

The significance of Baptism

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As we look back through ancient history we find many religions that had different ceremonies for cleansing, some even similar to baptism. For some it was a type of ceremonial cleansing to please their gods and receive blessings. For others it was an attempt to wash away sin or guilt. It is interesting how many unrelated religions had the belief that they were guilty of something and that they needed somehow to be cleansed of it. It is a testimony to Romans 2:15 which says, *“Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”* The law of God is written on the hearts of all mankind. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all possess a basic sense of right and wrong. We are all in need of forgiveness and salvation.

In the years leading up to Christ’s coming even the Jews had accepted a tradition of baptism when accepting a gentile who wanted to become a Jew. After going through circumcision and an intense time of questioning, the person would be baptized in front of other witnesses. When he came up out of the water he would be considered a “true son of Israel”. After this baptism, they were allowed to join other Jews who worshiped in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This was the time of history into which John the Baptist and later Jesus Christ were born. John had been called by God to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. He was to call the people of Israel to repentance and to turn back to God. He would preach, and those who were convicted of their need to come back to God would come forward and, with the crowd watching, would be baptized in the Jordan River. John’s baptism was unlike that of the Jews in that he was not calling them to join an organized religion. He was calling them back to God Himself. The individual would make an inward decision to turn back to God and then, through baptism, would publicly make it known to others.

In Matthew 3 we see how even Jesus submitted Himself to being baptized:

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus had nothing to repent of, but yet He still submitted Himself to being baptized. It was a public statement of a heart that was near to God. It was a statement of association with God and with those who were in a holy pursuit of God. Baptism is an ordinance that has been handed down through the centuries by Christ himself.

In Matthew 28:19-20, we read the final words of Christ before He ascended into heaven: ***"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."***

This was given as an ongoing commission for all times and for people of all nations, until Christ returns.

We see new believers baptized in the New Testament: (Acts 2:39-41, Pentecost; Acts 8:38-39, Philip and the Eunuch; Acts 9:17-18, Saul; Acts 16:14-15, Lydia; Acts 16:29-32, Philippian jailer). It is to be a public declaration of one's devotion to Jesus Christ. It is to come after one comes to believe in Jesus Christ. Thus it is often referred to as Believer's Baptism. Because of this we do not baptize infants. At that age they cannot understand the truth of their sin or put their trust in Christ. We do have a baby dedication, allowing the parents to publicly commit themselves to raise the child in the ways of God. It also allows the congregation the opportunity to publicly commit to support the family in the spiritual upbringing of their child. While we view baby dedication as an important emphasis, we only baptize those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ.

God could have picked multiple ways for us to publicly declare our new faith, but he chose a physical act that would remind us of the process of our salvation and the fact that we have been cleansed of sin. It is done in a manner that is a picture of the transformation that has taken place in our lives. It is the dying of the old self (2 Corinthians 5:17). It also symbolizes the resurrection and the new life that comes with knowing Christ. The old is gone and, spiritually speaking, we have been raised to new life.

As Romans 6:4 communicates, ***"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."***

We also see this symbolized in Colossians 2:12, ***"(...) having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."***

Though other denominations and theological traditions baptize by pouring or sprinkling, we practice baptism by immersion. We do so in light of the following considerations:

The English word “baptism” in the Greek is the word *“baptizo”*. It literally means to plunge, submerge or immerse. It is the same word that was used when dyeing material by submerging it completely.

Coming up out of the water is symbolic of being raised from the dead to a new and eternal life as Christ was, and as we are through salvation in Christ. This symbolism is not effectively conveyed by sprinkling or pouring. Resurrection is accomplished by coming out of something (whether grave or tomb). Immersion best symbolizes this reality by actually placing the believer under the water and bringing them out.

Moreover, passing through the water is also used to symbolize judgment and deliverance in the Old Testament (e.g. the flood of Genesis 6-7 and the crossing of the Red Sea of Exodus 14). Thus, by passing through the waters of baptism, the believer testifies to his or her trust that God’s judgment of his sin has been satisfied by Christ, as well as the clear conscience that goes with such trust.

As we look to scripture, immersion is the type of baptism which is shown:

Matthew 3:16 – *“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”*

John 3:23 – *“John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized...”*

Acts 8:38-39 – *“And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.”*

Baptism is a public declaration of the fact that one has put their faith in Jesus Christ. Making our faith known publicly to others should be a way of life for every Christian. Yes, our faith is to be personal, but that should not be mistaken to mean private or hidden. Matthew 5 calls us to, *“Let our light so shine before men that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father who is in heaven.”* Romans 1:16 says this, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”*

It is similar to a wedding ring. The wedding ring does not make the person married, but it is a public symbol of a personal commitment that one has made to his or her spouse. Baptism is giving public testimony to the world that a person belongs to Jesus Christ.

One might reason that if baptism is about publicly testifying of one’s new faith, then why did Philip baptize the Ethiopian Eunuch, in Acts 8:38-39, in the middle of the desert with no one there to watch? That is a good question that has a good answer. The Ethiopian Eunuch was, without delay, obediently declaring His allegiance to Christ through his obedience. He was associating himself with all believers

who had gone before him and would come after him. Although no other human witnesses were there, God was receiving glory as the Eunuch testified to his allegiance to Christ in front of such a great cloud of witnesses in the heavens (Hebrews 12:1; Ephesians 3:8-10).

Baptism not only testifies of our faith in Christ, it also associates us with the body of Christ locally, internationally and throughout church history. Baptism is one way in which we associate ourselves with the body of Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, ***“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body —Jews or Greeks, slaves or free— and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”***

All believers have been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ. As we publicly testify to this fact through believer’s baptism we are associating ourselves with the people of Christ. That is why in many countries people are persecuted for being baptized. It is a public symbol of dying to one’s former allegiance or religion and proclaiming one’s new devotion of belonging to Jesus Christ and His people.

When one looks to the teaching of scripture, it becomes very clear that baptism is not actually part of salvation. There are some verses that would make it sound that baptism is part of salvation, but one must be careful to not take a single verse out of the larger context of what the Bible teaches. One such verse would be Acts 2:38, when Peter was preaching to the crowds at Pentecost. At one point, in Peter’s sermon, it says that *“they were cut to their heart”* and asked Peter what they should do. Peter responded, *“repent and be baptized” “for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.”* This sounds like baptism is necessary for salvation, but we must step back and look at the full counsel of scripture. Baptism is not the source of our faith, the proof of faith or the means of salvation.

We arrive at this conclusion because of the various verses in scripture that describe the process of salvation but have no mention of baptism:

- Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*
- In John 3:16 Jesus declares, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*
- Acts 16:31 tells how, *“They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’”*
- John 1:12 also adds, *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”*

As these verses describe salvation, none of them mention baptism as a prerequisite. We see more evidence that baptism is not necessary for salvation in Luke 23:42-43. These verses tell of Jesus’ interaction with the thief on the cross. The thief said, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* And Jesus responded, *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* Jesus promised that the thief would be in heaven, even though the thief would not be baptized before his death.

This is because baptism is not part of salvation. A person turns from their sin and believes in Jesus Christ. The person is saved. They are forgiven and the Holy Spirit comes to live in them. Afterwards that person is baptized as a public testimony to the world that he or she has given their life to follow Jesus Christ. The baptism plays an important role in the public witness of the believer, but it is not part of conversion itself.

For those of you who may have been baptized by immersion at an earlier age, it is important to understand that we need only to be baptized once. If you trusted in Christ at that time, your baptism is valid and need not, indeed should not, be repeated. If, however, you were baptized by sprinkling or went through a baptism by immersion before being born again and trusting Christ, your experience was not believer's baptism, and thus you need to be baptized.

Obviously, there are always seasons of growth and greater periods of maturity in the life of a Christian. Believers must not be re-baptized each time they experience spiritual failure or spiritual growth. Believers must not be re-baptized. However, if you believe that your original experience was prior to truly trusting in Christ as Lord and Savior, it is proper and right to be baptized now.

If you are a believer who has never followed Jesus Christ in believer's baptism, please consider being baptized. Evaluate your motives for not being baptized. Are you concerned with what others will think? Are you worried about your appearance? Are you feeling that you are not a good enough Christian? Is it because you think you will have to become a "Baptist"?

If so, be reminded of your trust in Christ. You are now a child of God and He is the one who meets your needs. You are unconditionally and eternally loved. You no longer have to fear the approval of others. You are free to obey His commands.

There will never be a time when a person will be "good enough" for baptism. Our right to enter the baptismal waters is grounded upon Christ's righteousness, not our own. If we have been united to Him, we should confidently draw near in obedience to His command and be baptized. Through the years ahead the Holy Spirit in us will make us more and more like Christ. For now don't worry about perfection, just submit your life into His hands, as the clay submits to the Potter. He will shape you as He pleases.

If you are concerned about having to become a Baptist, put your mind at ease. Being baptized does not mean you then have to become a Baptist. The issue of baptism is important for every believer, regardless of denomination. If you want to become a member at IBC that is possible, but our main desire is that you walk honorably with God and consider baptism.

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus Christ, that is where you must begin. We are not referring to one whose parents are Christian or who has attended church for many years. The question is, have you ever turned from your sin and trusted in Jesus Christ? If so, the Bible teaches that you are forgiven and your life will be changed. If not, then you are still walking in selfishness and enslaved by sin. If this is you, will you repent and believe in Jesus Christ? Salvation can be yours.

At IBC, we ask believers who wish to be baptized to temporarily delay for a brief season while they go through a baptism course. First, this practice allows us to discuss the gospel and the meaning of baptism and to insure a clear understanding of both. Secondly, it allows the church the opportunity to come together and celebrate faith and fellowship with a new Christian brother or sister. Finally, it allows the person being baptized to invite family and friends who will have an opportunity to celebrate and hear his or her witness and the proclamation of the gospel.

As we look to scripture as our guide we see baptism done for a certain reason, at a certain time, in a certain way. Because of this we seek to practice baptism as the public proclamation of salvation through Christ, after one has become a believer in Christ, by immersion in water as was the example of Christ.

May God be glorified, may the church be strengthened and may the new believer be encouraged as baptism is observed amongst God's people.