

# An Inquiry Into Christian Baptism

## Introduction

There appear to be two undeniably solid justifications in Scripture for the practice of water baptism in the Christian church. The first is Jesus' own insistence on being baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). The second is the Great Commission's mandate that we "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Mark's iteration is even more compelling: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

The origin of water baptism is however a mystery to me. I know of no mention of baptism in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, when John the Baptist begins to preach his message of repentance, we are told that "Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:5,6). No one appeared to have any question that baptism was necessary or appropriate. Perhaps the practice was familiar to them through some tradition not recorded in the Old Testament. Or perhaps John himself persuaded them that it was an acceptable ritual connected with repentance.

But neither of these explanations gives clarity to the question raised by those who were sent from the Pharisees in John 1:24: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" It seems that baptism was less of a ritual in itself, but rather (in their minds) there was significance in being baptized by a certain individual. Apparently these people believed John to be claiming unusual spiritual authority. This notion may also have been the source of some confusion in the early church, when the believers in Corinth claimed to be "of Paul" or "of Apollos," etc. (1 Corinthians 1:12). Paul reminds them quite emphatically that regardless of who performed their baptism, they were all baptized in the name of (that is, the authority of) Christ Himself.

Whatever the origin of water baptism, it is clearly intended by God to typify another baptism, that is, baptism in the spirit, or "by fire." In John's words, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11). Water is often used to picture the Spirit. For example, Jesus states, "He who believes in Me. ...out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive" (John 7:38,39).

Water baptism, it would seem, is the human counterpart to a working of God in the realm of the spirit. We can apply natural water to our bodies; God alone can bring the water of life into our spirits. John's baptism was a baptism "unto repentance," which is the human side. God's baptism is one of supernatural empowerment: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you..." (Acts 1:8).

Any attempt to make water baptism a "stand-alone" event misses, I believe, its greatest significance. In the majority of testimonies of conversion in Acts, both water baptism and Spirit baptism are present. In one instance, God baptized the Gentiles in Cornelius' household with the Holy Spirit prior to their water baptism, to validate the authenticity of Gentile acceptance into His kingdom (see Acts 10:24-48). Jesus Himself received some kind of Holy Spirit anointing in the form of a dove.

Water baptism is an expression of our obedience, but the transformation it represents can only be the work of the Spirit of God. “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Baptism has no meaning if it does not denote authentic change. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:26,27).

## **Concerning Infant Baptism**

In my examination of Scripture, I was unable to find any substantive support for the practice of infant baptism. I would like to consider first the three arguments for its appropriateness of which I am aware.

### ***The argument from symbolism.***

From this view, water baptism is seen as the “new covenant” version of circumcision, which was explicitly required to be performed on infant boys as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and the offspring of Abraham. All infant boys were to be circumcised, not because they knew God personally but because they were members of Abraham’s family.

It might be noted that circumcision was a symbol which covered a group of people, but was only carried by half of them. Women, who were not circumcised, were also descendants of Abraham and thereby also recipients of God’s promises to that community. In fact, I have been told that Jewish lineage is most definitively traced through the mother’s bloodline; certainly that was so in the case of Jesus Himself.

When circumcision was transferred to the new covenant, it moved into the realm of the spiritual. Paul tells the Romans, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (Romans 2:28,29). Colossians 2:11 states with equal clarity: “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.”

In another passage, Paul calls circumcision a “seal of the righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:11). It is the symbolic mark of God’s approval of those “who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised” (vs. 12). In other words, faith first, then circumcision. In the new covenant, it is no longer a matter of inheritance (to be administered at birth), but instead represents an actual change of heart in each individual (male or female).

If there is a symbol corresponding to circumcision in the era of the new covenant, it would more likely be the communion cup, rather than baptism. Jesus told His disciples, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20). We might note that biblical instances of covenant were always accompanied by the shedding of blood (the Hebrew word itself means “to cut”). This too weighs against the connection of water baptism with matters of covenant.

But even more, the enormous difference between the old and new covenants is clearly reflected in the symbolism of communion. With the old covenant, a permanent mark was made in the flesh. It spoke of the absolute obedience that the law required of God’s people. With the cup and the bread, the mandate was not a list of commandments, but rather the simple admonition to remember Christ (1 Cor. 11:24,25).

Our Lord's supper is not the emblem of a legal contract, but rather an ongoing act of voluntary devotion and thanksgiving for His grace-empowered ministry of redemption in our lives.

### ***The argument from scriptural instance.***

In several scriptures, we are told that baptism was performed on entire households. Paul baptized the household of Stephanas (I Cor. 1:16). Lydia's household was baptized (Acts 16:15), as was the family of the Philippian jailer (vs. 33). Some have concluded that since we cannot know the ages of the members of these families, this gives argument that infants were not excluded.

What we also do not know, however, is whether in that culture there was an implicit understanding that spiritual status was granted only to adult members, perhaps those who had reached the age of bar mitzvah. Jesus blessed the little children who were brought to Him, and even noted that their humility should be a model to those entering the kingdom (Matthew 18:4). But He did not call them to repentance, nor did He appear to hold them accountable for their sin. Rather He said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (vs. 6).

In the account of the keeper of the Philippian prison, we are given another complexity that would suggest that a simple interpretation of household baptism might be inadvisable. As soon as the jailer realized that his inmates had not fled the prison, he begged them to tell him what he must do to be saved. Perhaps he had listened (along with the other prisoners) to Paul and Silas' testimony of the gospel. The answer they gave him, however, might stretch the limits of traditional theology. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:30). It was as though his personal faith might of itself produce the salvation of his entire family.

Instead, it is probable that Paul and Silas were being prophetic. What in fact happened was that before the others in his household were actually saved, the two apostles "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house" (Acts 16:32). No doubt everyone there realized not only that a miracle had happened in the earthquake which freed the prisoners, but also that God had intervened in preserving the life of their family member. In any event, we are told that they all believed (vs. 34). In other words, there was a specific connection between the faith of each individual, and his or her right to participate in baptism.

### ***The argument from tradition.***

Infant baptism has been practiced since at least the second century of the church's existence. This, I believe, is the primary reason why many contemporary churches continue to baptize infants. Based on the theological position still present in the Catholic church (and even in some Protestant churches), baptism is understood as a necessary component of salvation. In St. Augustine's words, "By all these considerations it is proved that the sacrament of baptism is one thing, the conversion of the heart is another; but that man's salvation is made complete through the two together" (Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, IV:25).

It is easily understandable that if we separate baptism from faith, and at the same time make it essential for salvation, we would be absolutely justified in administering it at the earliest possible age. It is even feasible (although by no means conclusive) that the practice of sprinkling rather than immersion came about because of the expedience of thus administering this sacrament to infants.

But for those denominations who understand salvation to be by faith alone, baptism should not be separated from the event of salvation. Scripture clearly ties both salvation and baptism to repentance, which is entirely an act of the individual will. Infant baptism severs the ritual from the confession of faith. It further deprives the person who later chooses to make Christ their Lord of the opportunity to voluntarily submit to baptism in obedience to God.

Finally, it eliminates the significance of baptism as a statement to others of the individual's decision to participate in Christ's death and burial. As Paul reminds us, "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

## **Further Considerations**

An additional scripture that is sometimes used in support of infant baptism is Acts 2:38,39. "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'"

There are two reasons why this passage fails to be persuasive regarding the baptism of infants. First, while the promise is given to "you and to your children," it may not be referring to those who are children in age, but rather may imply that the promise will continue throughout the generations. We should notice that the other group included in the promise is "all who are afar off." Ephesians 2:11-13 repeats this phrase in specific reference to the Gentiles. It is clear that not all Gentiles will enter God's kingdom, but only those who "in Christ Jesus...have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (vs. 13). In similar fashion, all our offspring are eligible for the promise, but we cannot assume that all will receive it.

More significantly, however, it can (I think) be argued that the "promise" referred to here is not the promise of baptism. Baptism, combined with repentance, appears to be the condition upon which a promise is given. In other words, baptism and repentance are in some sense the human requirement for those whom God Himself has called (Acts 2:39). What Peter is speaking of here is the promise of the Holy Spirit. "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear" (vss. 32,33).

Consider Christ's final instructions to His disciples. "And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (Acts 1:4,5). Paul echoes this in his letter to the Galatians; "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3: 13,14).

This brings us back to the integral connection between baptism with water and baptism with the Spirit. Perhaps the reason the church has not examined as carefully as it might the contexts and implications of water baptism is because it also does not fully grasp the weight of spiritual baptism. New Testament

occasions of Holy Spirit baptism were always accompanied by dramatic demonstrations of power, from Pentecost forward. As we mentioned earlier, the disciples unequivocally interpreted the Gentiles' behavior of "speaking in tongues and magnifying God" as proof of their infilling of the Spirit (Acts 10:46, 47).

More importantly, however, the Holy Spirit cannot be said to indwell anyone who does not also manifest the fruits of His nature in their behavior. One concern I have with infant baptism is that it places the impact of baptism entirely in the realm of the mystical. Nothing in the baby changes, at least that is perceptible to us humans. I would seriously doubt that there is a higher instance of adult conversions in those families who baptize their infants, over against other children who are not baptized but who are also raised in the church.

It similarly becomes easy to talk about a "work of the Spirit" in someone's life if that work is expected to be merely a matter of status and not of substance. But Paul speaks of a "newness of life" (Romans 6:4), that dramatically expresses itself in righteous behavior. "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (vs. 22).

A final point bears our attention, and that is that baptism—either as an infant or as an adult—gives an opportunity for false assurance that may prove quite damaging to real conversion. Consider 1 Corinthians 10. "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness...Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

Here we see a people who had walked in supernatural grace and had participated in the extensive and miraculous workings of God, but who missed the promised land. Paul explicitly tells us that we are to consider their fate as potentially portending our own. In other words, it is entirely possible to partake of baptism and other rituals of the church and yet not be truly eligible for the kingdom of God. Elsewhere he warns the Galatians, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage...For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:1,5,6).

Baptism, it would seem, should be recognized as an opportunity to participate in a deeply meaningful ritual that nevertheless has no innate consequence apart from the working of the Spirit of God. If this is so, it is my conclusion that its meaningfulness is dramatically enhanced when baptism is voluntarily submitted to by a cognizant individual whom the Spirit of God has truly drawn to repentance and faith. Baptism is thereby an act of obedience, an act of trust, an act of identification with Christ, and a statement of commitment, providing the believer with both a public testimony and a personal reference point, the memory of which should give stability to his lifetime walk with God.

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