

BAPTISM - WHAT, WHO, WHY?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 1, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In the two hundred sixty-nine chapters which make up the New Testament, the word “baptize,” or one of its cognates, such as “baptism” or “baptized,” appeals more than one hundred times. The very frequency of its appearance suggests that the subject is important. As further undeniable evidence of its importance, we recall that Jesus, the sinless Son of God, took the trouble to go from Nazareth down to the Jordan River to be baptized of John.

Through the centuries, the subject of baptism has been a very controversial one. There are differences of opinion as to what constitutes baptism. There are differences of opinion as to who should be baptized. There are differences of opinion as to the purpose of baptism. In fact, so heated have the controversies been that prominent preachers, especially those engaged in union revivals supported by various churches, have come to avoid the subject of baptism entirely. They leave all instruction concerning baptism to the local preachers to whom the newly converts come after they have chosen the church of their choice. Similarly, the makers of the modern teaching devices known as film strips have shown Christ in the act of being baptized, in an ambiguous way. The scene portrays Christ knee-deep in the water of the Jordan River, making it possible for those who believe in sprinkling to suppose that he was about to be sprinkled, while those who believe in immersion can suppose with equal certainty that he was soon to move deeper into the water and be submerged. Such ambiguity was not found in the preaching of the New Testament era, nor in the writings of the sacred scriptures. Let us turn to these writings to determine the answers to our questions concerning baptism.

What Is Baptism?

Spokesmen are quick to define baptism as sprinkling, pouring, effusion, and immersion. These several acts could hardly all be baptism, for the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians that there was only one baptism, just as there was only one God, one Lord, and one Holy Spirit. Notice his words: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.” (Eph. 4:4-6).

In order to determine exactly what baptism was understood to be in the apostolic age, we need only turn to some of the many typical passages of scripture which mention the subject. Let us begin with John 3:5: “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Notice also John 3:23: “And John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized.” In these two passages we notice that baptism involves both a physical act in water and a spiritual act of the inner man. It is called a part of the new birth. Notice also that baptism involves much water, which suggests that it is not the act of sprinkling or pouring a limited amount of water upon the head of the candidate.

Matthew gave this account of our Lord’s baptism: “But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffereth him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway from the water: and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming upon him.” (Matt. 3:15-17). A companion passage is found in Acts 8:36-38: “And as they went on the way, they came to a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.” Both these passages describe baptism unmistakably as requiring a going down into water and a coming up out of water. Only immersion requires such action.

Rich, Meaningful Symbol

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans concerning baptism he suggested the beautiful and rich symbolism of the burial and resurrection of Jesus, thus: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized unto his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also we also walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” (Romans 6:3-5). There must be something in the act of baptism that is like the burial of Christ after his death. There must also be something in the act of baptism that is like his resurrection from the grave. Only immersion satisfies these requirements. In Colossians 2:12 the apostle Paul further emphasizes this motif: “Having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” In order to get the cumulative effect of the New Testament teaching on baptism glance back over the passages just read and read again the underlined words. These point out unmistakably the nature of baptism. It is an immersion in water, without question.

“Baptizo”

Next, we should like to turn to the literal meaning of the Greek word “baptizo.” The consensus of the Greek lexicons is that it means “to dip, plunge, immerse, or submerge.” The universal testimony is that during the apostolic period the only act designated as baptism was immersion. The earliest mention of sprinkling is in the Didache, published about the middle of the second century. This work is an uninspired work, and therefore does not carry the authority of the Holy Spirit. Even in this work, however, the instructions given were that baptism should be immersion “in living water,” or running water, but that in case it was impossible to do it in running water, it could be done in still water, and in case it was not possible to immerse it was permissible to sprinkle water upon the forehead of the candidate. This practice was known as “clinical baptism” and was practiced after the middle of the second century only in cases of emergency. It was not until the Council of Ravenna, in 1311, under the jurisdiction of Pope Clement V, that sprinkling was substituted for immersion as the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. It is interesting to know that there are Roman Catholic Churches in Europe today, which boast full-sized baptisteries. In fact, a separate building was built near the Cathedral at Pisa Italy, to contain the enormous baptistery, which is some thirty feet in diameter. This building speaks eloquently of the relatively recent past when the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church was still immersion.

A paragraph from the Catholic Encyclopedia is appropriate at this point: The most ancient form usually employed was unquestionably immersion. This is not only evident from the writings of the Fathers and the early rituals of both the Latin and Oriental churches, but it can also be gathered from the Epistles of St. Paul who speaks of baptism as a bath (Eph. v.26; Rom. vi.4; Titus iii.5). In the Latin Church, immersion seems to have prevailed until the twelfth century. After that time it is found in some places even as late as the sixteenth century. Infusion and aspersion, however, were growing common in the thirteenth century and gradually prevailed in the Western Church. The Oriental Churches have retained immersion, though not always in the sense of plunging the candidate’s entire body below water. It (Catholic Encyclopedia, Article Baptism, Vol, II., pp 261,262).

Who Should Be Baptized?

The New Testament scriptures plainly teach that there are certain pre-requisites, or requirements, which must precede baptism. In his great commission to the apostles, Jesus said, “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In this passage we notice that the apostles were to go into all the world and make disciples, after which they then baptized them, after which they then taught them further. Notice there was teaching prior to baptism as well as teaching after baptism. Before a person can be scripturally baptized he must receive teaching as to the meaning and significance of baptism.

Even more clearly does the New Testament point out that faith is a pre-requisite for baptism. In Mark 16:16 Jesus is quoted as saying.. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.” Similarly, the story of the conversion of Cornelius indicates that he and his entire household first heard the gospel preached, and then believed it before they were subjects for baptism. Notice the introduction which he gave to the apostle Peter before Peter’s great sermon was delivered: “Forthwith therefore I sent to thee, and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord.” (Acts 10:33). Cornelius said in effect, “We are here to hear.” At the end of Peter’s sermon we find these concluding words, “To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name everyone that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins.” (Acts 10:43). It is very clearly indicated that only those who believed would receive the forgiveness of sins. A few moments later we read that they were baptized.

The story of the conversion of the Philippian jailor is parallel to the one just noticed. After Paul and Silas had been freed from their prison stocks by the earthquake the jailor asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately.” (Acts 16:30-34). In this passage we find that the jailor was told to believe with all his house, then, with all his house, he heard the gospel preached. Later, with all his house, he was baptized, and still later we read that, with all his house, he rejoiced, having believed. The entire household heard, believed, was baptized, and rejoiced.

Infant Baptism

We hear a great deal concerning infant baptism. This practice grows out of the doctrine that children are born in sin, utterly depraved. This teaching is rather strange in view of Christ’s statement as recorded in Mark 10:13-16. From this statement of our Lord we conclude that babies are not lost, and that they do not need to be saved. Having never committed sin, they do not need to be cleansed of their sins through baptism. Since they have never been lost they are safe. Later, after they have reached the age of accountability, they do commit sin and do need to be baptized in order to be freed from their sin. In view of the passages studied above, we conclude confidently that only those who were old enough to hear the gospel, old enough to believe that Christ is the Son of God, and old enough to repent of their sins, were proper subjects for baptism.

As further evidence that this conclusion is true we call attention to Acts 2:38, which finds the people on Pentecost asking, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Also, we find evidence in Acts 8:12: “But when they believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.” Here men and women were those mentioned as being baptized.

Why Be Baptized?

There are many who believe that the sinner comes first to salvation and then that he should be baptized. This order, however, is not of the scriptures, but, rather contradicts the order of the New Testament. In Mark 16:16 we find this order: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Notice that the sinner comes through baptism unto salvation.

The same teaching is found in Acts 2:38: “Repent ye and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Here sinners are told to be baptized for the remission of their sins. The meaning is simply that the act of baptism, and the other acts of obedience, are to be carried out in order to receive remission of sins. This is further substantiated by the directions given by the God-sent preacher Ananias to Saul of Tarsus, who had already believed on Christ and had spent three days in blindness and in fasting, “And now thy tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.”

Still another passage showing the necessity of baptism is I Peter 3:21: “Which also after a true likeness doth now save you, even baptism, not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the interrogation of a clear conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” While baptism is a necessary part of being saved, we would not wish to leave the impression that we believe that baptism plays a more central role than many of the other elements which combine in the process of saving a man’s soul. The scriptures tell us that we are saved by grace, by the blood of Christ, by ourselves, by the gospel, etc. We are only suggesting that baptism, too, plays a necessary role in man’s salvation.

When it comes to a discussion of the reason why men are to be baptized, we can only point to the scriptures and say that man needs to be baptized in order to have his sins forgiven and to be saved. One preacher told of a man forty years of age who came to him and said, “I was baptized a number of years ago to please my wife. Now that I have studied the Bible for myself I realize that such was not the right motive.” The preacher asked if the man believed that Christ was the Son of God and upon receiving an affirmative answer he baptized him scripturally. This man was baptized like the Ethiopian eunuch, and like the other Christians whose examples are given in the book of Acts, in order to please God, and in order to be cleansed from their sins.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon to hear jests and humorous comments made concerning baptism. There are many who take the subject lightly and who consider it a matter of no significance. To them there seems to be little concern about what baptism is, why they should be baptized, and why it is to be done. This, however, is a careless and dangerous way to handle a subject which is given so important a place in the inspired word of God. If baptism is important enough to be mentioned more than one hundred times in the brief book that God has given us to guide us from earth to heaven, and if it was important enough that Jesus made a long journey in order to be baptized, it is important enough for every living soul to render this act of obedience to the God who made him. “Behold, why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins.” (Acts 22:16).