

BAPTISM

adapted from a paper by Ray Stedman

The subject is baptism---its meaning, its purpose, and whether it really has a place in the life of a believer today. We will examine Scripture, and then tackle a few common questions.

Consider the newspaper article from Ipswich, England: “Mrs. Katie Barrett, 90 years old, will be baptized by immersion at Bethesda Baptist Church next Sunday. ‘I’ve been pondering this step since I was 18,’ she says, ‘and now I’ve made up my mind.’” This lady took 72 years to decide to be baptized, and many others are with her.

The first references to baptism in the New Testament are in connection with the ministry of John the Baptist. He practiced baptism to such an extent that he gained the title, ‘the Baptist.’ John baptized down by the Jordan River. People came to him from all over Israel---from Jerusalem, from Galilee, from everywhere.

John said to them, (Matt. 3:11) “I baptize with water those who turn from their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is far greater than I am---so much greater that I am not even worthy to be his slave. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

That passage is important because it marks the difference between *symbolic* baptism and the *real* baptism. When we speak of baptism we must remember that we are talking about more than a simple rite which people undergo. This rite of water baptism is a symbol of something else, and it is this something else which constitutes the real meaning of baptism the reality behind baptism. John has tied together symbol and reality. He says, “I am baptizing you with water as a mark of your repentance from sin, as a sign of your confession of your sins, but this does not complete the meaning of baptism. There is one coming after me who is mightier than I, in fact, one whose sandals I am not even worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

That last phrase, “and with fire,” has troubled many. They wonder what John meant, “with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” They understand what “Holy Spirit” means but are puzzled by his reference to fire. John makes it clear in the words that he immediately adds refers to a separation. John is speaking figuratively, portraying Christ as coming into the world with a winnowing fork by which he is separating chaff from the grain.

John says, (Matt. 3:12) “He is ready to separate the chaff from the grain with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, storing the grain in his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”

There is the “fire,” and by this John is saying that when Jesus Christ comes into the world he will baptize everybody in it either with the Holy Spirit or with fire---one or the other. Sometimes the phrase, “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire,” has been linked with the tongues of fire that sat upon the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost. But it seems that John is talking about two forms of baptism: (1) that of the Holy Spirit which, of course, first took place on the day of Pentecost; or (2) the baptism of fire which is the judgment of God. Fire is always a symbol of judgment. John is saying, “Look, you have one of two choices. This one who is coming is going to deal with everyone in the world, without exception. I am dealing with only a few here. But he who is coming after me---who knows the hearts of all men and is able to judge what is going on in their thoughts and in their inner lives---he will baptize you either with the Holy Spirit or with fire.” By implication John was saying to these people, “Look, now is your chance. If you don’t want to be set apart for judgment, then confess your sins, and be baptized with water as a symbol of it, so that when He comes your baptism may be that gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit which perfects and fulfills God’s plan for men.”

That explains how the *symbol* of water baptism is linked to the *reality* of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:4, after the resurrection, at the close of his own ministry, Jesus confirms this link:

In one of these meetings as he was eating a meal with them, he told them, “Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what he promised. Remember, I have told you about this before.”

In just a few days that promise was fulfilled. The Holy Spirit was poured out on these disciples and, for the first time, the body of Christ (the Church) was formed. That is the purpose of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is to form the body of Christ by introducing every individual believer into that body. Now, admittedly, this is a metaphorical body---not a physical body but a spiritual one. Yet it is a very real body. And all through the rest of the Scriptures you find the apostles speaking of the reality that the church is the body of Christ, the instrument through which the Lord Jesus performs his work.

Another passage of great significance in this connection is 1 Cor. 12:12-13

“The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.

That is the reality of which water baptism speaks. “Well,” someone says, “if that is the reality, and if we enter into it by faith in Jesus Christ, and if anyone who exercises faith in Jesus Christ is, by that very act, baptized of the Spirit into the body of Christ, then why do we need a symbol anymore? Is it not possible to experience this reality without going through the symbol of water baptism?” The answer is, yes.

There are many who have experienced the reality of being made a member of Christ's body through faith in him, without ever having been baptized. The thief on the cross is a notable example. There was a man hanging beside the Lord Jesus, dying. He saw something in Christ that marked him as different. He saw that the kingship, about which people were mocking, was no joke at all, that here indeed was a king. Here was a man of authority, a man who had power beyond this life. So he spoke these very revealing words: “Lord, when you come into your kingdom, remember me.” That is an amazing thing to say to a man who is dying: “when you come into your kingdom...” But he recognized that Jesus was going somewhere, and he said, “When you get there, remember me.” And the Lord Jesus said to him, instantly, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” The thief soon died. He had no opportunity to be baptized, yet he was a member of the body of Christ. Therefore, the symbol does not necessarily do anything for you.

Well then, why have the symbol? Primarily, because the Lord commanded it! If you want to read that command you can turn to the last verses of Matthew's gospel. On the same occasion when Jesus referred to the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit, he also said to the disciples:

Matthew 28:18-19 Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

That is his command to the disciples. They could not baptize with the Holy Spirit; the only baptism they could perform is with water. The command continues: Matthew 28:20, “Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

One of the things he had just commanded them was to go and disciple the nations and to baptize them. So the disciples were thereby commissioned to teach people to be baptized.

That should be enough, shouldn't it? If our Lord asks us to be baptized, and if we desire to obey His command and fulfill His will, then we should do it, whether we understand any more about it or not, because He knows better than we. If He asks us to use this symbol of the reality into which we have entered, then He has a good reason for it, and our part is but to be obedient to the command of Christ.

But, the Lord very seldom gives a command like this without an explanation of it somewhere, as we will see.

We do find that the early church practiced baptism. In fact, even the apostle Paul, who was called separately from the other twelve in that dramatic appearance of Christ on the Damascus Road, tells us that when he went to various places and people came to faith in Christ, he baptized them. He baptized certain Corinthians, and he names them for us. He did not baptize all of them; sometimes he did not baptize at all because he found that people were getting all pumped up about who had baptized them. Some of them were proudly saying, "Look, I've been baptized by the apostle Paul!" So he said, in writing to them, "I'm glad I didn't baptize any more among you people." Nevertheless he did baptize, and he was himself baptized with water. So the practice of the early church confirms the command and commission of the Lord to practice water baptism.

But that is not all. We learn from other passages something of the reason why the symbol is still required. The church has been given two symbolic rites: *baptism*, and the *Lord's supper*. The Lord's supper is a symbol of an inner reality, just as is water baptism. Yet very few have ever taken the position that the church should not observe the table of the Lord together. All of us who have done so have found that it is very beneficial as well as instructive to share the bread and drink the cup, and to meditate upon their meaning.

Similarly, water baptism has the function of focusing our attention upon the introduction to the Christian faith. It helps us to understand and grasp what is involved in being made a member of the body of Christ, how it cuts us off from the old life we once lived and introduces us to a new atmosphere, a whole new realm of living, so that we enter into a new life. This is what Paul describes in Romans 6 when he says,

(6:4) "For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives." He is speaking of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but he includes the symbol of water as well.

This is what baptism means. It is your testimony, a public proclamation, to everyone that you have actually taken, by your inner commitment, the step of renouncing your old life of self-centeredness and, in response to the invitation of the Lord Jesus, having joined yourself to Him, you have begun to follow Him in the fullness of strength which He provides. Therefore you rise to walk in newness of life.

The interesting thing is that this is what baptism accomplishes. It unites us to One, it identifies us with the One who is our Leader. It brings us into union with him. This symbolic act is a very clear description of the baptism of the Holy Spirit which unites us to the body of Christ.

I will barely touch on the issue of infant baptism because I do not think you can find a single verse in the New Testament which even suggests that it is proper. Baptism is an expression of faith by the individual. It cannot, therefore, be practiced by an infant who is incapable of expressing any faith of his own. Only the baptism of believers is authorized in the Bible.

To be immersed (or, dunked under water and brought back up) is to re-enact beautifully what the Scriptures teach about the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a wonderfully expressive way of saying that you have died with Christ, have been buried with Him, and have risen again to walk in a new life.

Question: What does the word "baptism" actually mean?

Answer: it comes from a Greek word, baptidzo, which means "to dip," "to place into a liquid," to dunk, as we would say.

Question: If you were baptized as an infant and then have become a believer, is it necessary to be baptized again?

Answer: This is a question that any individual must settle for himself. My personal conviction is that baptism should represent the individual faith of the person. Infant baptism could not possibly have done that. Therefore I would say it is necessary to be baptized again.

Question: Many churches practice infant baptism. How do they justify it? What text do they base it on?

Answer: This is always a difficult question to answer because there isn't any one text that they use. It is a practice that slowly grew up within the Roman Catholic church. The Lutheran church, of course, broke away from the Catholic church, but in certain areas Martin Luther and the other reformers carried over intact some of their old teachings. The Catholic church developed this idea from a concept that arose in the early church that it was necessary to reproduce in some way the Jewish mark of circumcision. Among the Jews circumcision identified a male child as belonging to the nation. One of the problems of Catholicism is that they have never quite been able to get away from the legalism and the shadows of the Old Testament. Thus they have carried much of the rites and ritual of the Old Testament over into the New. This is where they get the priesthood and the altar---things which are never part of the New Testament picture.

One of the ideas they carried over was circumcision. Yet Paul's epistles state so plainly that circumcision is not necessary for believers today, that they came to the conclusion that baptism was to be substituted. Since babies were circumcised in Jewish ritual it followed that babies were to be baptized. And the idea was thus propounded that this identified them with the chosen people, the church, and that if a baby were not baptized he could not be a part of the church. That is why the Catholic church has always insisted that babies be baptized immediately upon birth, and that if they die without baptism they go into some obscure region called limbo. Much of this was carried right over into Lutheranism and also into some of the Reformed Churches. This is how the practice of infant baptism arose, but it has no grounding in the teaching of the New Testament.