

Baptism In The New Testament

[Teaching Resource]

We're a little more reticent about baptism than we used to be. Belief and repentance have never been questioned as being indispensable to genuine conversion in Christian circles. But that has not been true of baptism. And that's interesting because the place of baptism was never a source of controversy in the early church. The early Christians never entertained the thought of an unbaptized Christian.

Now, most of us would agree that it is important to practice what you preach. But it is equally important to preach what you practice! The Southeastern Church practices believer baptism, and it is important that you understand why we consider it an important part of one's faith response to Christ. We should be concerned about not placing any greater emphasis on baptism than what the Bible emphasizes. But neither should we water-down baptism by emphasizing it any less than what the Bible does.

It might be helpful to begin with three observations:

- **Not everyone who has believed in Christ has been baptized.** The moment one comes to faith is not synonymous with the moment one is baptized into Christ. Therefore, you should be able to affirm one's faith in Christ and share truth about baptism without talking in a condescending manner. Knowledge shouldn't be a source of pride, but of gratitude. One doesn't need to be shamed for living by the light that they had. But they do need to obey when more light is shed.
- **Not everyone who has been baptized, has been born again.** In our fellowship, we know the mechanics of baptism more than we know the realities of the new birth. Baptism is a re-creation through faith in Jesus. It is a person and not a process that makes the new birth possible. That is why our goal isn't immersion; our goal is regeneration. To immerse someone who has no relationship with Jesus, but simply because he or she knew that baptism was the "next step" in the conversion process, is a distortion of the gospel.
- **Not everyone who has been born again is a member of the churches of Christ.** The truth of the gospel is not the sole possession of a particular historical movement. I'm proud of what our restoration movement has affirmed during it's best moments, but Christ's church has been around a lot longer than the restoration movement. And to teach otherwise would be divisive and sectarian.

As you share the gospel with others, it's extremely important that you learn to listen from the other person's perspective. Understanding where the other person is coming from will help you clear up any misunderstandings they might have about baptism. For example, the reason some evangelical churches deny baptism has any connection with salvation is because they wrongly assume that to do so would contradict the important doctrine of salvation by grace through faith (not works). In this particular situation, it would be important to help one see that baptism isn't a work of man, but of God--and always depicted in the Bible, and taught as the proper faith response to the gospel message.

Significant Passages from the Gospels:

Matthew 3:13-17--John was shocked that Jesus wanted to be baptized. John is preaching a baptism for forgiveness of sins, preceded by repentance. And so his first words are, "I need your baptism. You don't need mine." But Jesus insisted on being baptized as an expression of obedient submission to His Father's will. And it is very obvious, that when Jesus is baptized and comes out of the water, the Father is very

pleased with His Son's acceptance of the mission. In a similar manner, behind every believer's baptism is a submission to pursue the will of God in one's life.

Matthew 28:18-20--The gospel of Matthew closes with the final marching orders of Jesus. Matthew considered these words equally relevant to all disciples. It is very interesting that the very first and last thing Jesus does in His public ministry both involve this issue of baptism. Jesus considered baptism an indispensable part of the making-of-disciples process.

Mark 16:15-16--Believing and being baptized are responses to the gospel. You couldn't say that baptism is more important, but you couldn't say that it is any less important either. Baptism is not some sort of step that you add to your faith. Instead the idea is that baptism is an expression of your faith. The passage is worded in such a way that assumes either you are going to do both--believe and be baptized--or you aren't going to do neither one. Keep in mind that baptism is presented more as promise than as command in the New Testament.

John 3:1-15--One of the important points throughout the New Testament is that baptism is associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit (notice the connection in the following passages: John 1:32-34; Acts 2:38; Titus 3:4-7). The Bible is clear: we don't need a little more religion; we need total regeneration! We need to be re-created on the inside by the presence of God.

Significant Passages from the Book of Acts:

Notice the examples of people being baptized in the Book of Acts, as an expression of their faith in the Good News about Jesus. Baptism is depicted as a very natural and immediate response to hearing and responding to the gospel--**Acts 2:38; 8:36-39; 10:44-48; 16:14-15; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:1-5; 22:16.**

Significant Passages from the Letters:

Romans 6:1-10--Baptism is described, not merely as symbolic, but as the decisive event by which one is powerfully and unequivocally "united" with Christ (see vs 5; also same allusion in Gal. 2:20. Notice as well the emphatic and repeated use of the preposition "with").

Galatians 3:26-27--The entire Galatian letter refutes the notion that one could be saved by works of righteousness. This particular passage assumes baptism as an expression of faith--the result of which is the clothing of God's righteousness.

Colossians 2:11-12--Rather than using the imagery of crucifixion, this passage uses the imagery of circumcision as a way of describing God's powerful work in baptism. Keep in mind, baptism is an expression of faith in God, not in baptism itself.

Titus 3:4-7--Re-birth isn't something you do; it is something that God does. Although one is immersed in water through baptism, the operative agent is the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 3:21--Baptism is an avenue through which God saves people, just as He did in the days of Noah. The emphasis is on baptism as an expression of faith--an appeal to God for a clear conscience and a pledge of one's allegiance to Him.

- Dale Robinson, updated January 2011