

Baptism

Who should be baptized? How should it be done? What does it mean?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

In this chapter and the next we treat baptism and the Lord's Supper, two ceremonies that Jesus commanded his church to perform. But before we begin consideration of either one of them we must note that there is disagreement among Protestants even over the general term that should be applied to them. Because the Roman Catholic Church calls these two ceremonies "sacraments," and because the Catholic Church teaches that these sacraments *in themselves* actually *convey grace* to people (without requiring faith from the persons participating in them), some Protestants (especially Baptists) have refused to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "sacraments." They have preferred the word *ordinances* instead. This is thought to be an appropriate term because baptism and the Lord's Supper were "ordained" by Christ. On the other hand, other Protestants such as those in the Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, have been willing to use the word "sacraments" to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper, without thereby endorsing the Roman Catholic position.

It does not seem that any significant point is at issue here in the question of whether to call baptism and the Lord's Supper "ordinances" or "sacraments." Since Protestants who use both words explain clearly what they mean by them, the argument is not really over doctrine but over the meaning of an English word. If we are willing to explain clearly what we mean, it does not seem to make any difference whether we use the word *sacrament* or not. In this text, when referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper in Protestant teaching, I will use both "ordinances" and "sacraments" interchangeably, and regard them as synonymous in meaning.

Before beginning our discussion of baptism we must recognize that there has been historically, and is today, a strong difference of viewpoint among evangelical Christians regarding this subject. The position advocated in this book is that baptism is not a "major" doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration.

The position advocated in this chapter is "Baptistic"—namely, that *baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ*. During the discussion, we shall interact particularly with the paedobaptist ("infant baptist") position as advocated by Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* since this is a careful and responsible representation of the paedobaptist position, and it is in a widely used systematic theology text.

A. The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was *immersed* or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism *by immersion* is therefore the "mode" of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament. This is evident for the following reasons:

(1) The Greek word βαπτίζω (G966) means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. This is the commonly recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside of the Bible.

(2) The sense “immerse” is appropriate and probably required for the word in several New Testament passages. In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John “*in* the river Jordan” (the Greek text has ἐν, G1877, “in,” and not “beside” or “by” or “near” the river). Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “he came up *out of the water*” (Mark 1:10). The Greek text specifies that he came “out of” (ἐκ, G1666) the water, not that he came away from it (this would be expressed by Gk. ἀπό, G608). The fact that John and Jesus went into the river and came up out of it strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river, particularly because multitudes of people were coming for baptism. John’s gospel tells us, further, that John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Again, it would not take “much water” to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take much water to baptize by immersion.

When Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch, “as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?” ’ (Acts 8:36). Apparently neither of them thought that sprinkling or pouring a handful of water from the container of drinking water that would have been carried in the chariot was enough to constitute baptism. Rather, they waited until there was a body of water near the road. Then “he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went *down into the water* Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came *up out of the water* the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:38–39). As in the case of Jesus, this baptism occurred when Philip and the eunuch went down into a body of water, and after the baptism they came up out of that body of water. Once again baptism by immersion is the only satisfactory explanation of this narrative.

(3) The symbolism of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. Paul says,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3–4)

Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians, “You were *buried with him in baptism* in which you were also *raised with him* through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12).

Now this truth is clearly symbolized in baptism by immersion. When the candidate for baptism goes down into the water it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one’s old way of life and rising to a new kind of life in Christ. But baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply misses this symbolism.

Sometimes it is objected that the essential thing symbolized in baptism is not death and resurrection with Christ but purification and cleansing from sins. Certainly it is true that water is an evident symbol of washing and cleansing, and the waters of baptism do symbolize washing and purification from sins as well as death and resurrection with Christ. Titus 3:5 speaks of “the washing of regeneration” and, even though the word *baptism* is not used in this text, it is

certainly true that there is a cleansing from sin that occurs at the time of conversion. Ananias told Saul, “Rise and be baptized, and *wash away your sins* calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

But to say that washing away of sins is the only thing (or even the most essential thing) pictured in baptism does not faithfully represent New Testament teaching. Both washing and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized in baptism, but Romans 6:1–11 and Colossians 2:11–12 place a clear emphasis on dying and rising with Christ. Even the washing is much more effectively symbolized by immersion than by sprinkling or pouring, and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized only by immersion, not at all by sprinkling or pouring.

What then is the positive meaning of baptism? In all the discussion over the mode of baptism and the disputes over its meaning, it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the significance and beauty of baptism and to disregard the tremendous blessing that accompanies this ceremony. The amazing truths of passing through the waters of judgment safely, of dying and rising with Christ, and of having our sins washed away, are truths of momentous and eternal proportion and ought to be an occasion for giving great glory and praise to God. If churches would teach these truths more clearly, baptisms would be the occasion of much more blessing in the church.

B. The Subjects of Baptism

The pattern revealed at several places in the New Testament is that only those who give a believable profession of faith should be baptized. This view is often called “believers’ baptism,” since it holds that only those who have themselves believed in Christ (or, more precisely, those who have given reasonable evidence of believing in Christ) should be baptized. This is because baptism, which is a *symbol of beginning the Christian life* should only be given to those who have *in fact* begun the Christian life.

1. The Argument From the New Testament Narrative Passages on Baptism. The narrative examples of those who were baptized suggest that baptism was administered only to those who gave a believable profession of faith. After Peter’s sermon at Pentecost we read, “*Those who received his word* were baptized” (Acts 2:41). The text specifies that baptism was administered to those who “received his word” and therefore trusted in Christ for salvation. Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, “*When they believed* Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, *they were baptized* both men and women” (Acts 8:12). Likewise, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household, he allowed baptism for those who had *heard* the Word and *received the Holy Spirit*—that is, for those who had given persuasive evidence of an internal work of regeneration. While Peter was preaching, “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” and Peter and his companions “heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:44–46). Peter’s response was that baptism is appropriate for those who have received the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit: “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people *who have received the Holy Spirit* just as we have?” Then Peter “commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:47–48). The point of these three passages is that baptism is appropriately given to those who have received the gospel and trusted in Christ for salvation. There are other texts that indicate this as well—Acts 16:14–15 (Lydia and her household, after “the Lord opened her heart” to believe); Acts 16:32–33 (the family of the Philippian jailer, after Peter preached “the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house”); and 1 Corinthians 1:16 (the household of Stephanas), but these will be discussed more fully below when we look at the question of “household baptisms.”

2. The Argument From the Meaning of Baptism. In addition to these indications from New Testament narratives that baptism always followed upon saving faith, there is a second consideration that argues for believers' baptism: the outward symbol of *beginning* the Christian life should only be given to those who *show evidence* of having begun the Christian life. The New Testament authors wrote as though they clearly assumed that everyone who was baptized had also personally trusted in Christ and experienced salvation. For example, Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Paul here assumes that baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration. This simply would not have been true of infants—Paul could not have said, "As many *infants* as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ," for infants have not yet come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration.

Paul speaks the same way in Romans 6:3–4: "Do you not know that *all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death." Could Paul have said this of infants? Could he have said that "all infants who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" and "were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead"? But if Paul could not have said those things about infants, then those who advocate infant baptism must say that baptism means something different for infants than what Paul says it means for "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus." Those who argue for infant baptism at this point resort to what seems to the present author to be vague language about infants being adopted "into the covenant" or "into the covenant community," but the New Testament does not speak that way about baptism. Rather, it says that all of those who have been baptized have been buried with Christ, have been raised with him, and have put on Christ.

A similar argument can be made from Colossians 2:12: "You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." But it could not be said of infants that they were buried with Christ, or were raised with him through faith, since they were not yet old enough to exercise faith for themselves.

C. The Effect of Baptism

We have argued above that baptism symbolizes regeneration or spiritual rebirth. But does it only symbolize? Or is there some way in which it is also a "means of grace," that is, a means that the Holy Spirit uses to bring blessing to people? We have already discussed this question in the previous chapter, so here it only is necessary to say that when baptism is properly carried out then of course it brings some spiritual benefit to believers as well. There is the blessing of God's favor that comes with all obedience, as well as the joy that comes through public profession of one's faith, and the reassurance of having a clear physical picture of dying and rising with Christ and of washing away sins. Certainly the Lord gave us baptism to strengthen and encourage our faith—and it should do so for everyone who is baptized and for every believer who witnesses a baptism.

D. The Necessity of Baptism

While we recognize that Jesus commanded baptism (Matt. 28:19), as did the apostles (Acts 2:38), we should not say that baptism is *necessary* for salvation. This question was discussed to some extent above under the response to the Roman Catholic view of baptism. To say that baptism or any other action is *necessary* for salvation is to say that we are not justified by faith

alone, but by faith plus a certain “work,” the work of baptism. The apostle Paul would have opposed the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation just as strongly as he opposed the similar idea that circumcision was necessary for salvation (see Gal. 5:1–12).

Those who argue that baptism is necessary for salvation often point to Mark 16:16: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” But the very evident answer to this is simply to say that the verse says nothing about those who *believe* and *are not baptized*. The verse is simply talking about general cases without making a pedantic qualification for the unusual case of someone who believes and is not baptized. But certainly the verse should not be pressed into service and made to speak of something it is not talking about.

More to the point is Jesus’ statement to the dying thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief could not be baptized before he died on the cross, but he was certainly saved that day. Moreover, the force of this point cannot be evaded by arguing that the thief was saved under the old covenant (under which baptism was not necessary to salvation), because the new covenant took effect at the death of Jesus (see Heb. 9:17), and Jesus died *before* either of the two thieves who were crucified with him (see John 19:32–33).

Another reason why baptism is not necessary for salvation is that our justification from sins takes place at the point of saving faith, not at the point of water baptism, which usually occurs later. But if a person is already justified and has sins forgiven eternally at the point of saving faith, then baptism is not necessary for forgiveness of sins, or for the bestowal of new spiritual life.²⁷

Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him.

E. The Age for Baptism

Those who are convinced by the arguments for believers’ baptism must then begin to ask, “How old should children be before they are baptized?”

The most direct answer is that they should be old enough to give a *believable* profession of faith. It is impossible to set a precise age that will apply to every child, but when parents see convincing evidence of genuine spiritual life, and also some degree of understanding regarding the meaning of trusting in Christ, then baptism is appropriate. Of course, this will require careful administration by the church, as well as a good explanation by parents in their homes. The exact age for baptism will vary from child to child, and somewhat from church to church as well.

F. Remaining Questions

1. Do Churches Need to Be Divided Over Baptism? In spite of many years of division over this question among Protestants, is there a way in which Christians who differ on baptism can demonstrate greater unity of fellowship? And is there a way that progress can be made in bringing the church closer to unity on this question?

Much progress in this regard has already been made. Christians who differ over baptism already demonstrate their unity in Christ through individual fellowship, Bible studies and prayer groups in their communities, occasional joint worship services, cooperation in city and regional evangelistic campaigns, joint support of many mission agencies and other parachurch groups, joint sponsorship of youth activities, pastors’ fellowship groups, and so forth. Although baptism

remains a difference, that difference does not generally lead to harmful divisions. In fact, most Christians seem to realize that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith.

A very few denominations have decided that they would allow both views of baptism to be taught and practiced within their denominations. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) does this, for example, as a result of a “compromise” reached in 1950 when the denomination was formed from two different groups that had different views on baptism. The EFCA allows ordination for pastors who hold to believer’s baptism and for pastors who hold to infant baptism. And they allow into membership those who had been baptized as infants in a Christian church, without requiring them to be baptized as believers before joining the church. If some parents want to have their infant child baptized and the local pastor does not hold to infant baptism, the local church invites some other Evangelical Free Church pastor who holds to infant baptism to come and baptize the infant.

Although the Evangelical Free Church continues as a strong, healthy denomination today, there still remain some difficulties inherent in this position. One is that there can be a tendency to minimize the importance of baptism: since members disagree on this topic, it is easier not to talk about it much or emphasize its importance.

But the most serious difficulty arises when people begin to think about what such a “compromise position” implies about the views of baptism held by the people who go along with this compromise. For people who hold to infant baptism, they have to be able to say that it is acceptable for believing parents not to baptize their infant children. But according to a paedobaptist view, this seems close to saying that it is acceptable for these parents to disobey a command of Scripture regarding the responsibility of parents to baptize their children. How can they really say this?

On the other side, those who hold to believer’s baptism (as I do) would have to be willing to admit into church membership people who have been baptized as infants, and who did not make a personal profession of faith at the time they were baptized. But from a believer’s baptism position, genuine baptism has to follow a personal profession of faith. So how can believer’s baptism advocates in good conscience say that infant baptism is also a valid form of baptism? That contradicts what they believe about the essential nature of baptism—that it is an outward sign of an inward spiritual change, so that the apostle Paul could say, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ,” Gal. 3:27.

For someone who holds to believer’s baptism, admitting to church membership someone who has not been baptized upon profession of faith, and telling the person that he or she never has to be baptized as a believer, is really giving up one’s view on the proper nature of baptism. It is saying that infant baptism *really is valid baptism!* But then how could anyone who holds to this position tell anyone who had been baptized as an infant that he or she still needed to be baptized as a believer? This difficulty makes me think that some kind of “compromise” position on baptism is not very likely to be adopted by denominational groups in the future.

However, we should still be thankful that believers who differ on the issue of baptism can have wonderful fellowship with one another across denominational lines, and can have respect for each other’s sincerely held views.

2. Who Can Baptize? Finally, we may ask, “Who can perform the ceremony of baptism? Can only ordained clergy perform this ceremony?”

We should recognize here that Scripture simply does not specify any restrictions on who can perform the ceremony of baptism. Those churches that have a special priesthood through which

certain actions (and blessings) come (such as Roman Catholics, and to some extent Anglicans) will wish to insist that only properly ordained clergy should baptize in ordinary circumstances (though exceptions could be made in unusual circumstances). But if we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers (see 1 Peter 2:4–10), then there seems to be no need *in principle* to restrict the right to perform baptism only to ordained clergy.

However, another consideration arises: Since baptism is the sign of entrance into the body of Christ, the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13 on inward spiritual baptism), then it seems appropriate that it be done *within the fellowship of the church* wherever possible, so that the church as a whole can rejoice with the person being baptized and so that the faith of all believers in that church might be built up. Moreover, since baptism is a sign of beginning the Christian life and therefore of beginning life in the true church as well, it is fitting that the local church be assembled to give testimony to this fact and to give visible welcome to the baptized person. Also, in order that the people being baptized have a right understanding of what actually is happening, it is right for the church to safeguard the practice of baptism and keep it from abuse. Finally, if baptism is the sign of entering the fellowship of the visible church, then it seems appropriate that some officially designated representative or representatives of the church be selected to administer it. For these reasons it is usually the ordained clergy who baptize, but there seems to be no reason why the church from time to time, and where it deems it appropriate, might not call on other church officers or mature believers to baptize new converts. For example, someone effective in evangelism in a local church may be an appropriately designated person to baptize people who have come to Christ through the practice of that person's evangelistic ministry. (Note in Acts 8:12 that Philip preached the gospel in Samaria and then apparently baptized those who came to faith in Christ.)

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Have you been baptized? When? If you were baptized as a believer, what was the effect of the baptism on your Christian life (if any)? If you were baptized as an infant, what effect did the knowledge of your baptism have in your own thinking when you eventually learned that you had been baptized as an infant?
2. What aspects of the meaning of baptism have you come to appreciate more as a result of reading this chapter (if any)? What aspects of the meaning of baptism would you like to see taught more clearly in your church?
3. When baptisms occur in your church, are they a time of rejoicing and praise to God? What do you think is happening to the person being baptized at that moment (if anything)? What do you think should be happening?
4. Have you modified your own view on the question of infant baptism versus believers' baptism as a result of reading this chapter? In what way?
5. What practical suggestions can you make for helping to overcome the differences among Christians on the question of baptism?
6. How can baptism be an effective help to evangelism in your church? Have you seen it function in this way?¹

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 966-84.