What Does the Bible Teach About Baptism?



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What does the Bible teach about baptism? The following information is not meant to disparage any particular church's teaching on the subject, but to provide the biblical foundation from which the church practice evolved.

The word translated "baptism" from the original is "baptizo" which means to immerse or submerge. The practice of baptism is very Jewish in that the Jews were familiar with ceremonial cleansings in a bath known as the "mikvah." It was in such a mikvah in which Bathsheba was cleansing after her time of the month when King David spied upon her. A popular myth is that Baptism was also a means in the Old Testament of confirming the reception of a Jewish Proselyte, although this practice is found nowhere in the Bible. Nobody in the Bible was ever baptized into the Jewish community. This came about only through the prescriptions of the Law, and especially by circumcision (Exodus 12:48-49). The Jewish practices of ritual cleansing are, however, mentioned as an elementary doctrine by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 6:2), one that is emblematic of the purity in which God requires of worshippers. We know from the Bible that a ritual cleansing of the body in a mikvah or any other type of bath, be it sprinkling, immersion, or pouring, cannot remove the **spiritual** dirt from anyone (1 Peter 3:21). The Scripture says that only God can forgive sin (Mark 2:7, Ephesians 2:8-9, and especially Luke 5:23-24).

John the Baptist initiated the practice of baptism, although his was a baptism of repentance. Saint

Mark said, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). This "baptism of repentance" signified the participant's testimony of their personal repentance of their sin, meaning they had a change of mind and agreed with God that they had sinned and they desired to follow a new direction in their lives. In the case of John's baptism, we see the believer's response to their need of repentance is to immediately submit to immersion in water as a public, outward expression of the inward change they had experienced in their hearts after hearing John's preaching. Jesus took over where John the Baptist left off and continued this baptism of repentance. It wasn't until the Book of Acts that we find the disciples teaching a different kind of water baptism.

In order to understand the transition brought about in the practice of baptism in the Book of Acts, we must first understand that this Book is itself one of transitions. The first transition was that of Jesus to heaven when he left His disciples in charge of continuing His ministry. As the disciples were all gathered with Jesus they watched Him ascend into the clouds with the promise to "come again in like manner" (Acts 1:11). The next big transition was when the disciples gathered to await the promised Holy Spirit on Pentecost. On that day they received a baptism of a different type, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we see an interesting exchange that occurred between Paul and a group of disciples in Ephesus:

Acts 19:1-5 NAS95 1 It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptized ***in the name of the Lord Jesus*** *(emphasis added).*

John's baptism was qualitatively different as it was a baptism of repentance; whereas the baptism performed in the Book of Acts and hereafter is 1) a baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 5), 2) tied to the personal reception of the Holy Spirit, and 3) still contains the element of repentance, but also includes the recognition of Christ's resurrection power in living the Christian life. These elements are all tied together, creating a complex conglomeration of multiple dimensions of saving faith: repentance, believing in Jesus Christ, and receiving of the Holy Spirit from God. We find this in the Second Chapter of Acts during Peter's address to a large group of devout Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5) on the Day of Pentecost:

Acts 2:37-41 NAS95 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." 40 And with many other words he solemnly

testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

Here we see the instantaneous response of the people who repented of their sin, believed in Jesus "for the forgiveness of their sin" (v. 38b), received the Holy Spirit (v. 38c), and submitted to immersion as a public profession of their newfound belief. Baptism was for them a means of identifying with the death of Jesus by immersing themselves in the water, and then rising to a newness of life upon coming out. This ceremonial practice would have knit well with their previous Jewish religious practices. Baptism is Jewish, it was given to us by the Jew John the Baptist, practiced by Jewish Jesus, brought into its final form by Jewish Peter, and immortalized by the Pharisaical Jew, Paul.

Another case in Acts is descriptive of the later application of these same proscriptive principles:

*Acts 8:26-40 NAS95 26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. 33 "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." 34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 37 And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

In the story of Philip and the Jewish Ethiopian "eunuch" (one who voluntarily submitted to castration for the purpose of serving among a king's harem), we see the progression of events as they played out in the life of this royal official who was returning from Jerusalem where he had been worshiping.

1. The man read the Word of God,

2. He understood the Word of God and believed it (Philip was obedient to the Holy Spirit in answering the call to explain it to him),
3. He publically expressed his faith (to Philip),
4. He was obedient and submitted to baptism by immersion as soon as it was practically possible.

When we as believers are obedient to what God says about the need to be baptized we publically identify with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection from the dead. One commentator put it this way. "Immersion = Death. Submersion = Burial (the ratification of death). Emergence = Resurrection." Saint Paul said:

4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:4-5 NAS95)

This is the conclusion on what the Bible teaches about baptism of Christian believers. Regardless of how the doctrine of baptism has evolved among churches, the biblical teaching is straightforward as to both the meaning and the method of baptism as practiced in the early church.

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