

Water Baptism

Acts 8:26-39 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. (27) So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, (28) was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. (29) Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” (30) So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (31) And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. (32) The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. (33) In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.” (34) So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” (35) Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. (36) Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” (37) Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” (38) So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. (39) Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.

Life is full of symbolism. e.g. wedding rings, Nike tick, McDonalds’ M, the Mercedes symbol, flags, logos, tattoos, the peace sign.

Despite the fact that some churches have built up an entire belief system on symbols and rituals, there are very few things in the Christian faith that could be thought of as a ritual.

Today we’re going to look at one – water baptism.

And as we look at this topic, I’m going to ask you to set aside any church traditions you may have, and take a look at what God says in His word.

1. Baptism isn’t an optional extra

We live in a world of optional extras.

If you go through the drive-through at KFC and order some chicken, they’ll ask, “Would you like fries with that? A Coke?”

And if you buy a new car, they might ask if you want automatic transmission, or a sun-roof, or air-con, or a bull bar?

These are optional extras; you can say no.

But some things are non-negotiable.

If you buy a new car, they never say, “You want wheels with that? A motor?”

Some things are part of the package.

It’s the same thing with water baptism: it’s part of the package.

How do we know this?

First, we have a perfect example in our reading in Acts 8.

When Philip preached the gospel to the Ethiopian, the man’s response was, “What hinders me from being baptised?”

I've shared the gospel with numerous people over the years, and I have never once had anyone spontaneously ask about baptism.

So why did the Ethiopian? Because Philip had talked to him about it when he preached the gospel to him.

Second, even Jesus was baptised as a pattern for us. (Mat 3:13-16)

Third, in Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

According to this, baptism isn't an optional extra – it was Jesus' command.

If Jesus is Lord of our lives, we don't have to understand all the reasons why.

We just need to be obedient.

Fourth, we have the example of the apostles.

In Acts 2:38, Peter told the people to repent and be baptised.

In Acts 8, Philip preached to the Samaritans and then baptised them.

In Acts 10, Peter preached to Cornelius and his household and then baptised them.

In Acts 16, Paul preached to Lydia and her household and then baptised them.

Also in Acts 16, Paul preached to the Philippian gaoler and then baptised him and his household.

In the New Testament, the normal course of events was believe then be baptised.

They didn't have to think about it, or pray about it, or do a six-week course on it.

They just believed and that immediately qualified them to be baptised.

2. Who can be baptised?

Acts 8:36-38 Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?" (37) Then Philip said, "**If** you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (38) So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptised him.

When the Ethiopian asked Philip, "What hinders me from being baptised?", Philip replied, "If you believe with all heart, you may!"

That's the only condition.

He believed and was baptised – immediately!

Anyone can be baptised if they believe: you don't have to feel ready, or worthy, or wait for a certain amount of time.

This is how it was when he preached to the Samaritans too.

Acts 8:12 But **when they believed** Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised.

And when Peter preached to Cornelius:

Acts 10:47,48 "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptised who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (48) And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

There is a pattern in these verses.

There were times when whole households (Acts 16:15,31,33) were baptised – such as the Philippian gaoler and his family – but it's obvious from these other passages that a person first had to believe.

There are two things to note here.

First, anyone who truly believes, can be baptised.

Second, the order is always the same in the New Testament: believe then be baptised; repent then be baptised; be a disciple then be baptised.

It's never the other way around.

You couldn't be baptised as a baby, because you first had to believe or repent or be a disciple.

There's a story about a guy called Raccoon John Smith. He nudged a Presbyterian preacher who was standing next to him and said that he was going to baptise him next. The Presbyterian preacher protested strongly that it would do him no good to baptise him against his will, and begged Smith to let him go. Smith replied, "You say that it would do you no good if it were against your will, but did I not see you the other day sprinkling an innocent babe when it was against his will?"

Nobody in the New Testament is ever baptised before they come to faith.

So what if person has been baptised before putting faith in Christ? Let's see what the Scriptures say.

Acts 19:1-5 And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

They were baptised before coming to faith in Christ, so Paul simply rebaptised them.

I realise that a lot is made out of the fact that they baptised whole households, but that's an argument based on silence.

There is no evidence to support the assumption that there were infants baptised who were too young to knowingly put their trust in Christ.

Baptising babies would actually undermine the consistent New Testament order of believing before you are baptised.

Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised.

In this verse, even though, according to verse 6, multitudes had believed in Christ, only adults were baptised.

3. What does baptism mean?

First of all, let's take a look at what it isn't.

It doesn't cause a person to be saved and it isn't necessary for salvation.

When Jesus was crucified, two thieves were crucified with Him, one on either side.

One of them asked, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42-43)

The thief didn't need to be baptised to be saved.

Second, it's not just a sprinkling of water.

To understand this, we need to take a look at the word "baptism."

The early Christians did not invent the word baptism.

They simply took an already-existing word and gave it greater significance.

It developed from the Greek word "bapto."

The word bapto means "I dip" as cloth is dipped into dye.

This word is used only four times in the New Testament:

In Luke 16:24 Jesus uses it to describe a man dipping his finger in water.

In John 13:26, Jesus uses the word twice about dipping bread into wine.

And in Revelation 19:13, Jesus is described as wearing a robe dipped in blood.

From this word, came another word: baptizo, meaning I baptise.

This word means to dip and cause to perish as by drowning a man or sinking a ship.¹

You can't drown a man or sink a ship by sprinkling it with water.

That's why we believe that baptism should be by total immersion – not sprinkling – as a person is dipped into the water.

So we can see that the word contains two concepts: immersion and death.

We'll come back to this later.

We've seen what baptism isn't, so let's take a look at what it is.

First, it's a public declaration of faith.

There's no such thing as a secret Christian.

Matthew 10:32-33 Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father.

If we're ashamed to identify with Him publicly, Jesus won't identify with us on Judgment Day.

The Ethiopian of Acts was a man of great authority, representing Candace the queen.

Men of great authority don't travel by themselves. For instance, if the US Secretary of State visits another country, he doesn't turn up by himself; he has a whole entourage of bodyguards and assistants.

It was no different 2,000 years ago.

So when the Ethiopian was baptised, he was baptised in front of a whole bunch of people and it was his public declaration of faith in Christ.

Second, baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; it's a sacrament.

In other words, it's an outward sign of something that God has already done in your heart.

So what is it a sign of?

Remember the two components of the word baptism? Immersion and death.

Baptism is a sign that sin's power over us is broken.

Every human suffers from a sin virus that makes sinning seem attractive to us.

The Bible teaches that we are all under the power of this virus, but that if we die, it has no more power over us.

Christians call this dying to sin. (Rom 6:1-7)

Jesus died for our sins, and so we have forgiveness and eternal life.

But when you are baptised, you're saying that you not only believe that, but when Jesus died on the Cross, so did you.

The cross is the means of forgiveness *and* freedom.

“For he who has died has been freed from sin.” (Rom 6:7)

Identifying with Jesus in His death and resurrection, means that God has not only provided so that we can be forgiven for our sin.

¹ New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology 1/144-145

He is also concerned that we should be free from its bondage and power.

This is called identifying with Christ – or co-crucifixion.

Here two verses that contain an important truth:

1 Corinthians 15:45: And so it is written, “*The first man Adam became a living being.*” The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit.

1 Corinthians 15:47: The first man *was* of the earth, *made* of dust; the second Man *is* the Lord from heaven.

Notice that Jesus is called the last Adam and the second Man; He’s not called the second Adam and the last Man.

And there’s a reason for that.

As the last Adam, He put an end to the sinful Adamic race for all who believe.

He took upon Himself all of our sins and became sin for us. (2 Cor 5:21)

But as the second Man, He became the forerunner of a new race of beings.

This is why 2 Cor 5:17 says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

In Christ, God has finished with the old creation and started a new one.

There was no other way to deal with corrupt human nature.

ILLUS – If you’ve ever grown fruit trees, you’ll see what I’m talking about. You pick the fruit off your tree and what happens? It grows more fruit. If you want to stop the fruit from coming, the best and most effective way of doing this is to cut down the tree.

When you read the Bible, you might notice that it talks about “sin” and “sins.”

Sin is the nature, or the tree, and sins are the fruit of that tree.

God knew that there was no point in just trying to stop sinning; you have to deal with the tree that produces that fruit.

This is why when John the Baptist prophesied about Jesus, he said, “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees.” (Matthew 3:10)

Jesus’ death didn’t just deal with the sins – the fruit; His death dealt with the root cause – the tree itself.

So this is what happens when we are baptised; we identify with what Christ has done on the cross for us.

We are saying that we believe that when He died, we died too.

We go down into the waters of baptism as a symbol of death; and we are raised back up in newness of life.

Galatians 2:20: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.