

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW OF BAPTISM

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Who should be baptized?

How should it be done?

What does it mean?

Explanation and Scriptural Basis

Before beginning our discussion of baptism, we must recognize that there has been historically, and is today, a strong difference of viewpoint among evangelical Christians regarding this subject. The position advocated in this book is that baptism is not a “major” doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration.

The position advocated in this chapter is “Baptistic”—namely, that *baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ.*

A. The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was *immersed* or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism *by immersion* is therefore the “mode” of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament. This is evident for the following reasons:

(1) The Greek word (*baptizo*) means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. This is the commonly recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside of the Bible.

(2) The sense “immerse” is appropriate and probably required for the word in several New Testament passages. In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John “*in* the river Jordan” (the Greek text has “in,” and not “beside” or “by” or “near” the river). Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “he came up *out of the water*” (Mark 1:10). The Greek text specifies that he came “out of” the water, not that he came away from it. The fact that John and Jesus went into the river and came up out of it strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river, particularly because multitudes of people were coming for baptism. John’s gospel tells us, further, that John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Again, it would not take “much water” to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take much water to baptize by immersion.

¹ Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Page 982. Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994.

When Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch, “as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?”” (Acts 8:36). Apparently neither of them thought that sprinkling or pouring a handful of water from the container of drinking water that would have been carried in the chariot was enough to constitute baptism. Rather, they waited until there was a body of water near the road. Then “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 caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:38–39). As in the case of Jesus, this baptism occurred when Philip and the eunuch went down into a body of water, and after the baptism they came up out of that body of water. Once again baptism by immersion is the only satisfactory explanation of this narrative.

(3) The symbolism of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. Paul says,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians, “You were *buried with him in baptism* in which you were also *raised with him* through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12).

Now this truth is clearly symbolized in baptism by immersion. When the candidate for baptism goes down into the water it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one’s old way of life and rising to a new kind of life in Christ. But baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply misses this symbolism.

Sometimes it is objected that the essential thing symbolized in baptism is not death and resurrection with Christ but purification and cleansing from sins. Certainly it is true that water is an evident symbol of washing and cleansing, and the waters of baptism do symbolize washing and purification from sins as well as death and resurrection with Christ. Titus 3:5 speaks of “the washing of regeneration” and, even though the word *baptism* is not used in this text, it is certainly true that there is a cleansing from sin that occurs at the time of conversion. Ananias told Saul, “Rise and be baptized, and *wash away your sins* calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

But to say that washing away of sins is the only thing (or even the most essential thing) pictured in baptism does not faithfully represent New Testament teaching. Both washing and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized in baptism, but Romans 6:1–11 and Colossians 2:11–12 place a clear emphasis on dying and rising with Christ. Even the washing is much more effectively symbolized by immersion than by sprinkling or pouring, and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized only by immersion, not at all by sprinkling or pouring.

What then is the positive meaning of baptism? In all the discussion over the mode of baptism and the disputes over its meaning, it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the significance and beauty of baptism and to disregard the tremendous blessing that accompanies this ceremony. The amazing truths of passing through the waters of judgment safely, of dying and rising with Christ, and of having our sins washed away, are truths of momentous and eternal proportion and ought to be an occasion for giving great glory and praise to God. If churches would teach these truths more clearly, baptisms would be the occasion of much more blessing in the church.

C. The Effect of Baptism

We have argued above that baptism symbolizes regeneration or spiritual rebirth. But does it only symbolize? Or is there some way in which it is also a “means of grace,” that is, a means that the Holy Spirit uses to bring blessing to people? We have already discussed this question in the previous chapter, so here it only is necessary to say that when baptism is properly carried out then of course it brings some spiritual benefit to believers as well. There is the blessing of God’s favor that comes with all obedience, as well as the joy that comes through public profession of one’s faith, and the reassurance of having a clear physical picture of dying and rising with Christ and of washing away sins. Certainly the Lord gave us baptism to strengthen and encourage our faith—and it should do so for everyone who is baptized and for every believer who witnesses a baptism.

D. The Necessity of Baptism

While we recognize that Jesus commanded baptism (Matt. 28:19), as did the apostles (Acts 2:38), we should not say that baptism is *necessary* for salvation. This question was discussed to some extent above under the response to the Roman Catholic view of baptism. To say that baptism or any other action is *necessary* for salvation is to say that we are not justified by faith alone, but by faith plus a certain “work,” the work of baptism. The apostle Paul would have opposed the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation just as strongly as he opposed the similar idea that circumcision was necessary for salvation (see Gal. 5:1–12).

Those who argue that baptism is necessary for salvation often point to Mark 16:16: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” But the very evident answer to this is simply to say that the verse says nothing about those who *believe* and *are not baptized*. The verse is simply talking about general cases without making a pedantic qualification for the unusual case of someone who believes and is not baptized. But certainly the verse should not be pressed into service and made to speak of something it is not talking about.

More to the point is Jesus’ statement to the dying thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief could not be baptized before he died on the cross, but he was certainly saved that day. Moreover, the force of this point cannot be evaded by arguing that the thief was saved under the old covenant (under which baptism was not necessary to salvation), because the new covenant took effect at the death of Jesus (see Heb. 9:17), and Jesus died *before* either of the two thieves who were crucified with him (see John 19:32–33).

Another reason why baptism is not necessary for salvation is that our justification from sins takes place at the point of saving faith, not at the point of water baptism, which usually occurs later. But if a person is already justified and has sins forgiven eternally at the point of saving faith, then baptism is not necessary for forgiveness of sins, or for the bestowal of new spiritual life.

Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him.