

BAPTISM: Why?

By

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Church papers report that two out of every three people who are baptized into Christ drop out of the church after an average of 3 months and never go to church again except at special times.

The fault could lie with the church that it fails to provide an adequate diet of bread of life. The greater fault probably lies with preachers and evangelists who are quick to baptize people without giving them an understanding of the significance of this important experience. With much emphasis upon church membership, many submit to baptism because they want to be a member of the church which demands it. Many are baptized simply because Christ commanded it, and they look upon it as a “command to be obeyed.”

Preachers often point out the number of times the Bible mentions baptism, as if the preponderance of words on the subject would give an understanding of its meaning. Others have only one argument: that in the 9 cases of conversion in Acts, baptism climaxed each one of them. This may give weight to the importance of it, but doesn't help the inquiring mind to understand WHY it is important. Others see in baptism the simple means of imitating the example given in **THE BAPTISM OF JESUS**.

If one is baptized only because Jesus was baptized, he is missing the significance of his own baptism. When John the Baptizer protested that he needed to be baptized of Jesus, the Lord replied, “Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). Jesus indicated that his baptism fulfilled the righteousness of the law under which he lived. The Law given by Moses stated that before one could enter the ministry of the priesthood he had to be ceremonially bathed in water. Jesus was entering his public ministry, eventually to become our High priest and make atonement for our sins by the sacrifice of Himself. His baptism was different from Christian baptism in several ways. Jesus had no sins to be “washed away,” but we come to baptism as sinners, and are “baptized for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38), like Paul who was told to “arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins” (Acts 22:16).

Also, we are baptized “into His death” and in the name of Jesus. Obviously Jesus was not baptized into His own death. Since He had not been put to death yet, none of the people John baptized were baptized into His death nor were they baptized for the remission of sins. Rather they were baptized “unto repentance” and were to indicate by their lives the fact that they had changed and would “bring forth fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8). Later, after the death and resurrection of Christ, these folk were told by the apostles to be baptized into Christ (Acts 19:1-5).

Furthermore we are baptized on the basis of our faith in Jesus as the Christ, our sin-offering. In baptism we “put on Christ” as our righteousness.

If one is baptized only to follow Christ’s example, he might be baptized without believing in Christ’s death or His resurrection. Yet these are the cardinal principles of faith by which one is saved. Such baptism, therefore, might be of no value at all.

The purpose of Christ’s coming into the world was to take man’s penalty for sin, and to die in man’s place for sin. The Gospel that was to be preached, in which man was to believe and by which he was to be saved is the Gospel that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried; and that he had been raised on the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Without this faith in the fact of Christ’s death for our sin as A. B. McReynolds put it in his *“Weekly Report,”* “While it is true that many who are IMMERSED drop out of church, there is a vast difference between being immersed and being BAPTIZED. It is faith in Christ’s death that counts. For this reason the apostle Paul emphatically states in Romans 6:3 that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized **INTO HIS DEATH.**

Where was the value of the work of Christ? **In His death!** By taking the guilt for our sins and then bearing the punishment — death — for them, He freed us from the ultimate punishment of death in the Day of Judgment. But where is the assurance of this great work for me? It is in MY death at the time of Baptism. “We were buried therefore with Him through baptism INTO DEATH; that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life ... for he that has died is justified from sin” (Romans 6:4, 7). Here baptism and justification are essentially tied together. By His death He justified, and such justification takes place when the believer is buried with Him in death — the death of baptism. At the moment of baptism the believer has his eyes closed as in death, his breath stops as in death, and he is placed by another into the grave of water as in death. By faith the “old man was crucified with Him that the body of sin might be done away...” (Rom. 8:6).

One does not baptize himself any more than one buries himself. Therefore baptism is not a “work,” for the believer does nothing to save himself in baptism. He submits, by faith, to the vicarious death of Jesus, and “is baptized” by another. No one who understands baptism thinks that by being baptized he is “working” for his salvation, nor does he think that he is accomplishing the forgiveness of his sin because he is obeying a command. It is indeed tragic that there are some (whose slogan is “New Testament Christianity”) who say of baptism, “Do this, and by means of or by virtue of having completed your obedience to Christ, you have the remission of sins.” This would be a “righteousness which is by law” and which does not save. God does not grant remission of sins because you have kept the “law of baptism” nor because you have been “obedient” to keep a command. If salvation came by keeping a command, then it could be attained only by perfectly keeping all His commands, “for whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet off in 1 one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). We are saved “by grace through faith.” But just as there had to be an actual point of death for Jesus, a point in time when it could be said that He died, so there is a point in time when we submit to the power of that

death, and are baptized “into His death” — “buried with Him through baptism into His death.” At such a time it is faith in His death and resurrection that is accounted to us for righteousness. Baptism does not annul the grace of God, but appropriates it.

BAPTISM AND THE BLOOD

We often hear it said that in baptism we “meet the blood” of Jesus. This may make it sound as if there were some magical power in the blood of Jesus, and that it is blood that God is interested in rather than Justice. But the blood of Jesus was like the blood of all men (Heb. 2:14-15). The reason the blood is mentioned with reference to saving power is because “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11). When the blood flowed out, so did life. It was not “blood,” as such, that met the requirement of a sin-offering, but the death of the sacrifice. To shed one’s blood means death, for without blood there is no life. So where the Bible speaks of the blood of Christ, it means that His death met the just punishment for sin. The judgment for sin is not merely to extract a certain amount of blood, but to bring about the death of the sinner in the lake of fire, which is called “the second death” — a death that is eternal. It was for this reason that Jesus had to die if He was to undergo man’s penalty, and satisfy the justice of an absolute Sovereign.

Baptism is not a mystical union with “blood,” but it is a union with death, the death of Jesus and our own death, for sin and to sin.

HOW OLD?

If baptism was a mere ritual for church membership or if it were a sacrament as some believe, then the age of the candidate would make little difference. But since baptism must be coupled with faith in the death of Jesus, it can not be administered to those who are not old enough to have this faith. This is why millions of people, who as infants or children passed through the ceremony called baptism, later — through reading the Bible — realize that they were not actually baptized into Christ’s death.

This is also the case with many who were “pressured” by parents or preacher to “obey the Lord in baptism” when they were old enough to make a “decision” but were not old enough or were not taught enough to have faith. Many will baptize any child that is old enough to walk down the aisle and shake the preacher’s hand. We have no right to refuse baptism to any BELIEVER, but we do have a solemn obligation to each person to declare the truth of the gospel in such a way that he will have a firm basis for his faith. Conversely, we are morally forbidden to imply to anyone, child or adult, that the mere act of “obedience” — submitting to baptism without faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus — will do them any good.

Baptism is a joyful experience to one who understands it. Jesus died, but having no sin of His own, He was raised up to live as an immortal person forever. When we are baptized into His death, our sin-debt is remitted. Therefore when we die we may die without sin, and at Christ’s coming we shall be raised up as He was, to live in immortality forever. Our baptism becomes the point at which we may say, “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20), “having been buried with Him in baptism” (Col. 2:12).

“If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God” (Col.3:1).

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