

Baptism

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

Water baptism is the act in which a believer in Jesus Christ is immersed in water and raised up from it by another believer. Baptism was instituted by God to be the first step of obedience to demonstrate our reception the gospel of Christ. This initial act of baptism identifies the believer as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus commanded baptism, in effect, when He said “Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus taught that as disciples are made they must be baptized. Notice that He clearly separates “baptizing them” ahead of “teaching them to observe all that I commanded.” Therefore, baptism in water is significant because it is the first step of disciple-making.

And the early disciples obeyed! When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost (a Jewish feast day, but also the beginning of the Church as recorded in Acts 2), he said, “so then, those who had received His word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). In similar fashion, Philip preached in Samaria and it is recorded that “when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike” (Acts 8:12).

The meaning of water baptism

Baptism in water is simply an outward expression (a sermon without words) of the inward fact of one’s salvation. It is certainly appropriate to have a spoken word of testimony from the person being baptized, but even if he or she does not say a word, the action itself communicates very clearly and effectively. It is as if the person stood up and made a public proclamation of identification as a follower of Jesus Christ. This is what makes water baptism so meaningful, it is our “initial identification with Christ.”

It is important also to note that being baptized in water does not produce salvation. The Scriptures clearly teach that we are saved apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). All we can do is receive by faith the gift of eternal life from the gracious hand of God.

Nor is baptism a necessary accompaniment of faith and essential for salvation (John 20:31; Acts 10:43-48; 11:16-18; 13:38-39; 15:6-11; 16:29-31; Romans 3:22; 4:9-11). The thief on the cross was never baptized, though he was destined to be with Jesus in paradise (Luke 23:39-43). In Acts 10:44-48 we clearly see people who have believed in Christ and have received the Holy Spirit prior to their baptism. Also, Paul saw baptism as separate from preaching the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17). Therefore, while baptism is commanded, it is not essential for salvation.

The word “baptize” in our English Bible is translated from the word “*Baptizo*” in the original New Testament language of Greek, which is a form of the word “*Bapto*,” meaning “to dip.” It was used to describe the action of a blacksmith tempering hot iron by dipping it in water; the term also depicted a dyer placing a cloth into dye in order to tint the material. Paul also uses baptism to refer to the Holy Spirit’s work of placing us into Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3-4) and into Christ’s spiritual body, which is the church (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Baptism in water pictures this spiritual union with Christ. It demonstrates our new relationship and identification with the Lord Jesus Christ. When we trust in Jesus Christ, we are placed into Christ, united with Him in the likeness of His death and resurrection (Romans 6:6). When we are placed into the water in baptism it symbolizes the reality of what has occurred spiritually in our lives.

The importance of water baptism

Beyond being commanded (Acts 2:38), baptism is important because it is a person’s act of obedience which identifies him with Jesus Christ. It is a demonstration of the fact that one has believed the good news and thus has personally received Jesus Christ as Lord.

We can see that baptism is an identification with Christ because when it occurs it is with new believers in Christ. When an individual came to belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were immediately commanded to be baptized (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 22:16). In response to this command, the new Christians were quick to demonstrate their desire to obey Christ as Lord of their lives (Acts 2:41; 8:36-38; 10:44-48; 16:32; 33; 22:16). Jesus himself saw baptism as an act of obedience in which He didn’t delay (Matthew 3:15). Therefore, baptism is important because it is the first step of obedience.

In New Testament times, baptism was extremely important. While Christians today are often baptized long after the time when they first embraced Christ as their Lord and Savior, the early church did not hesitate. The practice of these first believers shows the importance of baptism in the life of new converts to Christ.

The requirement of water baptism

Since baptism is commanded and is important, every person must be baptized. We do not have the freedom to opt out of God’s desire for our life. There is one condition for baptism, belief in Christ. When baptism was performed in the New Testament, belief was always a requirement (Acts 2:38; 8:12; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:1-7). In Matthew 28:19 the command to baptize follows the command to disciple. John the Baptist required repentance and the confession of sin (Matthew 3:2-6). Therefore, only those who have placed their faith in Christ should be baptized.

A number of Christian denominations practice infant baptism. Many believers have had this done to them when they were little, only to realize later that the Scripture requires them to trust in Christ for their salvation prior to baptism.

They have then rightly chosen to be baptized as a believer in Christ, knowing that their infant baptism did not fulfill the command to believe and be baptized. Baptism is an act that is done by the one being baptized, not simply an act done to them. Baptism is of no use apart from a proper heart attitude (1 Peter 3:21).

At what age can a child be baptized? Since the requirement is belief in Christ, younger children are able to follow Christ in baptism. However, determining the age when a child is too young can be subjective, varying with each child.

Also, the younger the child is, the stronger the desire to be baptized simply to please a parent or other people. In order to balance the need for those who believe to be baptized with the desire to not lead people to do something that is not coming from a conviction of their heart, our children's ministry informs older grade school children about baptism and our youth ministry encourages baptism, in cooperation with the parents.

The method of water baptism

Various Christian churches baptize in different ways. The methods (called "modes") used include sprinkling (the head), pouring (over the head), and immersion (submerging the whole body). As can be seen from the usage of the word in the above illustration, immersion best agrees with the basic force of *BAPTIZO*. The Greek language has words for pouring or sprinkling but these words were never used in connection with baptism.

Also, there is great evidence that the early followers of Christ understood baptism to be by immersion. For example, John the Baptist baptized where there was "much water" (John 3:23), Jewish proselytes were submersed in a tank of water, a practice which we would naturally expect the church to continue, and every case of baptism in the New Testament could have been done with immersion. Immersion best fits the illustration of death to the old life and being raised to new life (Romans 6:1-4).

While we practice baptism by immersion, we acknowledge that the most important issue is the identification with Christ rather than the method of baptism. Therefore, we recognize baptisms that were performed in a different manner as long as the believer understood what they were doing in baptism.

All Christians are commanded to make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them (Matthew 28:19). There is no biblical restriction on who must do the baptizing. If 3,000 people were baptized in Acts 2:41, it is likely that more than the apostles were doing the baptizing in order to finish in one day.

Indeed, the person who does the baptizing is not significant (1 Corinthians 1:14-17) for there is no special grace that God dispenses through an individual at baptism. It is the act of obedience itself that is the focus and any baptized believer is fully capable of serving in this ministry.

Conclusion

Have you been baptized? If not and if you believe in Jesus Christ, you need to be baptized. Valley Bible Church baptizes through our relational groups. For adults this is our Growth Groups, for children this is our Youth Ministry. For more information about baptism, contact the church office at 661-942-2218 or mail@valleybible.net, or one of our ministry leaders.

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