



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Some Fundamentals About Baptism

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Introduction

1. For several years in one church where I worked, we adopted a uniform curriculum Bible study plan in which all our adult classes studied the same subject (with different teachers). One area of study we selected was baptism.
2. One teacher objected, arguing that we all knew the subject thoroughly and so would not benefit from the study. I questioned then, and would now, whether we knew it as well as he claimed.
3. I raise that question in the conviction that there are important reasons for teaching on baptism, despite the many sermons and recurring emphasis on the practice
 - a. Many who are older did hear what may have been a disproportionate number of sermons on baptism.
 - b. But even after all those sermons, did we know the New Testament subject of baptism well, or just *some* things about baptism well?
 - 1) The New Testament mentions baptism/baptize 108 times; have we studied *all* of those texts? Were we aware of all of them when we were baptized? Are there things taught in them that go deeper than the ideas repeated in the evangelistic sermons we heard?
 - 2) That members of other fellowships have and are writing books of many pages on baptism ought to at least make us wonder whether there are depths to the subject we have not explored.
 - c. Have we ensured that those who are coming after us know it well? If it's as important as we have typically stressed, should we not make sure we continue to teach it well?
 - d. Does our ability to talk about it with others match the claim that we know the subject so well? Only thorough study will prepare us to share any part of Christian teaching with others. If baptism is as important we have said, shouldn't we be sure we can defend it (1 Peter 3:15)?
4. The idea of explaining why we believe what we teach about baptism points us to another reason for periodic study of the subject.
 - a. Since others are talking and writing about it, we have an opportunity to interact with them regarding the New Testament's teaching.

- 1) What does it say about interest in baptism when we see the original edition (1977) of the book, *The Water That Divides: Two Views on Baptism Explored*, by a Baptist and Anglican (Donald Bridge & David Phypers), revised in 1998 and reprinted in 2008?
 - 2) What of the opportunities presented by a book like *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn R. Wright, eds., 2007), including a 40-page essay, "Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement" (pp. 285ff.)?
 - b. Evidently, there is interest in this subject which may lead to opportunities to clarify New Testament teaching about it.
5. But as important as it is to explain what we believe about baptism, it is perhaps more important to understand its significance for our faith and growth.
- a. What does baptism do and mean? It is more than a rite of initiation.
 - 1) Paul referred to that aspect of baptism in Romans 6:3-4.
 - 2) But he did so to encourage a new way of living with different priorities and standards (Romans 6:8-14).
 - b. Paul's emphasis suggests that lessons on baptism for the church should be more than polemical discussions that free us to sit as observers without thought about how this applies to us. These are opportunities for our growth.
6. So, we begin a study of baptism as part of our study of things we should believe. We will not seek to be exhaustive, but to say enough to develop capable understanding and lay a foundation for future study of baptism's implications.
- a. We'll talk about such things as baptism and Jesus, its connection to forgiveness, some questions we often face in response to our teaching on baptism, and its connection to our lives of active faith and the church.
 - b. We'll consider, too, some questions of practice that arise, e.g., who may baptize, how baptism is to be done, and when it should occur.
7. In this installment, we'll focus on some fundamental matters that provide the necessary framework for our study.

Body

I. The Norm: There Are No Unbaptized Christians.

- A. Part of the reason there is so much interest in baptism across denominational lines is because "the NT speaks of only baptized believers (as far as we can tell)."¹
 1. In Acts, for example, as Luke records his story of Christianity's initial spread across the Roman Empire, he includes multiple representative accounts of conversion, repeating the detail that people who responded favorably to Christian preaching were baptized.
 - a) No special attention is given to this; rather, he mentions it as if it's just something to be expected, the reasons for which were widely known.
 - b) See Acts 2:41 (Pentecost), 8:12, 13 (Samaria), 9:18 (Saul; 22:16), 10:47, 48 (Cornelius & his household), 16:15 (Lydia in Philippi), 16:33 (the jailer in Philippi), 18:8 (Corinthian synagogue ruler Crispus), and 19:3-5 (John's disciples in Ephesus).²

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 371.

² For a discussion of this point, see my tract, *Baptism: Some Reasons and Answers*, 2-3.

2. Paul sometimes grounded calls for specific insights, behaviors, and growth on the knowledge that his Christian readers had been baptized (Romans 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; Galatians 3:26-27).

- B. While much popular-level preaching today envisions a circumstance where someone can be a Christian for a time prior to baptism, many of those preachers teach that it is expected for the full practice of Christian faith.
- C. We'll consider the issue of whether one can be a Christian before baptism later; for now, we need to notice that New Testament Christianity sees baptism as in some sense vital.

II. The Manner: Baptism Is Immersion.

- A. We need to clear away some misunderstanding here.
 - 1. The English "baptize" is defined, "to immerse in water or sprinkle or pour water on in the Christian rite of baptism."³
 - a) Bear in mind, dictionary definitions reflect *current* use.
 - b) Remember, too, that in this case, the English word has been transliterated from the Greek term (βαπτίζω, *baptizō*).
 - c) Finally, recall that our concern is with what it meant in the New Testament, not how it's come to be used today.
 - 2. That said, when they saw the word βαπτίζω, they would have understood it as "dip, plunge, immerse, wash completely."⁴
- B. Beyond the definition of the word in New Testament times, other evidence points to immersion as the normal manner of baptism.⁵
 - 1. Jewish ritual washings in New Testament times involved complete immersion.
 - 2. New Testament descriptions of baptism imply dipping or plunging (John 3:23; Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:38-39).
 - 3. The symbolism of baptism as burial and resurrection fits with immersion, but is hard to visualize with any other method (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).
 - 4. "The evidence of early church history is conclusive on early Christian practice."⁶

III. Subjects: Baptism Is for People Capable of Faith and Repentance.

- A. The English definition cited previously seeks to clarify by adding, "They baptized the new baby." An additional definition listed says, "to give a name to at baptism; christen."⁷ Again, these definitions reflect current use, not New Testament use.
- B. New Testament evidence.⁸
 - 1. In fact, only adults are mentioned as being baptized in the New Testament.

³ baptize. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/baptize> (accessed: June 26, 2009).

⁴ See e.g., Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), ed. Frederick William Danker, Third Edition, 164-165. Compare Josephus, who used βαπτίζω to refer to someone drowning (War 1.437; *Antiquities* 15.55) or of a ship sinking (War 2.556; 3.525, 527; *Antiquities* 9.212)

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology For Today*, 201-202.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 202. See also his *Early Christians Speak*, 33-54.

⁷ baptize. Dictionary.com.

⁸ See Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 195ff.

2. "Every account of baptism in the New Testament shows it to be a response by believers (cf. Acts 18:8 as representative)" (Ferguson, 196).
 3. The evidence of church history shows that the practice of baptizing infants began at the end of the second century.
- C. In the NT era, baptism was for "penitent believers, or believing penitents" (Ferguson, 195).
1. It was an act of faith and repentance (Acts 2:38; 8:12).
 2. It brought forgiveness of sins to those who had been convicted in their hearts (Acts 2:37-38).

Conclusion

1. In the last part of the second century, Clement of Alexandria expressed the significance of baptism as understood just decades after the close of the New Testament era:

In baptism, we are illuminated; being illuminated, we are made children; being made children, we are perfected; being perfected, we are made immortal. . . . We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and been purified by baptism run back to the eternal light, children running to their Father.⁹
2. In light of statements like that, it is little wonder that baptism has commanded so much attention throughout church history. It is just as vital today, the point at which we move into the realm of forgiveness (Acts 2:38) and salvation (1 Peter 3:21), the time when we enter into Christ (Gal 3:27) and find newness of life (Rom 6:3-4).
3. Are you enjoying the purification that leads you back to the Father?

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⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.6.26.1-2; 32.1, in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers*, 127.