

The Great Debate About Baptism

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About 90% of Americans would identify themselves as Christian. Perhaps half actually do so with some intentional behavior (i.e. they attend a church or they pattern their lives in a manner that befits, at least in their minds, what a Christian life ought to be). If you were to ask this entire group what they thought about baptism, most likely almost all would describe it as an important part of Christianity. Most “Christians” believe in baptism, yet almost none practice it or perceive it as it is found in the New Testament. There are three main areas where baptism is misunderstood:

1. What constitutes baptism?
2. Which baptism is the correct baptism?
3. What does baptism accomplish?

WHAT CONSTITUTES BAPTISM

The practice of baptism varies widely in the US and in history. For many, baptism is something that occurs when you are born, and the word “Christening” is used to describe it. The largest denomination in the US (the Roman Catholic Church) as well as other churches (Anglican, Orthodox, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and other Reformed denominations, Methodists and some Nazarenes) practice infant baptism; this means that probably the large part of that original statistic of believers in the US were baptized as infants.

This is not the baptism of the New Testament. In Mark 16:16, when Jesus instituted baptism, He declared that one must believe and be baptized in order to be saved. This theme, that baptism can only occur when one has mentally assented to the doctrine of Christ, is the power of baptism in the New Testament. Peter declared that baptism was “*not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God*”, telling us that baptism is not about the water, but about the conscience of the person being baptized. All of this tells us that an infant, who cannot assent mentally to baptism, is not being baptized.

Secondly, for many in this same group, “baptism” consisted of water being poured or sprinkled on them. This too is not the biblical definition of baptism. The word “baptize” means “immerse”; it refers to being plunged beneath water. This is why in the New Testament baptism was done where there was a great deal of water (Acts 8:38, John 3:23). Baptism is a burial act (Romans 6:2-6); it is a symbolic burial in water. Thus pouring or sprinkling neither fit the word nor the practice nor the purpose.

WHICH BAPTISM

In the New Testament there is more than one usage for the word “baptize”. There is the Holy Spirit Baptism (mentioned in John 1:33 and other places by John the Baptist); there is the Baptism by Fire mentioned only twice by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16; there is the Baptism by Water separate from John the Baptist found only after Jesus arose from the dead in the book of Acts and onward (Acts 10:47, etc.); there is the Baptism into Christ referenced in Galatians 3:27; there is the Baptism of John found in the Gospel accounts (Mark 1:4); and there is one mention of a Baptism of Moses in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2.

In contrast to these types of baptism there is the message of Paul to the Ephesians in Ephesians 4:4-5: “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism...*”. Paul clearly states that of all of these baptisms, only one remains for Christians. The question is which one?

For one thing, several of these baptisms are actually parallel names for each other. The Baptism of Fire and the Holy Spirit are, based on context, the same event (consider in Acts 2 that the baptism by the Holy Spirit was manifested by fire). The Baptism of Water and Into Christ are one and the same as well; this is understood in places such as Acts 19:5 or Matthew 28:19, where Jesus commanded water baptism in His name. What about those baptisms which remain?

First, the baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit is only promised in the Gospel accounts to the Apostles. When mentioned again in Acts 1:4-5 Jesus specifically states it would come to the Apostles only on the day of Pentecost, and it is recorded in Acts 2. It is not mentioned again. It can be concluded that this is not the "One Baptism" that remains.

Second, the Baptism of John ended with the death of Christ. That baptism was for those under the Law of Moses (Matthew 3:3-9). When Paul encountered men who had this baptism in Acts 19:1-4, he instructed them to be baptized into Christ. The Baptism of John cannot be the one remaining baptism.

Third, the Baptism of Moses (only mentioned once) refers to the Israelites passing through the Red Sea. It is mentioned as a fore-shadow of the baptism of Christ (as Moses is an antitype of Jesus). All of the law of Moses was nailed to the cross (Hebrews 8:13). Therefore, the Baptism of Moses cannot be the remaining baptism.

The only remaining possibility is the Baptism of Christ into Water. It began on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and we see it practiced throughout the entirety of the New Testament.

WHAT DOES BAPTISM ACCOMPLISH

This final question is the most heavily contested debate about baptism. Some would declare that the baptism of Christ into water is "*An outward sign of an inward grace*"; meaning that a person is saved and THEN baptized as a sign of that salvation. Others declare that this baptism is "*A sacrament of the church*"; they mean that baptism is a possession of the church, and that it is a sign of church membership. Finally, some would say that "*Baptism now saves you*"; what they mean is that baptism is the act that transforms a lost person to being a saved person; it is the moment of your salvation.

Which of these ideas is in the bible? Nowhere is it stated that baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. Nowhere is baptism "given" to the church (consider the NT baptisms where there was no church). But what about the third option? **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 good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ - 1 Peter 3:21.

According to the bible, a person is baptized and then saved (*He who believes and is baptized will be saved* – Mark 16:16). According to the bible, baptism is the moment sin is removed (*Be baptized, and wash away your sins* – Acts 22:16). According to the bible, baptism is where Christ's work is done (*We were buried with Him through baptism* – Romans 6:3).

This is prove true when we visit the examples of baptism in the Bible. In the book of Acts alone we meet many individuals (The Eunuch in Acts 8, Cornelius in Acts 10, Lydia and the Jailer in Acts 16, Paul in Acts 22) who teach us that they were saved when they were baptized. As well, there are whole groups who were saved when they were baptized (The people of Jerusalem in Acts 2, the Samaritans in Acts 8, the Corinthians in Acts 18, the Ephesians in Acts 19).

But the Bible provides even more evidence of the work of God in baptism. Consider that:

Baptism = sins washed away (Acts 22:16)

Baptism = being born again (John 3:3)

Baptism = receiving the gift of God (Acts 2:38)

Baptism = effecting the death of Jesus (Rom. 6:3)

Baptism = the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6)

Baptism = being sanctified and justified (1 Cor. 6:11)

Baptism = putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27)

Baptism = being put into the church (1 Cor. 12:13)

Most people don't understand baptism. They were taught that the word "baptism" had a much different meaning than it does in the bible; they were taught that baptism referred to one of many different events; they were taught that baptism is not necessary to be saved. Yet the Bible teaches about an immersion into Christ for eternal life, which is the same as an immersion into water for salvation.