

WATER BAPTISM

An Ancient Practice and a New Life

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Resources for Christ-Centered Discipleship

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It's possible to place too much importance on baptism but I think it's more likely that most people don't take it seriously enough.

Jim Denison is a pastor in Texas, he tells how when he was in college he served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia. While he was there he attended a small church. At one of the church's worship services, a young woman girl was being baptized. During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church building. He asked the pastor about it. The pastor pointed to the girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."

It's interesting that in many cultures if your family is Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Jewish or atheist and you tell them that you believe in Jesus your views may cause conflict and controversy, but often it is not until you choose to be baptized that your decision to believe in Jesus is recognized as a serious commitment to Christ. I hate the idea of that young woman being made unwelcome in her home because of her commitment to Christ but I love the fact that she was willing to take her baptism seriously and considered it so important.

What makes baptism so important that a Christian young woman would pack her luggage and come to get baptized? *What is it about baptism that makes it so important for a Christian? What does it mean? Why does it matter? Let's look at both of those questions:*

First,

I. WHAT DOES BAPTISM REALLY MEAN?

The Greek word *baptizo* means, "to plunge, dip or immerse" something in water. That's the standard meaning of the word in Greek literature and in the Bible. But, what does it mean in this sense: What is the significance of baptism. What is its meaning?

Well, let's look at what we can learn from the story in **Acts 16**

This is a great story about a man who becomes a Christian. This man is actually in charge of the jail in the city of Philippi. And Paul comes to town and starts teaching people about Christ. Christianity began as an outlaw religion, not because it was violent but because true Christianity is so radically counter-cultural. So Paul was thrown in prison. But He praised God and prayed because He believed in the sovereignty of God, the absolute control of God over all of life and every even in life. God sent an earthquake and literally broke open the doors of the jail. So the jailor, who apparently has been listening to Paul's Christian message suddenly believes in the reality of the Christian God. He comes to Paul, who is basically telling him, don't worry we're not going to run away and he says to Paul: "*What must I do to be saved?*" That is a straight question. That's a question the Bible takes seriously. The answer that Paul gave in **Acts 16:31** is this: "***Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household.***" (That does not mean that if he alone believes his whole household will be saved. It means that what applies to him applies to the whole family.) As they all believe they will all be saved.

Now at this point there is no mention of baptism. Baptism is no an essential element in our redemption or salvation. But it's not unimportant either. Look at what happens next in the story.

Acts 16:32-34 says: *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.*

Now, if we look at this story and compare it to the rest of the Bible what it is teaching us is that faith is the essential element in our coming to Christ as Savior but baptism in an important outward expression of faith. Faith in Christ is the *essential element* in becoming a Christian and baptism with water is the *external expression* of that faith in Christ.

The Bible underscores the importance of faith or belief, the inward over the outward, the reality over the ritual, in four ways in this story.

1. The answer to the question: When he says: "What must I do to be saved?" Paul doesn't say, "be baptized." He says: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." This is part of the beauty of Christian faith. Scripture says God offers Himself to all of us, and he doesn't ask you to do anything *before* you come to Him in repentance and faith. There is no process that you must go through, no ritual to which you must first submit. The moment you turn to Him he is there for you.

2. The understanding of the Word: Verse 32: *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.* This is important because some people look at this passage and say, "You can't say that belief is most important because it says here that his whole household or family was baptized. There were probably little children in that family and they were baptized even though they were too little to understand or believe." What's interesting is that the book of Acts makes it so clear that that is not what happened. Whoever was in this house and family they were old enough for Paul to speak the Word of the Lord to *all* of them. They were able to receive the Christian teaching.

3. The reality of personal faith. Not only did they hear and understand the message but they all actually believed it. **Verse 34:** *The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.* They whole family heard the message and the whole family believed.

4. The response of their hearts. Not only did they hear the message and believe it but it gave them joy. **Verse 34:** *The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.* What that means is that this man had joy because of His faith in Christ and his whole family had the same joy because they shared the same faith in Christ.

Maybe there were children in this family, this household, we don't know. What we do know is that if there were children they were all old enough to hear the message, believe in God, receive and respond to the truth of forgiveness and new life through Christ and to connect with all of this in a way that touched their hearts with joy. The reason that is important is that the Bible always stresses that belief has to come before baptism because baptism is the external symbol of a spiritual reality that is first received through faith in Jesus.

- Faith in Christ is the essential element in receiving Christ and the gift of new and eternal life that he brings.
- Baptism is the external expression of faith that is expected of all true believers.

Illustration: My favorite analogy for baptism from modern life is the wedding ring. In the some wedding vows when you slip the ring on the finger of your loved one you say: "With this ring, I thee wed." Now what does that mean? Does that mean that the essence of the marriage relationship is formed, created, born out of the exchange of a small band of metal? No. If you take it literally the phrase "With this ring, I thee wed" makes it sound like the ring does it all. But the ring is really the outward symbol that expresses and seals the covenant promise that you make when you marry. The promise is what makes the marriage. The promise, the commitment without the ring would still make you married but the ring without reality makes nothing.

Now, in our culture, giving the ring and making the vow or promise is so connected that we sometimes speak of them as if they are the same thing. In some wedding ceremonies, when the rings are exchanged, we say something like; *I give you this ring as a symbol of my vows.* In others we simply say, *With this ring I thee wed.* We understand both ways of saying it. The way the Bible sometimes speaks about baptism is like this. It's called dynamic language.

Which simply means that sometimes inwardly believing in Christ as your Savior and outwardly expressing that belief in baptism is so linked as part of one conversion experience that the Bible doesn't worry about drawing a line somewhere between the belief that actually receives salvation and the baptism that outwardly symbolizes salvation.

Galatians 3:26-27 says: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*, Notice how clearly it tell us that it is through faith in Christ that we become the children of God. But, in the very next verse, baptism is so linked to faith in Christ as the expected outward expression of faith in Christ, that he says *for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*. He is speaking of belief and baptism as part of one conversion experience. When we ask "What is the *essential* thing?" the answer throughout the Bible is that it is *belief* in Christ. But, baptism is the expected *expression* of that belief in Christ.

That's what baptism means. So

II. WHY DOES BAPTISM MATTER?

Look at **Romans 6:1-4**: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? 3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.*

What we learn from this first, is that

A. Baptism is an act of obedience expected of all true Christians.

Think about what is happening here in the book of Romans. Paul is writing to a group of Christians he has never visited or known personally. He is trying to answer some very common everyday questions they have about living as people who have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But when he writes to them as believers in Christ he assumes that they have been baptized. He doesn't even consider the idea that there could be such a thing as an unbaptized Christian.

Water baptism is an act of obedience expected of all true Christians. And there is something else also.

B. Water baptism is a sacrament of God's grace with radical implications for your life.

The word "*sacrament*" comes from Latin. It means an oath of allegiance. In Christian faith a true sacrament is a ceremony established by Christ as a symbol of spiritual truth and a means of grace in our lives. To say that baptism is an empowering sacrament doesn't mean that it works magically. But it does mean that it matters.

When the question comes up, "Should we believers in Christ continue living sinful lives since God's forgives us by his grace anyway? The apostle Paul says, "No, of course not. That would contradict your baptism." **Romans 6:3** says, *[D]on't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* Baptism is not just a ritual you perform and then forget. The Bible keeps telling you as a Christian to remember your baptism and think about the implications of baptism for daily life.

The implications are twofold. One, The life you are to live is to be radically new! Baptism pictures death and resurrection, rebirth and renewal to new life. And two, the new life that we are to live draws it's newness and strength from the grace God gives us through Christ.

C. To live in light of your baptism is to cultivate a Christ-centered way of life based on Christ-centered motivations.

Illustration: We have an expression in English, to Jury rig something. It means to come up with a makeshift temporary repair for something that is broken. It actually comes from sailing. If

a mast was broken the sailors could use materials on the ship to rig the sail in some kind of temporary fashion so they could limp into port and fix things properly. Well, we human beings are like sailboats who've gone way off course and in the storms of life our rigging has been torn and broken. It's happened through the sins we have committed, the sins that other have committed against us and the sinful ways we have responded to the sins of others have committed against us. And what we have most often done is we've developed ways to jury rig the soul so that we can limp along the sea of life.

Take for example the issue of honesty and lying. Think about how we try to teach children, and for that matter, adults to be honest. We usually do it through fear and pride. We say, "Look, if you tell lies you're going to eventually get caught and then your going to be in worse trouble." If you go to business school and they have an ethics course you may hear things like this: "Honesty is the best policy. If you are honest your business will thrive. If you aren't you will lose credibility and customers and what's worse you may end up getting caught and going to jail like those guys with Enron. So tell the truth." Why? Because you need to fear the consequences of not telling the truth. So we jury rig morality to selfishness to limp along in life. There is a religious version of this that says you need to be truthful not only because you fear the consequences of man but because you need to fear the wrath of God. But at heart it's the same idea; tell the truth because of fear. Now, there is a value in that. It's better to have people telling the truth because of fear of the consequences of deception than not telling the truth at all. The famous Theologian Jonathan Edwards called that *common virtue* or *common morality*. What he means it is the kind of morality that is available for everyone in the world and we should be thankful for it but it is not Christian morality in the fullest sense.

There's another way we get people to be honest. Sometimes we tap into fear; "You better not lie because you'll get caught and you'll be sorry". Sometimes we tap into a different kind of selfishness. Not fear but pride. Maybe we tell a child; "You don't ever want to tell a lie, you're better than that. People who lie are terrible dishonest liars and we look down on those people. You are not like that you're made of better stuff." Sometimes we use pride try to rig it up to the broken moral mast so that we can get a little truth. Jonathan Edwards said that as Christians we should not look down on all of this because this is how God allows for sin to be restrained in the world.

By what's wrong with that kind of motivation and morality? Well for one thing it restrains us in a superficial way but it does not transform us in a deep way. It actually reinforces our sinful selfishness by strengthening our fear and our pride. Think about it: if fear and pride is what's keeping me from lying than I develop a habit of operating in life under the influence of fear or pride and those qualities are strengthened in my life. Instead of being put to death fear and pride are relied on and kept well fed and exercised. But, why do people lie when they lie? *Fear and pride!* So you grow up and think, "I'm an honest person." But then you get in a situation in which you do lie and maybe you surprise yourself and you think, "I don't understand what happened to me I wasn't raised that way". Maybe you were raised that way. Maybe you were raised to live by fear and pride and to use fear and pride to control your action but when you did lie it was because you reached a tipping point where it seemed like lying would serve fear or pride better than telling the truth in that setting. So you did it. But, make no mistake, you did it precisely because it is the way you have trained yourself. When we use fear and pride to get people to be honest, or for that matter to behave in any way, we are nurturing the selfishness at the core of our lives and at some point the jury-rigging falls apart. You haven't changed the heart you have restrained the heart while you have actually cultivated sin and selfishness in the heart.

To live in light of your baptism means to live differently. It means to not just try harder to live out of common morality but to live a new life out of Christ-centered morality. To live, not out of fear but faith, not out of pride but humility. *It means to live out of devotion and love for God because you see the new life He has given you through his sheer grace in Christ.*

Baptism pictures beautiful gifts of grace from God, cleansing, forgiveness, new birth, and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. Baptism pictures a radical gift of redemption that doesn't just

jury rig the soul but restores the moral and spiritual mainmast, securely rooting it deep down into the love of God so that it can be filled with the breath of his Spirit.

Illustration: Listen to how one of the great poets of the Christian faith, Charles Wesley writes about this in his hymn *Amazing Love*. He brings in a different set of images but the same truth. He says:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

Application: The grace pictured in Christian baptism has power. It can change any person in any place if truly believed. But you have to believe it and apply it to your heart, your trials and your temptations, your life. That's the reality that the gospel proclaims and our baptism pictures. **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.*

The Christ-centered basis for becoming truthful is not that you are better than those awful people who lie but you are just like those people who lie and yet God has been so gracious to you that he has given you a new birth and a new identity. You are a Christian now. You are not better than others in a proud sense. But you are called to be different. You are like a waif an orphan who's been taken in, cleaned up and loved, and given the name of the king himself. So you don't need to be afraid and it makes no sense to be proud. You have a new identity, it's all God's grace but it's life changing so step into it humbly but joyfully and live a new kind of life that is rooted not in fear or pride but in faith and humility.

CONCLUSION

Let's live that life in all it's radical newness so that the power of God's grace that we picture in baptism will be the reality of our lives as we follow Christ.

Amen