

Water Baptism

By Clark Blanchard

- *What is Christian water baptism?*
- *What does water baptism mean?*

No mention of baptism is made in the Old Testament, but sometime between the Old and New Testaments, baptism came to be used as a means of conversion. We are introduced to the subject of water baptism in the Bible with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3). John's ministry from God was to prepare Israel for the Messiah and His kingdom and to introduce Him. He preached a message of baptism with water for repentance (Matthew 3:3, 6, 11; Luke 3:3) in anticipation of the Messiah and His kingdom (John 1:23 -36). His ministry was exclusively to Israel (Luke 1:76-80).

For the Jews, it appears that the ritual of water baptism was an extension of ceremonial cleansing by dipping or immersing in water. Small tubs, called "mikvahs," were used for this purpose. John's baptisms were conducted largely in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:5-6) or other bodies of water such as Aenon at Salim because there was much water there (John 3:23). This entire historical and geographical background leaves little doubt that the mode of baptism practiced by John was immersion.

Jesus placed His stamp of approval on John's ministry when He was baptized by him (Matthew 3:13 -17). And God the Father used this occasion to say, *This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased* (Matthew 3:17).

Although Jesus Himself was not baptizing as part of His ministry, His disciples were (John 4:2). In the Great Commission, after Jesus told His disciples to *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*, He said, *baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19). Although this could mean immersing them in the truth of the Godhead instead of water, most take it as a command for water baptism. Further, the Christians throughout the book of Acts consistently practiced water baptism (Acts 2:38 , 41; 8:12 , 13, 16, 36, 38; 18:25 -19:5). This provides compelling evidence that water baptism by immersion was part of the New Testament church.

However, over the 2,000 years of church history, the issue has become one of great confusion and debate among Christians. Water baptism has been taken to mean (1) salvation, (2) something which accompanies salvation, (3) something which predestines salvation (especially for infants), (4) identification with Christ and Christians, and most commonly, (5) a requirement for church membership.

The Word "Baptism"

The first step in dealing with baptism is to understand the word "baptism" itself. Most people only associate the word with water. But "Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words" (pp. 98-99) says, "the word *bapto*, to dip, was used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment or the drawing of water by dipping a vessel into another, etc. ..." Plutarchus uses it of the drawing of wine by dipping the cup into the bowl and Pluto, metaphorically, of being overwhelmed with questions."

The various forms of *bapto* are used well over 100 times in the New Testament in a wide variety of applications, many having nothing whatsoever to do with water baptism. For example, in the KJV Bible, *bapto*'s various forms were translated baptized, baptize, baptizing, Baptist, wash, washed, washing, dip, and dipped. Many of these applications have nothing to do with water baptism:

- Dipping of objects such as a finger, sop, or clothing for dying (Luke 16:24; John 13:26; Revelation 19:13).

- Jesus' baptism of trial and tribulation (Mark 10:38-39).
- Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11).
- Believers' baptism into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13)—This is the work of the Holy Spirit in which He places a believer (A) into the body of Christ (B), the church universal, at the time of the person's conversion to Christ, thereby positionally uniting the individual with Christ and all other believers.
- Baptism of believers into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27)—This is the positional uniting and identification of the believer with the Person of Christ that occurs at the time of conversion. Some may see this as synonymous with the item above. In either case, it is not water baptism. The verse contexts give no connection with water.

In addition, the New Testament also includes the following categories of uses for the various forms of Greek *bapto* that are associated with water baptism:

- Water baptism associated with the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3).
- Water baptism practiced by Jesus' disciples in the Gospels (John 3:22; 4:1-2).
- Water baptism as practiced by Christians throughout the book of Acts.

The Meaning of Water Baptism

It would seem that several conclusions can be made about the subject of water baptism:

1. Water baptism is an acceptable Christian practice. We know of no New Testament church age believer who was not baptized, and baptism was never discouraged.
2. Water baptism does not accomplish salvation, nor is it necessary for salvation. Passages defining salvation do not mention baptism (for example, John 1:12; 5:24; 14:6; 17:3; Acts 4:12; 16:31; Romans 1:17; 3:19-28; 6:23; 10:9-17; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7; 1 Peter 3:21; and Revelation 22:17). Paul said, *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel* (1 Corinthians 1:17).
3. Baptism is not for local or institutional church membership. New Testament water baptism is never associated with membership in any particular group. Concerning being baptized (dipped or immersed) spiritually, Paul wrote, *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit* (1 Corinthians 12:13).
4. Water baptism does not make people better, more spiritual, or closer to God than those who are not water baptized. The New Testament never claims that baptism is a sacrament which automatically brings upon us a blessing of God. Closeness to God is based on spiritual, moral, and theological qualities, not on mechanical acts. (See, for example, Matthew 5-7; 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.)

So what is the significance of water baptism today? It would seem that

Water baptism is a biblically based opportunity to worship God by which we identify with Christ, expressing our desire to be numbered as one of His disciples.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is Christian water baptism?*

A: It is an act of worship in which a Christian is immersed in water by another Christian in order to indicate a desire to follow Christ.

Q: *What does water baptism mean?*

A: It is an historical ritual of association that identifies the believer with Christ and all other Christians. It places no special symbolism of holiness in the water itself. It is simply a ritual which follows the New Testament example. It is an initiation for all believers who wish to follow Christ and associate themselves with Christianity (Acts 2:41; 8:12-16, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33, 18; etc.).