

## **A Brief Look at Christian Baptism**

Pastor Mark Blair

February 2010

The Risen Lord Jesus Christ commands His followers to be baptized. Through this symbolic act the believer is identified with the Lord and His Church. Baptism is a symbol of new life in Christ, a seal of the covenant of grace, and a sign of the forgiveness of sins. Water is an outward symbol for the inward work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is for those who have repented and believe in the Lord Jesus.

The origins of Christian baptism are found in the Old Testament. The Law of Moses dictated ceremonial washing for priests chosen to serve (Leviticus 14.8,9). John the Baptist, and the first disciples of Jesus, performed such ceremonial washings as a rite of repentance (John 3.22-26). This pre-Christian baptism was preparatory, intended to lead a person to faith in the Messiah (Luke 7.29,30, Acts 19.1-7).

After His resurrection the Lord Jesus instituted Christian baptism, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28.18-20). The qualification is discipleship – following Him. This text describes baptism as a rite of initiation and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” is the continuation. Baptism should be done early in our discipleship; obeying his teaching keeps one faithfully following that path “to the very end of the age.”

The dramatic growth of the early Christian church necessitated thousands of baptisms. The New Testament records eleven examples:

### **1. Acts 2.37-41      The Jews in Jerusalem on Pentecost**

According to Peter, baptism is an outward expression of sincere repentance, a sign of belief. Forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit are promised.

### **2. Acts 8.12-17      The First Samaritan Believers**

Believing precedes baptism, administered here to both men and women. This was the first time the gospel crossed the bitter cultural boundary into Samaria. For this reason God gives the Spirit after they believed. Jewish leaders placed their hands on “unclean” Samaritans – resulting in a wonderful outpouring of the Spirit on ONE body of believers.

### **3. Acts 8.35-38      The Ethiopian Eunuch**

Hearing the Word – Believing – Baptism; this is God’s salvation plan for all nations. Here is the first reference to the mode, though somewhat indirect; “both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water...” Somewhere on that trail to Gaza they found a stream in the desert. Both men “went down” the embankment to the water and “came up” to the pathway. This was probably more of a trickling stream than a raging river.

### **4. Acts 9.18 (22.16) The Apostle Paul**

After meeting the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, the blinded Paul was taken to a home in the city. After three days of fasting, Paul meets a disciple named Ananias who was sent by God to pray for him. During this prayer, Paul’s eyes are opened and immediately he is baptized, probably by Ananias. This seems to have occurred inside the home, after the baptism Paul broke his fast.

## **5. Acts 10.44-48     The Household of Cornelius in Caesarea**

Luke records the outworking of Jesus' plan for gospel advance. Beginning in Jerusalem, crossing through Samaria, now the good news comes to Roman Gentiles. The impact is the same everywhere; instruction in the Word, ignition by the Spirit, and the invitation for baptism is extended. Those having the inward reality of the Holy Spirit cannot be denied the outward symbol of water baptism.

Throughout the Bible, names often convey spiritual identity. God changes a name when he changes a character, i.e. Abraham, Sarah, Israel, and Paul. Baptism is a naming ceremony. Believers are given their new identity, belonging to the Triune God, bearing the name of Jesus. There is no contradiction between the Triune Name of God and being "baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." This Jesus, sent by the Father, gives us His Spirit – in Him we meet God.

## **6. Acts 16.13-15     Lydia**

Paul attended an outdoor prayer meeting to the God of Israel in the city of Philippi. A wealthy Gentile businesswoman named Lydia was given faith to believe God's message. This meeting was alongside a river. Perhaps her baptism was performed immediately in that river. Or perhaps, a brief time passed as the members of her household were gathered and instructed. This is the second example of a "household baptism." Those who baptize infants cite these texts as examples. Those who baptize only believers note these texts never explicitly mention the presence of infants, and that the household is first taught (implying understanding and maturity?) then baptized. Good Christians continue to debate this question of infant baptism.

## **7. Acts 16.30-34     The Philippian Jailer and his family**

Belief in Jesus is the only way of salvation. Baptism is a sign of that belief. The jailer washed and was washed! After cleansing their wounds, they administered the sign of his cleansed soul - baptism. This text is one of the clearest examples of someone probably NOT being immersed. Whatever the mode of their baptism, it occurred in the early morning darkness, and likely with the same supply of water used for bathing the released prisoners.

## **8. Acts 18.8             The Corinthians**

Luke traces the Kingdom advance into ever widening circles. Here Paul is deep into Gentile territory; Corinth was one of the most notoriously perverse cities of the decadent Roman world. But where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Preaching met with faith is followed by baptism – for "the entire household."

## **9. Acts 19.1-7     Disciples of John in Ephesus**

The Apostle of the New Covenant meets some disciples of the Old Covenant. They received the preparatory sign of John's baptism, but never met the One John prepared the way for. Paul completes their understanding by introducing them to Jesus and the Spirit. Once they believed, they too were baptized in water.

## **10. 1 Corinthians 1.13,14     Crispus and Gaius**

In this passage Paul scolds a divided church. Perhaps some "followed" the one who administered their water baptism. Paul teaches baptism should be a sign of UNITY (see also 1 Cor 12.13). Water baptism permanently introduces Christians to the visible church, just as Spirit baptism permanently unites Christians to the invisible church. Paul did perform baptisms, but his most important work was preaching Jesus and him crucified (1.17-2.5). This is the message of salvation. Baptism symbolizes faith in this great saving love of God.

## 11. 1 Corinthians 1.16 The Household of Stephanas

Hooray for forgetful preachers! I am in good company. The most important question was not who baptized this believing family, but were they now faithfully following their Lord? Were they manifesting the unity Jesus prayed for? Empty words, and human traditions, drain the power of cross.

Through these examples we can observe:

1. **A pattern of God's Work and man's response.** We love because God first loved us. When we were running away from God, He came seeking after us. God acted savingly in the death and resurrection of Christ. This blessed message was proclaimed by Apostles and their followers. Those who believe, and whose new life is evidenced by a new lifestyle, are invited for baptism.

2. **Baptism is the expected sign of faith, one of the first steps of believing obedience.** "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" asked the newly converted Ethiopian (Acts 8.36). "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" questioned the Apostle Peter (Acts 10.47). Believers were baptized very soon after professing faith, often immediately. The connection between belief and baptism is so close that Mark ends his gospel with the words, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16.16). Belief apart from baptism was unusual. The crucified thief who entered Paradise with Jesus was a rare exception. The normal believer, who has the opportunity, is baptized. But condemnation comes from not believing in Jesus, not from a failure to be baptized.

3. **God in His wisdom makes the main points clear – Preaching, Believing, and then Baptizing.** But perhaps to keep us humble, we don't get all our questions answered.

As mentioned previously, good Christians still debate the question of **infant baptism**. Much of my Christian experience has been with those who baptize their babies. I graduated from a Presbyterian college, a Reformed seminary, and served in an Anglican church. I do not believe infant baptism makes the baby a believer, nor guarantee them a place in heaven, nor even assure their holiness in this life. But I do admire the paedobaptist's desire to show the continuing nature of covenant faith. Colossians 2.11,12 makes a parallel between the old covenant membership sign – circumcision, and the membership sign of the new covenant – baptism. Male infants received the sign of the old covenant, but must infants also receive the new covenant sign?

Much of the argument to baptize infants is made from inference and biblical silence. One text keeping me from baptizing infants is Jeremiah 31, quoted in Hebrews 8. It teaches one characteristic of the new covenant is an experiential knowledge of God. "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Hebrews 8.11). My paedobaptist friends challenge, "Are you saying that all the 'believers' you baptize really do know the Lord?" And of course my answer is, "No, only God can be certain." But I think someone who can articulate an understanding of salvation, even at a young age, is a more fitting candidate for baptism.

In choosing not to baptize infants of believing parents, including my own sons, I am not classifying them as worldly pagans. Children of believers live in a sphere of grace. They hear the gospel, they enjoy Christian fellowship, they see the godly example of their parents and other believers, and as such Paul says "they are holy" (1 Corinthians 7.14). They are set apart from the world and placed in this sphere of opportunity for saving grace. As a pastor I have chosen to dedicate the children of believing parents unto the Lord, as Jesus was in the Temple. This is a public pledge of the parent's faith and

symbol of the grace environment in which God has placed their child. This dedication before the church is an opportunity for the whole family of faith to stand with the parents in prayerful support. We especially pray that as the child grows they will make their own decision to follow Christ and be baptized.

I have five reasons why I cannot be dogmatic about the mode of baptism.

1) Baptists try to make a quick end of the argument by teaching that the Greek word for baptism - 'baptizo' - must be translated "dip" or "immerse." However, this cannot always be proven from Scripture. In Luke 11.38 the Pharisees criticize Jesus for not 'ebaptisthe' (which the NIV translates 'wash') before meals. The context is Jesus' failure to keep the rigorous ceremonial cleansing standards the Pharisees wrongly required. Did this Pharisee expect Jesus to be immersed in water before every meal? (Note that Jesus the *person* is the subject of the verbal action and not simply Jesus' hands.) In Mark 7.3,4 the word 'baptisontai,' (literally 'baptize themselves') is used of the Pharisees. Surely this did not mean that they immersed themselves every time they returned from the market - along with their cups, pitchers, and kettles.

2) References to going down into rivers say more about the location of the baptism than the mode. Is it possible that people stood in rivers, or even kneeled in shallow streams, while water was poured over their heads in baptism? John writes of "many (springs of) waters" which were necessary to accommodate the "people constantly coming to be baptized" (John 3.23).

3) I have already mentioned the logistical difficulties of immersion in the household baptisms cited.

4) In Romans 6 and Colossians 2 baptism is linked to the saving work of Christ. Baptists often cite these texts emphasizing that death and resurrection are pictured by being taken down into the water and brought up again. Remember, however, that the Gospels never teach that Jesus "went down" into a grave; his body was placed in a borrowed tomb for a couple days. A closer reading of these two texts reveals a broader teaching about salvation. The believer is united with Christ in His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Why should baptism emphasize only two of these vital historical events? It is arbitrary to pick only death and resurrection as the subject of baptism's symbol. Immersion cannot visually reflect being hung on the cross.

5) Mark says of John the Baptist, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him...they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (1.4-6). I once had the joyfully exhausting privilege of immersing about twenty people. Did "locusts and wild honey" give John phenomenal strength for immersing thousands?!

I am writing as one who was baptized by immersion and loves to perform baptism by immersion. But I cannot say that Scripture proves immersion is the only legitimate mode of Christian baptism. It seems less than Christian not to respect the various traditional forms of baptism – immersion, sprinkling, and pouring – when they are administered according to biblical standards. God gave us baptism to symbolize our union in Him. May we stand with conviction in areas where the Scriptures are clear and submit with charity in the areas where we lack biblical clarity. May Christ be exalted, and His Kingdom advance as more and more believe - and are baptized.

\* \* \* \* \*