

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

BAPTISM — ESSENTIAL FOR SALVATION

“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:21).

In the passage quoted above, the saving of Noah in the Ark of refuge which he built is likened to baptism. The water saved Noah and his family because it lifted them above the destruction that swept away the ungodly world in which he lived. The waters of baptism can save us from the judgements that Christ will shortly bring upon all the wickedness of the age we live in (1 Pet. 3:20; Mt. 24:37).

Baptism in Scripture

Baptism is first mentioned in Scripture in relation to John the Baptist's ministry (Mt. 3:5,6,11). His baptism was one of repentance (this means a change of heart, leading to a changed way of life). It anticipated the baptism of the Lord Jesus and was intended to prepare the Jewish people to believe in Christ (Acts 19:4,5). Israel had already been nationally baptized into Moses when they crossed the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2), but now Christ commissioned the apostles to baptize individual believers of the gospel, both Jew and Gentile, into his name (Mt. 28:19,20; Mk. 16:16). Baptism into Christ identifies believers with the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, which, having been accomplished, render this baptism of more significance than either Moses' or John's baptisms, which it replaced (Rom. 6:3-6; Acts 2:37,38).

The need for correct belief

Jesus said in Mark 16:16: “He that believeth [the gospel] and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned [condemned]”. Belief of the one gospel (Gal. 1:6-9; 3:7-9,26-29) and baptism are both necessary. The Acts of the Apostles gives us several impressive examples of correct belief preceding baptism:

- Acts 2:14-41 - Jerusalem Jews on the day of Pentecost
- Acts 8:12 - The Samaritans
- Acts 8:27-39 - The Ethiopian Eunuch
- Acts 10:1,2,34-48 - Cornelius and his companions
- Acts 16:14-34 - Lydia and the Philippian jailor and his family
- Acts 19:1-5 - The Ephesian disciples of John the Baptist

Are there any exceptions?

There is no record in Scripture of the repentant thief on the cross (Lk. 23:40-43) being baptized. Jesus promised he would be in the Kingdom. But he might have been baptized earlier by either John or the disciples of the Lord (Jno. 4:1,2).

But the example of Christ must be our guide. He said, on the occasion of his baptism: “thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). There can be no exceptions; all who wish to be saved must believe and be baptized.

Christening, infant baptism and the Baptists

The Greek words for baptize and baptism mean being fully immersed. There is no suggestion in Scripture of baptism being a sprinkling with water. There are several passages that describe or imply bodily immersion; for instance, Matthew 3:16; John 3:23; Acts 8:38.

Infant baptism was first heard of in the days of Tertullian (A.D. 200), who vigorously opposed the practice. The rite of infant sprinkling dates back to pagan Roman customs, when babies were sprinkled with holy water and named. Like many other pagan ideas, this rite of infant baptism was gradually superimposed on Christian teaching (2 Tim. 4:3,4). Infant baptism belongs to the apostate church.

When the sect called the Baptists came into existence in the seventeenth century they believed the promises made to David, and looked forward to God's Kingdom on earth, immersing only adult believers. Today, many Baptist churches believe in such doctrines as heaven-going, the Trinity and a supernatural devil, having abandoned their earlier Scriptural beliefs, and some do not even insist on total immersion, but sprinkle with water.

The symbolic meaning of baptism

Baptism is a symbol of sacrifice and of resurrection. Sacrifice always involves death. Baptism into Christ links us with his death, which destroyed "the body of sin" (Rom. 6:3,6). Baptism signifies death to the former way of life, enslaved to sin, and the commencement of a new life enslaved to Christ (vv. 4-13). Baptism also identifies us with Christ's death and resurrection (v. 5), that we might one day inherit eternal life in the Kingdom (v. 23; Isa. 26:19).

Baptism changes our position before God

When, after a good confession of the one faith (Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:10; Eph. 4:5), a true baptism takes place, Scripture teaches that our past sins are forgiven us, for Christ's sake (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Col. 2:11,12). We become "a new creature", as Paul teaches (2 Cor. 5:17). We become the children of God, and heirs of the life-saving promises made to Abraham (Gal. 3:26-29). We have access to God through Christ in prayer, being no longer "children of wrath" and alienated from God (Eph. 2:1-3,12,13).

At what age should baptism take place?

All the Scriptural examples are of persons capable of believing the gospel, defined as "the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Mk. 16:16; Acts 8:12). Passages such as Colossians 3 set out the responsibility to lead godly, obedient lives which falls upon those who have "risen with Christ" (v. 1). The age a person is baptized will depend therefore on his or her maturity and understanding. All baptisms, of young or old, will be preceded by repentance (Mt. 4:17; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 2 Pet. 3:9). Some crisis of the mind will trigger the realisation that we *must* be baptized, as this is the will of God, and that only *in Christ* can we be saved (Acts 4:12). All manner of circumstances, people or events can lead to this crisis of mind. If we have not already been baptized, may we respond to the call of Peter, as 3,000 did on the day of Pentecost, to "Save [ourselves] from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40).

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