

# ***The Meaning of Baptism***

The word "ordinance" means "that which is ordered by or commanded." By the ordinances of the Church, we mean the external rites which the Scriptures set forth to be observed by believers. In most Protestant churches, we observe two such rites that were commanded by Christ - Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

We do not use the word "sacrament" as applied to the ordinance, because that word indicates something that is especially sacred in itself and necessary for salvation.

## **I. Baptism**

### **A. What is Baptism?**

Water Baptism is a meaningful demonstration of a personal identification with the Lord Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. It is also a public testimony of an inward personal salvation experience that took place at an earlier time. This you will see again throughout this study.

In the early church, its meaning was very significant. Jewish believers would be excommunicated from family and friends, and the Gentiles would suffer ridicule and persecution. Baptisms were generally done publicly for anyone to observe. Today, although baptism is primarily observed within the local assembly of believers, it still holds a very significant meaning.

For some people, the thought of public confession can be very frightening, but we must not forget that "God has not given us the spirit of timidity, but of power, and of love, and of sound mind...therefore, we should not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord (2 Timothy 1:7-8)."

Baptism is an outward sign or symbol of an inward reality. It symbolizes that which took place in our lives when we were saved. It is a sign testifying to all that we have had a born-again experience with God and that He has made a change in our lives. On the fourth finger of my left hand I wear a plain golden ring. This ring is a symbol, an outward sign for all to see, and it indicates that I am married. It indicates that there is one person who holds a special place in my life and who means more to me than any on earth. Now the wearing of the wedding ring does not make this true, but it signifies that it is true. Baptism is a symbol like the wedding ring. It has no saving power in itself, but it signifies that we have had a born again experience with Christ, and that He is precious to us. For an unsaved person to be baptized is hypocrisy, as he is signifying something that is not true, and being baptized in no way makes it true. If he has not received Christ as Savior, he is lost; being baptized will make no difference in his life and relationship to Christ.

### **B. What is our authority for observing this ordinance?**

#### **1. It is commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19).**

Since it is commanded by Christ, we actually need no further authority than this. Jesus said, "Ye are my friends if ye do the things which I command you." He also said, "Why call

ye me Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Out of our love and loyalty to Him we should desire to be baptized.

A prince once sent a badge to his officer asking that he wear it to show his loyalty and allegiance to him. The officer said that he loved the prince and was loyal to him as his ruler, but he refused to wear the badge. Such loyalty would certainly be questioned, even as a Christian's loyalty to Christ is questioned when he refuses to obey His commandments.

Baptism is not the door to the church or a kind of initiation by which we are received into the church. We should never reluctantly submit to baptism in order to become a member of a particular church. Love for our Lord and Savior is the most reasonable and honorable motive for baptism. Prompted by that love we desire to identify ourselves with Him.

## **2. Baptism was enjoined by the apostles (Acts 2:38; 10:47,48).**

## **3. Baptism was practiced by the early Church.**

One of the best books on baptism is the book of Acts in the New Testament. A reading of this book will reveal that the early church baptized those who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **C. What does Baptism Mean - What Does It Signify?**

Remember that we said that baptism was an outward sign of an inward reality, or a symbol of that which has already taken place in the life of the believer. Let us see then what has taken place in the life of the believer, which baptism signifies.

#### **1. Baptism is a public confession of Christ.**

A man becomes a soldier when he takes the soldier's oath. The public, however, may not realize he has become a soldier until he is seen in his new uniform. The uniform does not make him a soldier; it simply proclaims that he is a soldier. In a similar way, a person becomes a Christian by putting his trust in Christ. In baptism, he puts on the Christian's uniform, telling the world that he has become a follower of Christ.

#### **2. Union With Christ (Galatians 3:26,27).**

When a person receives Christ he is baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. This means that the believer is vitally united to Christ, and the very life of the Son of God flows into the believer. Water baptism symbolizes this baptism of the Holy Spirit and becomes to the Christian the sign of his vital union with Christ.

#### **3. Baptism symbolizes our death to sin and our resurrection to a new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 2:20).**

Christ took the place of the sinner in bearing the penalty for sin. So complete is the believer's identification with Jesus Christ that when Christ died on the cross and arose from the dead, the believer is pictured as having died and arisen with Him. Baptism symbolizes therefore, the cancellation of personal guilt through the absolute and complete removal of the penalty of sins through the blood of Christ. But further than that it pictures the believer's death to sin and resurrection to a new life in Christ. By

being lowered into the water the believer is testifying, "My sinful life, the old man, unrighteousness, the old sinful person that I was is buried with Christ." When a person is being raised from the water he is testifying, "I am now a new creation in Christ Jesus raised in newness of life to God and righteousness."

In baptism, the believer testifies to that which Christ has done, and we declare our identity with Him in crucifixion and resurrection. We bear witness to the fact that His righteousness becomes ours "through the faith of the operation of God."

#### **4. The Lordship of Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27).**

Baptism signifies the enthronement of Christ as the Lord of the believer's life.

#### **D. How do we baptize? What is the proper mode of baptism?**

Many modes of baptism are practiced. Some sprinkle, some pour, some immerse forward, some immerse backward, and some immerse three times. Who is right? We believe that immersion in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is the proper mode of baptism, for the following reasons:

##### **1. The word "baptize" means 'to dip or immerse'.**

The Greek word "baptizo" which has been translated into the English language is used 127 times in the New Testament and is not once translated sprinkle or pour. All scholars agree that the main meaning of this word is to dip or immerse and all agree that immersion is a proper mode of baptizing.

##### **2. The examples of baptism we have in the New Testament were immersion.**

The only two baptisms that were reported in detail in the New Testament are those of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11) and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts :36-39). These were clearly by immersion.

Let's look at these and other scripture passages referring to baptism:

Matthew 3:6	"...baptized of him in (Gk. en - 'in') Jordan"
Matthew 3:11	"...baptize you with (Gk. en - 'in') water"
Matthew 3:16	"...when he was baptized, went up straight way out of (Gk. apo - 'out from within') the water"
Mark 1:5	"...baptized of him in (Gk. en - 'in') water"
Mark 1:9	"...was baptized of John in (Gk. en - 'in') Jordan"
John 1:31	"...I come baptizing with (Gk. en - 'in') water"
John 1:33	"...sent me to baptize with (Gk. en 'in') water"
Acts 8:38,39	"...went down both into (Gk. eis - 'into') the water...and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water..."

These scriptures point out that baptism was in water; candidates went down into the water, and candidates came up out of the water. Furthermore, in Romans 6:4 we read, "We are buried with him by baptism into death." And in Colossians 2:12, "Buried with him in baptism." Only immersion pictures burial.

### **3. Immersion best presents the symbolism of baptism.**

Immersion is clearly the best symbol of burial and resurrection. Neither sprinkling nor pouring picture the symbolism of baptism as effectively. Only the burying of a believer in the water grave of baptism and raising him again from the water grave can carry out the figure of burial and resurrection.

### **4. Secular usage of the word "baptizo".**

Kittle notes in his word study of "baptizo" that it was used by secular writers around the time of Christ for the "sinking of a ship or drowning".

### **5. The testimony of history and the teaching of great scholars of all churches and denominations.**

St. Basil 330 AD: "How can we be placed in a condition of likeness to His death? By being buried with Him in baptism. How are we to go down with Him into the grave? By imitating the burial of Christ by baptism, for the bodies of the baptized are in a sense buried in water."

St. Chryostom 398 AD: "We, as in a sepulcher, immerse our heads in water, the old man is buried and sinking down, the whole body is concealed at once, then as we emerge the new man arises."

Martin Luther, founder of the Lutheran Church: "In the primitive Church, baptism was a total immersion, or burial, as it were. Baptism is a Greek word and may be translated "immersion". I would have those who are baptized to be altogether dipped; in water."

John Calvin, forerunner of Reformed and Presbyterian theology - "Baptize signifies to immerse, and it is certain that immersion was the practice of the ancient church."

John Wesley, founder of Methodism: "Buried with him, alluding to baptizing by immersion, according to the custom of the first church."

Dr. Pain, Congregational Professor of Ecclesiastical History: "Immersion was the baptism of the Christian church for thirteen centuries."

Dean Stanley, Episcopalian: "In the apostolic age those who came to baptism came in full age, and of their own choice. Those who were baptized were immersed in the water."

Phillip Schoff, Presbyterian church historian: "Immersion was unquestionably the original form of baptism."

Bishop White, Anglican: "Immersion was the primitive and apostolic baptism...Immersion was the only mode of baptism in the early church. God in His

providence has permitted the Baptist denomination to restore the long-lost primitive mode of immersion, teaching the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ."

Many other testimonies could be added to this list if space permitted but I will add just one more:

Father B.L. Conway, Roman Catholic priest, author, and leader: "Catholics are fully aware that the early practice of the church was to immerse, and that this practice prevailed in both the East and West in solemn administration of the sacrament to the end of the 13th century."

History reveals that both sprinkling and pouring, as well as infant baptism grew out of the belief that baptism was necessary for salvation - called "baptismal regeneration". The Roman Catholic church practiced immersion until 1311 (Council of Ravenna), when it officially adopted sprinkling as the accepted mode of baptism. The Greek Catholic Church still baptized by immersion, immersing three times instead of once - although they baptize infants in another way. Walliston Walker, a well-known church historian of Yale University says, "Immersion continued the prevailing practice till the late Middle Ages in the west; in the east it so remains."

The Westminster Assembly (1634-1647) framed the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Catechism, a Directory of Worship, and a Presbyterian form of church government. After discussing the question of baptism, 24 voted for immersion and 24 for sprinkling. The deciding vote cast by Dr. Lightfoot, the chairman, fixed sprinkling in the Westminster Standards for the Presbyterian Church.

Let us close this section with this quotation from a Greek scholar, Meecham. "Nowhere does the Bible show the sprinkling or pouring of water upon a person for baptism. There are seven New Testament passages containing the word 'pour', but none of them refer to baptism. 'Baptizo' is used 127 times and is never once translated 'sprinkling' or 'pouring'."

## **E. Who Should Be Baptized?**

### **1. Jesus commanded the church to teach and baptize.**

Matthew 28:19 – "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them..."

### **2. In every example we have in the Bible, those who were baptized first received Christ as Savior. Note the following:**

Acts 2:41 "They that gladly received His word were baptized..."

Acts 8:12 "When they believed...they were baptized, both men and women."

Acts 8:13 "Then Simon himself believed also, and when he was baptized..."

Acts 8:36,37 "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest."

Acts 10:44,48 "While Peter spoke these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the word...And he commanded them to be baptized..."

Acts 16:14,15 "And a certain woman...whose heart the Lord opened...And she was baptized..."

Acts 18:8 "And Crispus...believed; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed and were baptized."

Acts 19:4,5 "...That they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized..."

See also Acts 9:17,18; 16:31-33 and all other references to baptism after Pentecost. No one was baptized until he had intelligently received the plan of salvation offered in the gospel. Baptism in no instance preceded definite acceptance of Christ.

### **3. There is no teaching or example of the baptism of infants or unbelievers in the New Testament.**

"...there is no conclusive proof in the New Testament of the practice of infant baptism. In this matter many Protestants inconsistently violate the principle of the Bible only as a rule of faith and follow the divine tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Again, if a man is justified by an act of faith, and an infant is incapable of such an act, it follows logically on Protestant principles that children ought not to be baptized."

### **4. Baptism has no meaning whatsoever for infants or unbelievers.**

Read again the meaning or significance of baptism. None of these symbols are true of the person who has not personally received Christ as Savior. Infant baptism grew out of the mistaken belief, still held by some today, that baptism is necessary for salvation. This belief developed in the third century but did not become generally accepted until the sixth century.

## **F. Summary**

### **1. Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran Churches**

a. These three churches believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. They do not believe that baptism by itself will save, for it must be accompanied by faith. Baptism, they believe, is the means by which faith is made effective in bringing about the new birth, removing original sin, working forgiveness, and producing everlasting life. To them, faith without baptism will not save and baptism without faith will not save.

b. Since they believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, they therefore believe that infants should be baptized as soon as possible.

c. Since they practice infant baptism, and since most parents would not want their infant to be immersed, they must justify sprinkling or pouring as a mode of baptism.

### **2. Methodist, Reformed, and Presbyterian Churches**

a. These three churches do not believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. Though they state this, their statements have confusing ramifications.

To the Methodist, it symbolizes that God loves and has redeemed the one being baptized, and the acceptance of that person as a child of God and a member of the church. This sounds nice, but if God desired this, He would have commanded it. It thus undermines God's original and present intention for baptism.

To the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, baptism symbolizes the cleansing or purifying of the soul from sin as water cleanses dirt from the body.

These views neglect the personal nature of baptism and, in effect, rob the one being baptized of the personal testimony of the salvation experience of which baptism is to signify.

b. Since these churches do not believe that baptism is necessary for salvation, they have great difficulty justifying infant baptism.

The Methodists do so on the ground that all have a right to membership in the church and to be recognized as children of God. This is done by baptism. But this clearly contradicts John 1:12,13 - "But as many as received Him, to them gave he power to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

The Reformed church justifies infant baptism on the ground that the church in the New Testament takes the place of Israel in the Old Testament and that baptism in the New Testament takes the place of circumcision in the Old Testament. Since infants were circumcised and shared the covenant blessings of God made to Abraham, they should be baptized now and share the blessings of God made to the Church. This sounds good and logical, but we must not forget that the Scriptures do not support this theory. The Presbyterian church justifies infant baptism on the ground that "the commonwealth of Israel was the church", and that since children were members of the church in the Old Testament, they are members of the church in the New Testament. Since we interpret the Bible literally, we object to the idea of "the church" in the Old Testament because in Matthew 16:18, Christ spoke of the church as being future; in Acts chapter 2, we have the historical beginning of the church; and in Ephesians chapter 3, we are told that the church was a mystery unknown to the Old Testament saints and revealed by God through Paul. Furthermore, the Bible differentiates between the Jew, the Gentile, and the Church of God (I Corinthians 10:32).

## **G. Conclusion**

What should be our attitude toward those who differ with us on the matter of baptism? Our attitude must be one of love. Baptism is not a basis of salvation; it is a fruit of salvation. It is a visible manifestation of obedience toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In our careful study of the Scriptures, we conclude that obeying the Lord's command to be baptized is an important first step in our testifying that we are alive in Jesus Christ. It is a blessing to obey this ordinance of the Lord, and so we beseech believers everywhere to follow the Lord's example and command to be baptized (Matthew 10:32, Matthew 28:19).