

Baptism

Why Should We Be Baptized? How Should It Be Done? What Does It Mean?

Explanation and Scriptural Basis

Speaking of Baptism and the Lord's Supper' should we call them sacraments or ordinances? Or does it really matter? It really doesn't matter as long as we explain what we mean by the terms. Baptism is not a major doctrine. However people were put to death in England who believed in infant baptism in ages past. Today it has only been the basis of division among Christians with no known blood shed that I have heard of. It is important to understand and come to some agreement on in the scripture if it is to be practiced rightly as commanded by Christ in the church. Grudem's position, which agrees with our position at HCF, is that baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

So some of the discussion presented here will deal with the paedobaptist (infant baptism) position as advocated by Louis Berkhof, RC Sproul and others. Their arguments are careful and well represented and if you like to read about them, I have a CD where MacArthur (believer's baptism) and Sproul (infant baptism) present and defend their views. You can also read about the paedobaptism position in Louis Berkhof's Systematic Theology which I and I assume others also have a copy.

A. The mode and Meaning of Baptism

Immersion was the Mode of baptism in the New Testament. That is to say that the person was placed completely under water and then brought back up again. Two reason support this understanding and practice.

1. The Greek word Baptizo means "to plunge, dip, immerse" something like somebody in water.
2. The sense "immerse" is appropriate considering the context of the word in the verses. Mark 1:5 and Mark 1:10 the Greek words associated with baptism are en (in) and ek (out of). People were baptized by John en the Jordan River. Jesus came up out of (ek) the water.

If baptism were just sprinkling, then how much water do you need? John chose giant rivers full. John 3:23 tells us that when John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, that he chose that spot because, "there was much water there". Or when Philip baptized the Ethiopian, in Acts 8:36 he stopped by a body of water instead of pouring some water out of his canteen on his head.

3. The symbolism of union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. (read Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12)

This is a beautiful picture of what baptism represents. When we go under the water, it is a picture of us going down to the grave and buried and coming up out of the water is a picture of us being resurrected with Christ to walk in newness of life. I personally love the symbolism of immersion. It's a radical change in our disposition just like our lives were radically changed by Christ. We were pretty much high and dry and now we have been washed and purified from our sins.

Both washing and death and resurrection with Christ are all symbolized in baptism. The following verses emphasize dying and rising with Christ. (Romans 6:1-11, Colossians 2:11-12)

In summary the meaning of baptism carries with it the following:

- It holds intrinsic significance and beauty.
- It carries tremendous blessing.
- It demonstrates the passing through the waters of judgment to safety.
- It symbolizes dying and rising with Christ.

- It symbolizes having our sins washed away.

What a glorious thing to celebrate that brings great glory and praise to God?

B. The Subjects of Baptism

Believer's baptism is a view whereby only those who give a believable profession of faith should be baptized. Sometimes a "believable profession" is furthered explained as 'those who have given reasonable evidence of believing in Christ' should be baptized. Baptism, which is a symbol of beginning the Christian life, should only be given to those who have in fact begun the Christian life.

1. The Argument From the New Testament Narrative Passages on Baptism

Only those who received the word (and believed) were baptized (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 10:44-48)

"Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" The point here in these three passages is that baptism is given is appropriately given to those who have received the Gospel and trusted in Christ for salvation.

2. The Argument From the Meaning of Baptism

New Testament passages as we have just read supported that baptism followed saving faith. Baptism is the outward symbol of beginning the Christian life. This is demonstrated in Galatians 3:27. Paul is assuming or implying that baptism is an outward sign of inward generation. This obviously could not be true of infants. It wouldn't work if Paul said "As many infants as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Infants would not have come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration. In fact the evidence is quite the opposite isn't it? If we were raised with Him through faith as it says in Colossians 2:12, then how could infants be considered in this verse to have the age necessary to exercise faith for themselves?

3. Alternative #1: The Roman Catholic View

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism should be administered to infants. The reason is that they believe that "sacrament" of baptism amongst other sacraments is necessary for salvation. They also believe that the act of baptism in and of itself causes regeneration. Therefore baptism to them becomes a means of saving grace and not just a means of grace we learned about in the last chapter, where it is a means of grace only in the sense that the Holy Spirit brings blessing to the person being baptized and to the church as well.

The Roman Catholic position is defined at the bottom of page 971. This explanation is taken from Ludwig Ott in his Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma. (Read this section)

Summary of Roman Catholic View

1. Baptism should be given to infants.
2. Baptism is a cause of regeneration.
3. Baptism causes a person to part of the Holy Catholic Church.
4. Baptism leaves an indelible spiritual mark.
5. Baptism can only be performed by Priests.
6. Baptism however may be performed by unbelievers.
7. Baptism infuses the faith of the Church and the faith of the recipient is not required.
 - i. Baptism has inherent object efficacy – meaning it doesn't depend of the faith of the giver or the recipient. The sacrament itself, given by God confers grace immediately

- ii. The Sacraments work *ex opera operato* – the sacraments operate by the power of the completed sacramental rite.

Ex opera operato means “By work performed” It means that the sacraments work in virtue of the actual activity done, and that the power of the sacraments does not depend on any subjective attitude of faith in the people participating in them.

A parallel is drawn between the necessity of baptism for salvation by Roman Catholics and the need for circumcision by the Jews for salvation. Either way, these practices represent a “different Gospel”.

(Galatians 1:6)

Speaking of circumcision, Paul says in Galatians that, “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law, you have fallen away from grace.” (Galatians 4:10, 5:4)

However, we must talk about John 3:5 since we hold that baptism is not necessary for salvation as Roman Catholics do. Being born of water in this verse is referring to the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36 25-27 which speaks of spiritual washing which will come in the days of the new covenant. This spiritual washing happens when we are born again.

Titus 3:5 speaks of “washing of regeneration”. It is a spiritual giving of new life. Also see Ephesians 5:26 for another example on spiritual not physical washing.

I Peter 3:21, where Peter says that Baptism saves you can be best explained in context by the fact that Peter is obviously talking about the inward spiritual reality which baptism represents, not the outward physical ceremony. This is a safeguard statement that would make it clear that the physical ceremony doesn't attribute automatic saving grace. Salvation has always come through the inward exercise of faith that is represented by baptism. Understood this way, baptism is an appropriate symbol for the beginning of the Christian life.

4. Alternative #2: The Protestant Paedobaptist View

This view proposes that all infant children of believing parents should rightly be administered baptism. Paedobaptism means the practice of baptizing infants. The argument that infants of believers should be baptized depends primarily on the following three points:

- a. **Infants Were Circumcised in the Old Covenant**

In the Old Testament, circumcision was the outward sign of entrance into the covenant community or the community of God's people. This was done to all male Israelite children at 8 days of age.

- b. **Baptism Is Parallel to Circumcision**

In the New Testament, the outward sign of entrance into the “covenant community” is baptism. Therefore baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision. So it follows that baptism should be administered to all infant children of believing parents.

- c. **Household Baptisms**

Further support for the practice of baptizing infants is found in “household baptisms”. (Acts 16:15, Acts 16:33, 1 Cor 1:16)

Refuting the Paedobaptist Position

1. Only Jews and their servants were circumcised in the Old Testament. (Genesis 17:10-13) However real circumcision is something spiritual and a matter of the heart. In the Old Testament circumcision was given to every Jew regardless of profession of faith.
2. The New Testament does not talk about a covenant community. In the New Testament church, the only question that matters is whether one has a saving faith and has been spiritually incorporated into the body of Christ, the true church.
3. The examples of household baptisms in the New Testament are not decisive for one position or the other. It's assumed that if one was old enough to believe what was preached in that house that they would not be infants.
4. What does baptism accomplish? Roman Catholic if you remember would say that it causes regeneration. We would say that inward regeneration has occurred. But the Paedobaptist can't say either. They would say that it symbolizes probable future regeneration.

C. The Effect of Baptism

Baptism by immersion symbolizes regeneration or spiritual rebirth. It does more than symbolize. It is also a means of grace. That means the Holy Spirit uses it to bring blessing to people and to God Himself. It brings joy to follow Christ and to be obedient to be baptized.

D. The necessity of Baptism

Jesus commands baptism (Matthew 28:19) and so did the Apostles (Acts 2:38) However, it is not necessary for salvation. Jesus' words to the dying thief on the cross, (Luke 23:43) show that this is true. Baptism is necessary if we are to be obedient to Jesus Christ. Christ commanded baptism for all who believe in Him.

E. The Age for Baptism

How old do you need to be in order to be baptized? You need to be old enough to give a believable profession of faith and I might add, want to give this profession of faith, unforced. Parents need to see convincing evidence of genuine spiritual life and also some degree of understanding regarding the meaning of trusting in Christ.

F. Remaining Questions

1. Do Churches Need to Be Divided Over Baptism?

No they don't but you wouldn't have two forms and meanings of baptism in one church. The scripture should be the sole arbitrator (decider) of faith and practice not traditions of the church.

2. Who Can Baptize?

Scripture does not say. There are no restrictions given to non-ordained members of the congregation. It should be men and they ought to be approved by the elders to do so and that they have been baptized (showing consistency and obedience).

3. Where Should Baptism be done?

Baptism should be done as a public ceremony of the church so that members of the church can receive blessing and that they can see the profession of the person beginning their spiritual fellowship with believers and that they might be held accountable.