit to water as a spiritual cleansing agent whatsoever. These verses do not identify the cleansing agent.

They only tell us **the act in which the cleansing** occurs. It is plain from elsewhere in Scripture that the blood of Christ is the only agent capable of cleansing or forgiveness (Heb. 9:22; 1 Pet. 1:18–19; Rev. 1:5, et al.). The old song has it exactly right: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

When does this washing occur or how does one gain access to the precious cleansing blood of Christ? Besides the references already cited, consider also Romans 6:3: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” It was in His death that Jesus’ shed His cleansing blood for the sins of mankind (1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 9:26–28; et al.). By what means is the sinner able to participate in the death of Christ, where He poured out his atoning blood? The inspired apostle answers conclusively: We are “baptized into his death.” This statement is in perfect harmony with every other Scripture on baptism.

The purpose God has revealed in his Word for baptism is not that of Christian obedience, done because one has already been saved. Rather, it, along, with a confessed faith in Christ and repentance of one’s sins, is the act in which one comes to participate in the spiritual benefits of the death of Christ. It is therefore the act from which one comes forth to live a new

life (Rom. 6:4). It is the act upon which the Christ adds one to the church of Christ, because he has been saved and the church is God's depository of saved people (Acts 2:41–47; Eph. 5:23). Only when one understands that salvation/forgiveness of sins is not granted until one is Scripturally baptized, can one appreciate the apostle Peter's pronouncement that baptism saves us (1 Pet. 3:21).

Summary

The Scriptures teach that the baptism the Christ ordered to be preached to all men is a burial in water. It brings one into salvation/forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. It is our earnest plea that all men return to what the Bible teaches on this and every other subject in religion and morals, both in their teaching and practice.

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[Note: I wrote this MS by invitation, and it was published as one of 52 chapters in *Introducing the Church of Christ*, edited by Alvin Jennings (Star Bible Publications: Fort Worth, TX, 1981).]