

The Practice of Baptism and Why it is Important

My task today is to bring you a message on Baptism. We will look at what the word of God teaches us and commands us about the *practice, importance* and *timing* of baptism. What I'd like to highlight first is, next to being born again by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, baptism is the next most important decision/commitment that we make. We come to faith in Christ and then we demonstrate that faith through believer's baptism.

Baptism is an act of obedience that gets its meaning and significance not from ritual or tradition but Jesus Christ himself, who took our sin upon himself, through his sacrifice and death on a cross, then triumphed over death in his resurrection from the dead, securing a new life and eternal life for those who believe in him and who come to him in faith, accepting his grace. Baptism has meaning and significance, only because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this act, we affirm him, we believe in him, we follow him, we identify with him and we obey him.

So this message if nothing else, is, if you are a Christian and have never being baptised, I would strongly encourage you to consider this step.

So I want to talk about the *Practice Of Baptism, The Importance of Baptism* and finally the *Timing of Baptism...*

1. THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM...asking the question *What Is Baptism?*

a. The word "baptism"?

Baptism, is from the GK word *baptizo* generally meaning "to dip", "immerse", or submerge. And when it used in the bible it is that a person is baptised into water rather than water being baptised, or sprinkled, or tipped onto them.

b. Baptism is commanded by Jesus...

Along with Communion, baptism is one of two sacraments instituted by Christ and recognised by virtually every Christian body and with communion is to be practiced in the church until he returns. The key evidence for baptism being established as an ordinance for the church is the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20,

Matthew 28:19 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

Verse 20 answers the question as to how long the church are to do these three things: *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* So as long as the "age" lasts, Jesus is with us, we keep doing what he's commanded.

So baptism is a command of Jesus, to be obeyed, as part of making disciples until Christ returns at the end of the age.

c. Baptism follows the teaching of scripture...

Acts 2:38 *Peter replied, "**Repent and be baptized, every one of you**, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

This was a command to individuals. Three thousand believed on the Day of Pentecost and then three thousand people were baptized. This sets the example the church today is to follow. It's biblically clear that the Lord has called us to baptise believers as a means of public identification with Christ.

Staying on Acts 2:38, does this suggest baptism washes away our sin?" No, when Peter says "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*" he means that baptism follows, or goes hand-in-hand with salvation because baptism is a demonstration that we have repented of our sins and have been forgiven.

Acts 9:17–18 *Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,*

Acts 16:14–15 *One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. **

d. Baptism is for believers

I expect when it comes to baptism people could be grouped into:

- a. those who were baptised as infants and don't follow Christ
- b. those baptised as infants that do follow Christ, but have never being baptised as believers
- c. those who know Christ who have never being baptised as a believer
- d. those who know Christ and have been baptised a believer
- e. and those who have been believers, have been baptised but have walked away from Christ.

We might summarise this as the world having baptised non-believers and believers not baptised.

Perhaps there are some here today and your experience is baptism as an infant, and your children have been baptised as infants.

I do not want to invalidate those experiences or cause any guilt here. I make no claims that those were not legitimate baptism experiences. However, I do believe the bible is

clear in that baptism is for those who have come to faith in Christ and then demonstrate that faith through believer's baptism.

Acts 2:41 *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

Acts 8:12–13 *But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*

Acts 16:31–33 *They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized*

Baptism is for believers, those who have come to faith in Christ and are able to make their own voluntary decision and have an understanding of the commitment they are making. It is physically enacting the transformation that has occurred spiritually as a person has come to faith in Christ. And following through with this enactment is a public confession of your faith and trust in Christ. That physical enactment is death, the old person going down under the water, and resurrection, the new person coming up out of the water.

Here's how Paul put it to the church in Rom 6:4, "*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*" (ESV).

That all being said, the question arises: can a person be a Christian yet not be baptised?

As important as it is inasmuch the bible is clear on its teaching and of what Jesus has commanded, some people for whatever reason choose to never be baptised. Our task is always to encourage, but never to pressure or manipulate or judge another person's right standing before God. However, in the case of a believer refusing or deferring baptism, they must ask themselves before God, whether their decision is pleasing to him. This is, at the end of the day something God asks us to do!

e. Baptism is (preferably) by immersion

I do not want to labour this point but want to offer a view nonetheless. The bible offers a clear view that baptism is by immersion and that is the preferred method. Rom. 6:6-3-4 is the clearest evidence of water baptism symbolising a spiritual reality (death, burial and resurrection) ...

Romans 6:4 *We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*

We die with Christ, we are buried with Christ, we rise with Christ, we are baptised (immersed) into Christ. That's what happen when we come to faith in Christ. Water baptism is symbolic of this spiritual reality. Water baptism says publicly I believe this...

... also Acts 8 with Philip and the eunuch: *"Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him"* (v.36-38) ...the implication here is being submerged, immersed into the water

...also John 3:23 *"Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized"* ...you don't need "plenty of water", certainly not a river, if baptism was intended as less than immersion. People went into then came out of the river.

...Matt. 3:16 *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.*

I want to suggest that though the bible offers a clear view that baptism is by immersion, and that is the preferred method it is less about prescribing this and more about our heart obedience in the act; the significance and comprehension of the act.

Explain: this is if a person cannot (physical/medical reasons) be immersed in water or, if there is simply not enough water for immersion, but in such extenuating cases for the person concerned their baptism demonstrates what is intended with baptism (dead to self, raised with him, etc – i.e. Rom. 6). In such cases I would say we do the nearest possible we can to immersion. So depending on the person, could be as simple as water poured over the head, hands, or feet.

Again, such cases are the exception to the preferred method, which is immersion, realising only immersion fits with what baptism demonstrates: death and burial to the old, raising of the new. As important as baptism is, it is not a question of a person's salvation. I would not want to deny a believer the next closest thing to immersion or a baptism experience by insisting exclusively on total immersion.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM

I want to suggest when it comes to addressing the importance of baptism, which in my view there's no biblical doubt at all too, the main emphasis is on *how important I make it*. It's important to God, it was important enough that baptism along with communion are the only two ordinances, it was important enough for Jesus, that he himself was baptised by John.

Matt. 3:13-15 *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to **fulfil all righteousness.**" Then John consented.*

Note what Jesus said there: "to fulfil all righteousness.", which implies without baptism not all righteousness would be fulfilled. It was important for Jesus to do this, he didn't need to, he was perfect, sinless, but he modelled for us something he wants every believer to do, it's a necessary and essential part of committing our lives to Christ.

And Jesus' water baptism was a foreshadowing of a far more solemn baptism that was to eventuate in Jerusalem soon to come. Remember Jesus' words near the end of his ministry (Luke 12:50) "*I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*" Note Jesus' choice of words here. Why wouldn't he say I have a death to undergo, or a crucifixion to undergo. Rather he said I have an immersion (*baptisma*) to undergo. Immersion into what? Death, burial and resurrection.

And so to follow what Jesus himself modelled, Christians are immersed in water in believer's baptism as an outward public demonstration of our immersion into Christ. It is a demonstration of what has occurred spiritually: we have died to self, buried the old self, and have been raised up new.

Think of baptism like a wedding ring, they both symbolise a transaction. A wedding ring symbolises a marriage. Baptism symbolises salvation. Wearing a wedding ring does not make you married, any more than being baptised makes you saved. To extend the comparison. If a person is not wearing a wedding ring usually you can assume they're not married. In NT times if a person had not being baptised you could assume they were not likely a believer. Baptism is symbolic of the decision we have made to follow Christ.¹

When it comes to *how important baptism* is to us the biggest issue we face, is getting it done, and there are a variety of reasons² why a believer has not followed through with baptism...

- Unaware of the teaching of scripture around believer's baptism
- Pride...I can't bring myself to do something that's so public in front of all those people, it's too embarrassing, too humiliating...³
- Indifference. What does that mean? They understand it, believe it's necessary, are not against it, but just can't be bothered. Far from a priority, they just never get around to it.
- Don't 'feel ready' (*talk to that shortly*)
- Habitual sin is holding you back. This would be the Christian who does not want to be a hypocrite by publicly acknowledging Christ as Lord of their lives. Yet, does nothing about reconciling that habitual sin.

There may be other reasons a believer has. Either way if I have not been baptized, is it because I have not grasped its importance? Is it I don't see it as a step of obedience?

¹ 1500 Illustrations, pg. 27

² <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-57/Understanding-Baptism>

³ Obedience to Christ command is less of an issue than my pride

Jesus said *"if you love me you will obey my commands"* (John 14:15) *Scripture is clear on baptism, Jesus did it, the NT church did it*—remember this: 3000 believed and 3000 were baptised, get this, only a few weeks after the one they called Lord was mocked, tortured and crucified. This was a massive and courageous thing to do!

Often in the NT as you read the word baptism instead of saved, it is because the way early believer's knew someone was saved and had truly repented of their sin was because they were? Baptized. Baptism was an evidence of a true change of heart and a true sign of repentance and commitment to Christ. *It's an important practice for us to follow.*

Lastly on this point, we need to be aware over all and any reasons we might give for being confused, reluctant or resistant to baptism, that this is precisely what the enemy wants. Satan does not want Christians obeying Christ. He wants Christians confused, reluctant, resistant, indifferent and misdirected. *It's an important practice for us to follow.*

3. THE TIMING OF BAPTISM

There is a straightforward response to the question of timing for when a person should be baptised? It is when a person has come to faith in Christ. To the question of how long after, my answer would be: as soon as practicably possible. I would suggest we are to follow the pattern that was established on the day the church was born where we see every believer was immediately baptized.

A moment ago I gave you a few reasons why folk delay being baptised, the most common one, for me, is, "I don't feel ready". No one ever is. If you've taken the big step of committing your life to Christ, understanding what that now means for your life, there's no need to delay your baptism. I can accept that some time is needed for some to see fruit of the commitment to Jesus prior to baptism. That said, the act of Baptism itself is a fruit of your commitment and of a changed life.

Want to pause here and address the question: "if I've been baptised already, should I be re-baptized?" If you were not baptized according to NT scripture, if you were not immersed in water after a conscious and voluntary commitment of your life to Jesus Christ and to the act of baptism, then you need to be baptized. Ask yourself: was it my decision? Baptism is for believers; it should be done as soon as practicably possible.

So there we have an overview of what baptism looks like biblically and why it is important. Scripture is clear on baptism, Jesus did it, Jesus commanded it, the NT church did it, and it is an important practice for us to follow in obedience to Christ. One final text before we wrap up...

...look at Luke 7:29-30 *All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John.*

But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John. The Pharisees rejected Gods purposes. Baptism is part of Gods purposes. To reject baptism, is to reject the purposes of God.

I like James Dunns definition of baptism. He says it is a symbolic expression of the heart's "appeal to God." Baptism is a calling on God. It is a way of saying to God with our whole body, "I trust you to take me into Christ and to make Jesus the substitute for my sins and to bring me through these waters of death and judgment into new and everlasting life through the resurrection of Jesus my Lord."

This is what God is calling you to do. You do not save yourself. God saves you through the work of Christ. But you receive that salvation through calling on the name of the Lord and by trusting him. And it is God's will all over the world and in every culture - no matter how simple or how sophisticated - that this appeal to God be demonstrated in believer's baptism.

I will not labour this because I know the Holy Spirit will do his work. If you're a Christian here today, my encouragement to you is simple: if you've never been baptised as a believer can I urge you to examine your heart before God, today.

Is there any real reason before God that would prevent you from being baptised?