

The Meaning and Mode of Christian Baptism
Pastor Mark Blair
January 2019

The Risen Lord Jesus Christ commands His followers to be baptized. Through this symbolic act the believer is identified with the Lord and His Church. Baptism is a symbol of new life in Christ, a seal of the covenant of grace, and a sign of the forgiveness of sins. Water is an outward symbol for the inward work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is for those who have repented and believed on the Lord Jesus.

The origins of Christian baptism are found in the Old Testament. The Law of Moses dictated ceremonial washing for priests chosen to serve (Leviticus 14.8,9). John the Baptist, and the first disciples of Jesus, performed such ceremonial washings as a rite of repentance (John 3.22-26). This pre-Christian baptism was preparatory, intended to lead a person to faith in the Messiah (Luke 7.29,30, Acts 19.1-7).

After His resurrection the Lord Jesus instituted Christian baptism, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28.18-20). The qualification is discipleship – following Him. This text describes baptism as a rite of initiation and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” is the continuation. Baptism should be done early in our discipleship; obeying his teaching keeps one faithfully following that path “to the very end of the age.”

Christian baptism is the symbol of membership in the New Covenant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews contrasts the Old and New Covenants as he recalls the promise God made through the prophet Jeremiah. In both Covenants our faithful God invites unworthy sinners into eternal life because of His marvelous saving grace. Yet a key difference is the deeper experiential knowledge of His forgiveness in the New Covenant.

“The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises... ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’”
Hebrews 8.6,10-12

As we read in Hebrews, knowing the Lord who has forgiven us is characteristic of the New Covenant. This does not mean that Old Covenant believers were not forgiven. Rather the prophet emphasizes that New Covenant believers have a deeper understanding of their Lord. Jesus also describes this knowledge of God: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17.3).

Jesus came to bring us ever closer to God. All His prayers in Scripture began with deep intimacy, ‘Abba, Father - Daddy.’ No Old Covenant believer ever dared approach God with such familiarity. But Jesus tells all His New Covenant followers to come freely to our ‘Abba Father.’

Even more, the Exalted Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to baptize the Church with the power and promise of salvation.

“Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Romans 8.14-16

Since the evidence of New Covenant faith is ‘knowing the Lord,’ we expect those who seek baptism to clearly express their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. In the Old Covenant male infants were given the sign of circumcision by their faithful Hebrew parents. Children were born into the Old Covenant. But New Covenant members enter through ‘new birth.’ New Covenant members are identified by their profession of saving faith in Jesus. Of course a person’s ability to articulate grows with maturity and education. A true member of the New Covenant will be able to make their faith clear in their own way.

“I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.*

Psalm 40.1-2

When the brilliant theologian Karl Barth was asked, “What is the most profound thought you have ever had?” He replied, “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!*” No matter how intellectual we become, or how many degrees we earn, nothing will exceed the wondrous, simple, truth of God’s amazing love for us! Baptism is for all who have experienced this love and can express this truth; it is an outward sign of an inward faith.

The New Testament records several examples of ‘household baptisms.’ These texts are intriguingly silent as to how many people are in those homes, and just how old are the occupants. Those who practice infant baptism suggest babies were in these households. But this is not clearly stated. What is clear is that baptism followed belief. When Paul’s team entered the home of the Philippian jailer we read, “They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house... then immediately he and all his family were baptized... he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.” (Acts 16.32-34).

Belief in Jesus is the only way of salvation. The requirement is not reaching a certain age, but having a clear understanding of God’s salvation in Christ. From the household baptism examples in Scripture, it appears that believing can happen at any stage of life. Baptism – of each believing member in these households - is a sign of their sincere belief.

Through these examples we can observe:

1. A pattern of God’s Work and man’s response. We love because God first loved us. When we were running away from God, He came seeking after us. God acted savingly in the death and resurrection of Christ. This blessed message was proclaimed by Apostles and their followers. Those who believe, and whose new life is evidenced by a new lifestyle, are invited for baptism.

2. Baptism is the expected sign of faith, one of the first steps of believing obedience. “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” asked the newly converted Ethiopian (Acts 8.36). “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” questioned the Apostle Peter (Acts 10.47). Believers were baptized very soon after professing faith, often immediately. The connection between belief and baptism is so close that Mark ends his gospel with the words, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16.16). Belief apart from baptism was unusual. The crucified thief who entered Paradise with Jesus was a rare exception. The normal believer, who has the opportunity, is baptized. But condemnation comes from not believing in Jesus, not from a failure to be baptized.

I have five reasons why I cannot be dogmatic about the mode of baptism.

1) Baptists try to make a quick end of the argument by teaching that the Greek word for baptism - ‘baptizo’ - must be translated “dip” or “immerse.” However, this cannot always be proven from Scripture. In Luke 11.38 the Pharisees criticize Jesus for not ‘ebaptisthe’ (which the NIV translates ‘wash’) before meals. The context is Jesus’ failure to keep the rigorous ceremonial cleansing standards the Pharisees wrongly required. Did this Pharisee expect Jesus to be immersed in water before every meal? (Note that Jesus the *person* is the subject of the verbal action and not simply Jesus’ hands.) In Mark 7.3,4 the word ‘baptisontai,’ (literally ‘baptize themselves’) is used of the Pharisees. Surely this did not mean that they immersed themselves every time they returned from the market - along with their cups, pitchers, and kettles.

2) References to going down into rivers say more about the location of the baptism than the mode. Is it possible that people stood in rivers, or even knelt in shallow streams, while water was poured over their heads in baptism? John writes of “many (springs of) waters” which were necessary to accommodate the “people constantly coming to be baptized” (John 3.23).

3) The Philippian jailer’s household baptism is one of the clearest examples of people probably not being immersed. “At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized” (Acts 16.33). Whatever the mode of their baptism, it occurred in the early morning darkness, and likely with the same supply of water used for bathing the released prisoners. It is not likely a ‘mid-level’ public service official would have had a pool which could be used for immersion in their own home. But Luke is silent about the mode of baptism; his emphasis is on its ground of faith in Jesus.

4) In Romans 6 and Colossians 2 baptism is linked to the saving work of Christ. Baptists often cite these texts emphasizing that death and resurrection are pictured by being taken down into the water and brought up again. Remember, however, that the Gospels never teach that Jesus “went down” into a grave; his body was placed in a borrowed tomb for a couple days. A closer reading of these two texts reveals a broader teaching about salvation. The believer is united with Christ in His crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Why should baptism emphasize only two of these vital historical events? It is arbitrary to pick only death and resurrection as the subject of baptism’s symbol. Immersion cannot visually reflect being hung on the cross.

5) Mark says of John the Baptist, “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him...they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (1.4-6). I once had the joyfully exhausting privilege of immersing about twenty people. Did “locusts and wild honey” give John phenomenal strength for immersing thousands?!

I am writing as one who was baptized by immersion and loves to perform baptism by immersion. But I cannot say that Scripture proves immersion is the only legitimate mode of Christian baptism. It seems less than Christian not to respect the various traditional forms of baptism – immersion, sprinkling, and pouring – when they are administered according to biblical standards. God gave us baptism to symbolize our union in Him. May we stand with conviction in areas where the Scriptures are clear and submit with charity in the areas where we lack biblical clarity. May Christ be exalted, and His Kingdom advance as more and more believe - and are baptized.

* * * * *