

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

65 What Is the Big Thing About Baptism? Both Sides of the Baptism Question

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-17; John 1:15-34:

Our subject is baptism, and if you will forgive the pun, we will just plunge right in. It seems appropriate to me that our attention should be drawn to the above passages inasmuch as we are planning a service of baptism in another couple of weeks. The background or circumstances which surround the events described by Matthew and John are wonderful. Before we speak about the significance of John's baptism, Jesus' baptism and our baptism, as we find it in the New Testament, let us reflect on some of the things which have been going on.

First of all, the Apostle John, not to be confused with the Baptist, of whom we will speak later, has spoken quite clearly about the absolute uniqueness of Jesus as the fount of life, the form of deity, and the force of creation. (John 1:1-4) He has spoken about the Baptist's ministry in preparing us for the presence of the Word in our world. He speaks quite clearly to the fact that this same Jesus who was preexistent in eternity became flesh and clothed himself in human likeness and walked among men. John records, "we beheld him full of grace and truth as the only begotten of the Father." That word begotten in the Greek means literally "one in essence." and it is translated properly "*begotten*" in the RSV and some other translations yet according to William Barclay, in the time that John was living and writing it had come to take on special significance and it meant uniqueness in the sense of one who was specially loved. That's interesting as John was obviously interested in addressing himself to the people of his time, they would therefore associate immediately with the common meaning of the word. They would recognize that John was saying that Jesus was unique not only by virtue of what He was and who He was, but unique in the special love which existed between himself and the Father.

Secondly, the appearance of John the Baptist as he came clad in a burnoose of camel's hair, a leather belt, a triangular headband, and coarse sandals caused no little stir among the people. His hair was long, a thirty year growth as a mark of Nazarite consecration. His words were probing and biting and his manner was independent. He saw misery in the land, heathen garrisons residing in the holy

city, political and economic bondage to Rome, and a lifeless and virtually meaningless national religion. Thus, he caused quite a ruckus as the people became excited over the fact or possibility that they could know God and participate in His kingdom. They came in droves and assembled to hear this strange prophet, something which had not taken place for over 400 years when Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, had proclaimed the Word of God. How did the contemporary church, that is the ecclesiastical authority of that day, react to this excitement? They responded in typical fashion, they formed a committee! It says they went out to see John and to ask him all sorts of questions. It is the same today. When something exciting happens committees will be formed to go and look into it. So they go out to John and they ask him, *"Who are you? Are you Elijah?"* They were misinterpreting the text from Malachi where they felt Elijah would literally come back and prepare the way for the Messiah rather than realizing what the text clearly means is one like Elijah will come.

They asked him, *"are you Elijah?"* John said, *"No."* *"Are you the Messiah?"* Again John said, *"No."* John continued, *"The Messiah, the one you seek, He will come after me and I am not worthy to be His slave or servant to untie His shoes."* This has always been a favorite passage of mine. I think it is tremendous the way John always desecrates himself and elevates Jesus. That is always the way it should be with a true servant of the Lord. It is the prayer and posture of a person who wants the Lord to be lifted up. It is interesting that when Paul wrote his Galatian letter he said, *"they glorified God because of the change in me."* He did not say, *"they glorified me because of the change in me."* (Galatians 1:24) Paul learned the secret of the Baptist's success in representing Jesus. *"He must increase, I must decrease"* will always be the formula. It cannot be reversed. The text goes on to picture the Pharisees asking John the question, *"Why are you baptizing?"* And John replies, *"I baptize you with water, but there will be one who will come after me who will baptize with the Spirit."* And reading further, it speaks about the fact that Jesus comes to John and is baptized.

Now, as we think of the baptismal service which has been planned, there are certain questions which often arise. *"What about baptism, what is the big thing about it?"* Sometimes and in some places babies are baptized, and in other places, only people who have made a profession of faith are baptized. Is baptism significant, or is it just something we do because the church has always done it?

Is it something which is of recent origin making the Christian faith a little more interesting? There are many questions which come to people's minds when a service of baptism is announced. It is well that such questions are asked. Our faith will never become alive to us unless we recognize that everything we do within the framework of our faith has meaning. If we do things simply because our fathers did them or because the church has done them through the years, then they lose the very significance they are supposed to have. We therefore concentrate on this question of the big thing about baptism and we will consider first the baptism of John.

I. JOHN'S BAPTISM:

When John the Baptist cried aloud to his listeners, *"The axe of God's judgment is poised over you, ready to sever your roots and cut you down. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire,"* there were many who received what he had to say with great thoughtfulness. Some were deeply moved and took his message to heart. This resulted in their baptism, and their baptism implied certain things. **First**, it was an initiation or introduction to a totally new experience of life. You see, John was saying that Israel was going to be spiritualized. The people of John's day had looked upon the nation of Israel, the physical Israelites, as being God's chosen people. Now John was saying in effect that Israelites are people who respond to the message of the King, regardless of their ethnic background. The message of God and His kingdom, this message, is going to give birth to a new era and you are about to enter this era with the coming of the Messiah, Christ. **Secondly**, John's baptism suggested a kind of deliverance for those who trust the coming King. Some scholars see in the baptism of John an allusion to the passing of Israel through the Red Sea. You recall they were delivered out of a life of bondage and slavery into a life of freedom, a new experience in the Promised Land. You remember their deliverance with the parting of the Red Sea and that when the waters returned, the troops of Pharaoh were drowned, the Israelites were spared. It was a mighty deliverance. **Thirdly**, John's baptism was a kind of initiation, if you will. It was dramatic and necessitated a deliberate act of one's will. You certainly don't walk into the water and allow someone to immerse you (or whatever) without being aware of what is going on. You cannot be baptized in this way without being conscious of what is going on, or the circumstances of the event.

John's baptism also had ethical implications. In Luke's Gospel we read, *"And then the multitude came and said what shall we do?"* (Luke 3:10) And John begins to

enumerate what they should do. Share their goods and be concerned about the people who are without. The tax collectors came to John and they asked him, *"What shall we do?"* He told them only to tax what was right. The soldiers came to him and asked what to do and John told them not to take advantage of people, not to steal or to live a riotous life. Now what was John saying to these people? He was saying that once you come and are baptized and are introduced to this new dimension of life, it has very practical implications in your life style. In other words, this act was having an effect and direct consequence in their behavioral patterns. How they needed to hear that message! You see they had been going through the motions of religion and of ceremony and it wasn't having any effect upon them as a tax collector, as a soldier, or whatever. John is saying, "Let me baptize you. I am calling you to a new way of life." This way of life will be seen. This was implicit and explicit in his baptism. **Lastly**, John's baptism had ultimate meaning. John said the kingdom was at hand. The events now taking place will bring about the establishment of God's kingdom in the hearts of those who will respond to his challenge and invitation. This was to be a mini kingdom and a foretaste of the final kingdom when Jesus reigns overall. John's baptism was indeed a significant one.

II. JESUS' BAPTISM:

Then something very unusual happened. We read that Jesus comes and is baptized by John. Jesus evidently was standing in the crowd on one occasion, He steps forward, and in approaching John asks to be baptized. (John 1:26) We can appreciate that John declined saying, *"I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest thou to me?"* (Matthew 3:14) Why did Jesus ask to be baptized by John? After all, we have said that John's baptism was one of repentance offering a place in the family of God. Jesus had no sin to repent of and He was Himself God. I think the answer to the question of Jesus' baptism lies in the reason why He came to this world in the first place. Over the door to the infirmary at Princeton University are the words, *"Not to be ministered unto, but to minister."* This is what Jesus said of Himself as recorded in Mark 10:45. If we view Jesus whole life as a kind of ministry to the needs of others we may understand why He asked to be baptized. **I think first of all it was an act of pure obedience. Jesus said,** *"Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."* (Matthew 3:15) What did it mean to Christ to fulfill all righteousness? It meant that He would drink the bitters of the cross. (Matthew 26:39-42) For Jesus baptism day was a day when He would publicly decide to act in obedience to the

will of God. For thirty years He remained in Nazareth and faithfully discharged His duties toward the home. I think there was a very real way in which He waited for a sign. John the Baptist was that sign. This was the time to venture forth and to begin the work He was born to do. I am not suggesting here that a kind of messianic awareness came over Jesus at a point in His life. Not a word of it! As a boy in the temple He knew what His work was long before the Baptist appeared. It is just that the Kingdom was now at hand. **Secondly, I believe His baptism was an act of consecration to His work.** In this connection let us look at Matthew 20:22 and Luke 12:50. These verses speak of the suffering Jesus will endure on the cross. He will, as it were, be immersed in the wrath of God. It will surround Him. By this act He gave Himself to the work ahead. Jesus did not drift toward Golgotha as if caught in the tide of fortuitous events. He set His face toward the cross, His baptism was a declaration of His intention to die.

Lastly, Jesus baptism was an act of identification with those who sin. In order for Christ to be a savior to men He had to manifest His identity with mankind. I believe it is very significant that the first public act of Jesus was to do precisely that. When we think and speak of the identification of Christ with sinful humanity we are declaring one of the great truths of the Christian faith. The words spoken from Heaven on the occasion of Jesus baptism are very significant here. In Matthew 3:17 we read, *"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."* The words stress unmistakably the authentic identity of Jesus as God's Son, and the pleasure of the Father with Jesus as He does what men are asked to do. Two important designations are recorded for us in John 1:33-34. Jesus is the Lamb of God and the Son of God. As Lamb He will redeem with the cleansing agent of His blood, as Son He will include all men. In His baptism Jesus, you see, was not described as teacher, though teacher He was; He was not described as a good man and example, though surely He was both of these; He was identified as redeemer who would reach for men. Millions of people ought to discover this Christ. They live incognito. They assume one identity, but they are someone else. Deep inside they are turned off. No one can reach them, that is, except one. His name is Jesus. He understands. His life shows He wants to come where we really are. He did that in His baptism, He identified with us.

III. OUR BAPTISM:

Now John's baptism was beautiful, but it fell short of New Testament Christian baptism. In the Book of Acts we read that those who responded to the proclamation of the Gospel were baptized. We find that their baptism signified

their response to the message of good news which they had heard. It also symbolized the cleansing and forgiveness of sin that the person experienced through his new relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. These implications seem very clear to the Apostle Paul as God caused him to view baptism from this perspective when he wrote to believers living at Colosse. We read in chapter 2 and verse 12, *“having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”* I wonder if we all have had a baptism with these awesome implications. They are all there. A response to the message of the Gospel and a realization of what has come to us in Christ. I think there is so much more to baptism than what is written on a certificate of some kind. It's thrilling to experience the things that God has prepared for them that love Him. I think these are really the big things about baptism. Having responded to a message and rejoicing in Christ the early Christians voluntarily obeyed the command of Jesus by example (Matthew 3:15) and word. (Matthew 28:19-20). A master could not require this obedience of a slave, nor a ruler of a subject, nor a parent of a child with the same depiction which comes only by choice, by the act of free obedience. How could you require a person to demonstrate they have come to enjoy the benefits of Christ if, in point of fact, they have come to no such enjoyment? Such a baptism we do not have. Alas, we have a wonderful baptism, it is wonderful because we have a wonderful Lord whom we have come to enjoy. That's what Paul meant when he wrote these words, *“having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith...”*

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Editors Note: The following Bible Study was not part of the original series, Questions We Want Answered. It was prepared and presented by Pastor Christensen for a separate study. The editor thought it important and valuable enough to include with this study on Baptism.

BOTH SIDES OF THE BAPTISM QUESTION

Actually, there are many sides to the baptism question. Some believe in pouring, some in sprinkling, others in immersion. Some believe in infant baptism while there are those who believe it is for believers only. Some think it has to be done three times, once for each member of the Trinity. The opinion of some is that it must be done in an outside body of water, while others feel it must be performed only by a clergyman of their persuasion. This incomplete list of differences also includes baptizing in the name of the Trinity, while some do it in the name of Jesus. There are those who settle the matter by not bothering with baptism at all and by ignoring the issue. It is indeed a very sad thing that there is so much difference of opinion about the subject of baptism. However, the harm that is done before the eyes of a watching world is not so much the result of the details of this ordinance as it is the disregard of the spirit of the rite. The spiritual significance is the crowning virtue in what is done, over and above the time, method, form and place. (Colossians 2:16-17; John 6:63) Having mentioned this, I would like to turn to those differences concerning baptism which seem paramount; mainly, the subjects and mode of baptism. This week I would like to study with you covenant theology regarding the baptism of infants as well as the reformed position effecting mode.

I. Infant Baptism:

In denominations where infant baptism is practiced, and for the purposes of this lesson we shall assume that only the children of believers are suitable candidates, the baptism question cannot be properly answered by an appeal to the New Testament alone. It is a larger matter which appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures and seeks to deal with the means of entrance into God's family initially.

1. God Made a Spiritual Covenant With Abraham:

In this spiritual covenant, circumcision was a sign and seal. (17:1-14) While God ordered the circumcision of the flesh, it is plain that there was to be a spiritual significance. (Deuteronomy 10:12-16; 30:6-10; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26).

2. God's Selection Included Infants as Those Who Shared in Covenant Benefits:

Infants were thus considered a vital part of Israel as the people of God. They were present when the covenant was renewed (Deuteronomy 29:10) and had a place in the assemblies (II Chronicles 20:13; Joel 2:16). We should not look for less a standing in the new dispensation of the church.

3. Baptism Is Substituted for Circumcision in the New Dispensation:

Circumcision can no longer serve as such (Acts 1-2:21:21; Galatians 2:3-5; 5:2-6; 6:12; 13, 15). If baptism did not take the place of circumcision, the New Testament is without an initiatory rite. If children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation, we can assume they had the right in the new. The faithful of the old looked for a much fuller and richer dispensation in the future, not a lesser one.

4. The Inward Faith Was Essential Yet God Ordered the Sign:

Circumcision never got anyone into heaven and neither did baptism. Through the rite of circumcision a child did become a member of the family of God on earth and was positioned (so to speak) at the door of heaven. He (the infant) was considered a part of the family of God. (Romans 2:25-29)

II. SYMBOLISM AND MODE:

The central idea according to Reformed Doctrine in the symbolism of baptism is that of purification. To immerse is a proper mode, but so is baptism by sprinkling inasmuch as they both symbolize purification. The idea of purification was the important thing in the Old Testament and with the baptism of John. (Psalm 51:7; Ezekiel 36:25; John 3:25-26) If Jesus had intended baptism as a symbol of anything other, he would have said so. The following conclusions are reached.

1. The Mode of Baptism Is Not Important If the Effect Is Maintained:

Thus, the going down into water and the coming up from water is not represented in Scripture as the essential quality of the ordinance.

2. The Greek Words "Bapto" And "Baptizo" Do Not Necessitate Immersion:

It is generally agreed by scholars that these words admit to a secondary meaning, mainly to "dye," even "to dye in any manner." One of the world's

outstanding scholars, Wilson, in his monumental work, **Infant Baptism** (London, 1848) comments, "The word "baptize" perhaps does not so necessarily express the action of putting under water, as in a general thing's being in that condition, no matter how it comes to be so, whether it is put into the water, or the water comes over it; though, indeed, to put into the water is the most natural way and the most common, and is, therefore, usually and pretty constantly, but it may be not necessarily, implied (p.97). Let the baptizing element encompass its object, and in the case of liquids, whether this relative state has been produced by immersion, effusion, overwhelming, or in any other mode, Greek usage recognizes it as a valid baptism."

3. Practical Implications:

Was there water enough in Jerusalem to baptize three thousand in a single day by immersion? The task of John the Baptist in immersing the multitudes that came to him would be incalculable. There is no evidence the Philippian jailor led his prisoners out to a river or pool or dared to lead them outside of the city. (Acts 16:22-23) Acts 9:18 does not indicate that Paul left the place where he was found by Ananias. These and other considerations indicate that while many in the apostolic age were baptized by immersion, but inasmuch as the New Testament nowhere insists that this be the case, effusion was an accepted mode.

As we continue in our study of Baptism I would like to quote L. Berkhof, former president and professor of Dogmatic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, as he distinguishes those who view this ordinance from another perspective. "Baptists are at variance with the rest of the Christian world in their position that dipping or immersion, followed by emersion, is the only proper mode of baptism; and that this mode is absolutely essential to baptism, because this rite is intended to symbolize the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the consequent death and resurrection of the subject of baptism with Him." (**Systematic Theology**, p.627)

Next Sunday afternoon the ordinance of baptism will be administered. Several characteristics of that service may be noted at this time in order that it be a meaningful event and not degenerate into an empty kind of ritual.

I. ALL THE RECIPIENTS OF THE ORDINANCE HAVE CONFESSED PERSONAL FAITH IN CHRIST:

Baptism is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, signifies publicly the individual's identification with Christ and his partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace. As in the age of anticipation, all who were the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, typifying the spiritual seed, were circumcised, so in the age of realization, the typical aspect and character of the covenant being done away with, all who are the seed of Abraham according to the Spirit are baptized, baptism signifying, in essence, the covenant blessings. Who are the seed of Abraham according to the Spirit? The answer comes from the Word of God, those who exercise saving faith, those who are born, "*not of the will of the flesh*" as are our children by natural birth, but who are "*born of God.*"

II. SUBMISSION TO BAPTISM IS A VOLUNTARY ACT OF OBEDIENCE TO JESUS:

Baptism may be defined as "an outward expression of an inward experience." Here an individual voluntarily chooses to identify with and obey his Lord before men in this way. (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). Thus, the act is not imposed upon one who is not capable of moral choice or determination. If such be the case, no ruler may impose it upon a subject, nor master upon a servant, or parent upon a child. Whether we include the baptisms administered by John and by the apostles during our Lord's ministry, or confine our attention to baptism as given from Pentecost on, no clear instance of involuntary baptism can be found. In every case the granting of baptism presumes the attitude of free choice.

III. SUBMERSION IN AND EMERSION FROM WATER ILLUSTRATES PERSONAL UNION WITH CHRIST:

Earlier in this lesson we spoke of the spiritual significance as the crowning virtue in what is done over and above method or place. It can be concluded therefore that all the water in the world will not give meaning to this act if the heart is not right to begin with. This is a spiritual act and it is for spiritual people. As in any spiritual act, an act that has meaning beyond the physical such as a kiss between two people who are in love, or the saluting of the flag, a story is told. Baptisms were not uncommon among Jews who became the first Christians. When John came baptizing in water it was no novelty. The new feature was the significance. For the disciples of John it was a baptism of repentance. Following the

resurrection of Christ from the dead, Christian baptism took on the significance of being identified with the risen Lord. In form a physical act wonderfully shows an individual's union with Christ, (Romans 6:3-4) When a person is buried, he is completely covered. No part of him is exposed. This is true whether or not burial is in the ground or in a mausoleum. Submersion in and emergence from water beautifully portrays the death, burial and resurrection of Christ upon which we pin our hope. A careful reading of the New Testament has brought satisfaction to my own mind that the baptism which was practiced in the primitive Christian church bore these three marks.

In this lesson it has been our desire to develop a proper balance and perspective in regard to the matter of baptism. We do not want to place an unscriptural importance upon the ordinance nor do we want to take the risk of dishonoring the Lord in not obeying Him. I would like to answer a few questions in closing which I have been asked about baptism.

1. What Is The Position Of Hope Church And Of The Evangelical Free Church Of America Concerning Baptism?

The Evangelical Free Church believes with the vast majority of Protestants that the Lord Jesus Himself instituted two ordinances. It might be well to distinguish here the difference between a symbol, rite, and ordinance. A symbol is the visible representation of an invisible truth. A rite is a symbol which is regularly set forth. Baptism and the Lord's Table are symbols which have become ordinances by the deliberate command of Christ because of their timelessness and universal obligation. The doctrinal statement of Hope Church reads, "We believe that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances to be observed by the church during the present age." (art. III, sec. 7).

2. Is Baptism Necessary For Salvation?

The Evangelical Free Church does not believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. In this same section of the doctrinal statement we read, "They are, however, not to be regarded as a means of salvation." We do not believe that these ordinances are to be considered a means of grace by which special merit is earned for salvation.

3. I Have Also Been Asked if The Evangelical Free Church Baptizes Adults or Children?

This can be answered by saying that both modes are permitted by the doctrinal statement. Dr. Arnold T. Olsen, President of the Evangelical Free Church, has written in a statement of belief, "When the statement declares that we believe in water baptism, it does not specify how much water should be used, that is, by immersion or sprinkling; nor does it state the time, that is, in infancy or adulthood." There is freedom of conscience as to time and mode. This means that the Evangelical Free Church is neither Baptist nor Lutheran but welcomes into its fellowship those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior regardless of which position they hold on baptism but that baptism is not considered as a means of salvation. While it is true that the majority of our people and pastors hold to believers' baptism, there are a number who hold to the baptism of infants as a form of dedication to the Lord. The Evangelical Free Church believes that it is possible to have different doctrinal viewpoints on some of the minor issues and yet work together in harmony as far as the great major issues of the church are concerned. Waldenstrom said in the presence of our pioneer leaders "...that a Lutheran church is a gathering of Lutheran Christians, a Methodist church is a gathering of Methodist Christians, a Baptist Church is a gathering of Baptist Christians, but a Free Church is a gathering of all Christians."

Very often at this point in the consideration of baptism, I turn to I Peter 3:20-21 where Peter, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says that baptism does not save a person's soul (it does not put away the filth of the flesh) . However, it is a matter of conscience toward God. If a person has been baptized as an infant, the question of being baptized as an adult, it seems to me, can best be solved by a study of its meaning in God's word and an appeal to a Spirit led and guided conscience.

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