

What Does it Mean to Be Baptized?

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Acts 2:38 Then St. Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

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Acts 2:40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

Acts 2:41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

The Apostle tells the people that they must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of their sins. Is it true that in order to be saved by faith and grace one must be baptized for the remission of sins? Yes, it is absolutely true. There is no possibility that anyone anywhere at any time can be saved without being baptized. However, that is not an affirmation of the doctrines of the so-called "Baptismal Regenerationists." The essential requirement for baptism is all-important to the Christian Gospel, but it probably does not mean what you think it means. What exactly does it mean? We are going to spend as much time and space as it takes to thoroughly examine this issue. Until we get it straight there is no point in moving on.

A Called to Reformation

John the Baptist was a transitional character between the final prophecies of Malachi and the coming ministry of Jesus the Christ. There were a number of transitional aspects to the ministry of John that we will not go into here because we want to focus on one. Up until John the Baptist the sign and seal of the old covenant had been circumcision. Circumcision called for the remorseful and penitent to reform his life by taking the sharp knives of the spirit

and cutting away the corrupting flesh which stood between him and God. That call for Reformation, spelled out most clearly in the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy, did not work, and was never going to. It was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

When John came on the scene and called people to repentance, he did not circumcise them, he baptized. The water baptism of John was an ordinance of the old covenant and the principle of reforming one's life. John made it clear to those who came out to be baptized by him that his baptism would not take away anyone's sins and it would not save anyone. Why then did God give John the ordinance of baptism? Why didn't He just let John keep practicing circumcision until Christ came on the scene? The reason is that baptism was prophetic of what was coming. In the New Covenant there would be no more effort to reunite man and God by the Avenue of Reformation. It was not in the children of Adam to reform. The decision was made that the only thing to do with Adam's children was to kill them. That execution would either take place at the Cross when they would die with Christ and be resurrected, or it would take place in the Day of Judgment when they would die without Christ and not be resurrected. Death, burial, resurrection, new birth and new life is the New Testament principle; not reformation.

John the Baptist himself expressed that coming truth when he said that he was baptizing them in water as a means of them expressing their repentance and their desire to be washed clean, but that the Christ who was following him would baptize them with the Holy Ghost and the fire, and that is what would take away their sins. To keep from adding confusion to an already difficult prophetic proposition, Jesus did not baptize. That is because when He baptized, it would be with the Holy Ghost in order to remit their sins. But that could not happen until Christ had died and established the basis for the taking away of their sins.

On the Mount of Olives, just prior to His Ascension, Jesus informed his disciples of the change that was about to take place when He told them that John indeed baptized with water, but that they would be baptized by the Holy Ghost in the near future. This was clearly an indication of a change. Not with

water — but with the Holy Ghost. Thus we see that the New Testament baptism is not a Reformation baptism of water in order to cleanse, but the benefit of a baptism of the Holy Ghost (of which the water baptism is, at best, a symbol.

And so the New Testament baptism is a baptism by the Holy Ghost to death, burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, putting away our old selves and being created anew with last Adam. We no longer need live in sin, being born-again by his own incorruptible sperm (I Peter 1:23).

Even so, part of the baptism of the Holy Ghost is the public testimony of being baptized in water. It is not, as has often been taught, a testimony that one has been Justified. Legitimately viewed and understood, water baptism it is a testimony of the Christian about his life. The believer is going to die to himself, wash his life clean through submission to the Word of God (of which the water of the baptism was only a type) and be resurrected with Christ in his life and live to new and sanctified existence.

Water or Spirit?

The question that we have before us in the second chapter of Acts, since the issue is basically one of Justification (Sanctification [our lives we live as believers] is not foreclosed in this discussion), is whether or not these 3,000 souls were baptized in water, or if they were baptized in the name of Jesus?

This is often sneered at by the traditionalists as a begged issue, but before you go too far down the line in that kind of thinking, there are a couple of points to consider. The genius of the Church is that we have the name of Christ, and the authority behind that name, with which to go out and do our work. The most important work of the Church vests in bringing people to repentance and entrance into the kingdom of God. We might illustrate what I am thinking with this story:

A man goes into a bank. He is the servant of a very wealthy person. He has been authorized to go and transact some business for his employer while the boss is gone to a foreign country. The servant takes one of his boss's finest suits out of the closet and puts it on. He gets in his bosses

expensive and fancy car and drives to the bank. He goes in and tells the bank manager what he has come for. To make his case he calls the bank manager's attention to the fact that he is wearing one of his bosses most expensive suits. He takes the bank manager out the door and shows them that he has driven to the bank in his bosses fabulous limousine.

The bank manager is very impressed by all that, but he has one defining question about this servant. Does this man have any document with his bosses name on it authorizing the servant to use his name in the transaction of business? "I do not care if he has on one of the man's suits, if he is driving his expensive car, or even if he has made himself up to look like his boss. I want to see some legal authority granting this servant the right to use this man's name, his power, and his resources."

It is not only foolish, but also risky to question the efficacy that there is in the name of Christ. The orthodox Jews had all of the external accoutrements and inferred connections with God. The problem was that they had no God within and no gift from the mouth of God granting them unlimited use of the authority of God's name and His power. A little later on St. Peter will tell the rulers in Jerusalem that by the name of Jesus Christ, and through faith in that name, they have found the power and authority to make the lame man whole.

In this text, St. Peter does not tell these people to be baptized in water, but to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The passage tells us that as many believed the Gospel were baptized. There is a legitimate case to be made here that these people were not baptized in water, but in the name of Jesus Christ.

Which is Greater — the Ordinance of Baptism, or the Christ, the Cross and the Holy Ghost to Which it Points?

An important issue exists here that needs to be addressed. Does any religious man think that baptism in water carries with it more power and efficacy than being baptized by the Holy Ghost in the name of Jesus Christ? John the Baptist told the people who came to him that baptism in water would not save

them. He told them that baptism in the Holy Ghost with fire would save them. Jesus told the disciples on the Mount of Olives that they would not be baptized in water, but baptized in the Holy Ghost. And now St. Peter tells these people to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and as many as believed were baptized. We carry out the Mission of the Church by the authorization of Jesus Christ our God and Savior who says that we can use His name and all the power and authority behind it. Are you sure that you want to downplay, degrade and reject out of hand the idea that it was baptism in the name of Christ that saved these people and not baptism in water?

We are not going to pursue this line of thinking too far because we do not wish to downplay the importance of baptism in water in the New Testament Church. Even so, I believe it is important not to get the cart before the horse. Whatever efficacy baptism in water may have in the Christian life, it is only there in relationship to baptism in the name of Christ and by the Holy Ghost. If we do not see that point, we have missed the whole thing between John the Baptist and Jesus; and Jesus on the Mount of Olives before His ascension. And then perhaps we should transfer that same misunderstanding to this passage in the Second Chapter of Acts.

Where, When and How

There is another point about this that I wish to make as we move along. I offer these things for your consideration and do not posit them as dogmas (as there are many things that I do posit as dogma, but this is not one of them). There were limited sources in Jerusalem for baptism to take place. Several of the pools in that city were very difficult to get down into and it required time and care. Pools like the Pool of Siloam were crowded about with people. To use that pool for a baptismal source, the crowds would have had to be moved away. Where would one have taken them, and how long would it have taken to move that horde of impotent folk? Would the people, some who had been sitting there for a very long time, have consented to be moved? On this day 3,000 people were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and on the next day 5,000. There were 120 disciples, but at least a significant number of them were women. It is not

clear if all of the others would have been considered appropriate baptizers. If 75 people were baptizing, it would have required each of them to baptize 40 people on that first day and 70 people on the next. That would mean one person every twenty minutes for eight hours (10:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M.¹) if there were no delays or extenuating circumstances, and we have already suggested some. It would have been a fairly massive logistical consideration for that to be done, and then there is always the question of whether the authorities in Jerusalem, who jumped on these people immediately when they realized what they were doing, would have permitted this sort of activity for two days running, which would have pretty much dominated the activity of that city. In that understanding, I believe there is a very good chance that these people were not being baptized in water, but in the name of Jesus Christ. As for myself, I am perfectly satisfied with having people baptized in the name, the power, the efficacy, and the authority of Jesus Christ. When you add to this the fact that the issue here is Justification and not Sanctification, and that water baptism the New Testament has basically to do with Sanctification, it is my opinion that this is probably what was going on.

Regeneration, Not Reformation

In the Gospel story, the means of having salvation are clearly set forth. Deliverance from evil is not through reformation, but through death and regeneration. Salvation takes place in death, resurrection and new life. Just as man did not have it in him to reform himself, neither does he have it in him to regenerate himself. There are some distorted forms of thinking — reincarnation and other strange ideas of the fallen mind — that say otherwise, but the truth is that if man dies without Christ, he is dead. There is no resurrection power in man. Through the Cross of Jesus Christ, the power was provided for resurrection from the dead. But the power was also provided for us to die. Without death with Christ there is no deliverance from the old creation, and only in death with Christ is there resurrection and new life. We do not have the power

to die like that. The only death we can die is the death of mortals. Only Christ could die as an immortal in order to destroy death and bring resurrection and life. Our participation in that death comes through repentance and conversion. This death does not result from a shallow emotional crisis. Implicit in saving faith is conversion. There must be the desire to be free from the old nature and to be a different person. There is no saving faith where there is no will to be changed. There must be a desire to be free from the old ways and to have the new life and the new ways. We must know and believe that it is through Christ and His Cross. We must believe in the forgiveness that is provided. We must believe that salvation is possible and new life is possible. When we are washed, when we are immersed by the Holy Spirit into Jesus Christ, it is into His death. In that way we die to the old ways and are able to live in the new ways. We must understand that we are dying with Christ and we must want to die with Him to the old world and be resurrected in and to the new world.

Buried With Him by Baptism

In the religious world, there has probably been more controversy and misguided opinion on the subject of baptism than any other subject. Some schools of thinking have seen it as nothing more than an Old Testament ritual and ceremony. Their emphasis is on the ordinance instead of the truth. Their one-dimensional religion focuses always and only on getting you to participate in the ordinance. They think that by undergoing this religious rite, all has been taken care of in terms of obedience to the commandment. In fact, that misses the truth. Others have resorted to a kind of tacky exhibitionism whereby they make the baptism of the Holy Ghost a heady and superficial expression fraught with emotionalism, instability and experientialism. This too misconstrues the truth. There is no deliverance in either of these two forms of external religious

show. The truth lies in the principle of the Cross, its teaching, its power and what it implies to you and me, both in terms of a requirement and an application.

Baptism is essential to salvation. There can be absolutely no doubt about it. The whole Gospel of Christ is destroyed and rendered meaningless if there can be salvation without baptism.

It is this very fact that separates the Gospel from the Covenant of the Law. In the true biblical symbolic contrast between baptism and circumcision, the truth of why the Gospel succeeds where the Law failed is amplified. In fact, baptism is essential to all three aspects of the Great Salvation: Justification, Sanctification and Glorification. It was this baptism to which Jesus referred in Acts 1:5, when He said, **“For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.”**

What Water Baptism Symbolizes

To what did the water baptism of the New Testament Church relate and of what was it a testimony? Water baptism focused on changed life. It was a public commitment by the individual of his life to Christ and His service. It was a testimony of dying to the old life, and giving up on that which we received from Adam through natural birth by dying to the old ways with Christ on the Cross. It was about being washed clean from the pollutions of the flesh by obedience to the Word of God of which the baptismal water was a type (Eph 5:26). It was about being resurrected with Christ and living the new life in the New Creation as it is available to us now in the present phase of the Kingdom of God (Eph 2:6, Col 1:3). It was this very thing that Jesus was speaking of when He said, **“To whom also he showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”** (Acts 1:3) In verse 8, Christ tells them: **“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”**

Baptism is a symbol of the ministry of the Holy Ghost Who places us into the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and gives us the wisdom and power

to live the new life (Col 2:12, 3:1-4). It speaks of the power of the Holy Ghost to live this life according to the principle of the Cross functioning in the life of the Christian. The purpose is to destroy the power of sin and death to rule over the Christian, as seen in Acts 1:5-8; 2:1-5; 19:3-5; Romans 6; Colossians 2:12; I Corinthians 15:29 and Galatians 3:27. In these passages, the emphasis is laid upon the life of the believer, the testimony to the world, and the work of the Holy Ghost in the life of that individual.

Three Meanings to the Christian

The water baptism of the New Testament has three meanings to the Christian. The first is his willingness to die to the old ways by going down into the grave, as symbolized by going down into the water. Next is being washed and made clean by obedience to the Word, of which the water itself is a symbol. Finally, being resurrected by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is symbolized in coming back up out of the water.

Baptism of Fire

A second meaning of baptism has to do with suffering for Christ's sake. This is the death that comes through self-denial and the willingness to be persecuted and afflicted for the Gospel's sake. It is the willingness to identify with the sufferings of Christ, and the resulting salvation (or deliverance) of our lives. Jesus taught this concept of baptism in St. Luke 12:50; St. Mark 10:39 and St. Matthew 20:20-23 when He asked the disciples if they were able to be baptized with the baptism **"wherewith I am baptized."** Even though they thought they were able, Jesus told them that they were not, but that the day would soon come when they would be able to, and would be.

The Ark, the Flood, Baptism and Salvation

Perhaps the classic teaching in the New Testament on that particular focus of baptism is in I Peter 3:21, and the surrounding context. This is a much misunderstood and maligned passage. As always, the meaning comes from the context. The subject is arming ourselves with the thought of suffering for Christ's sake in this world. You cannot serve God and give yourselves to true Christian values without being an outcast in society. You will be ridiculed and

scorned. Discipleship also means giving up the motivations and goals that the worldly man has. This brings us to a crisis point. We have to make a decision. What are we going to do?

The example is Noah. St. Peter recalls the days when the Holy Ghost preached repentance through Noah to those people who were captives in sin before the flood. But the preaching of Noah and the call for repentance went unheeded, just as it does with so many today. Noah was ridiculed and scorned for his testimony and for the Ark. There had never been any rain, much less a flood, and these people did not believe in impending judgment. But through obedience to God, suffering and patience while the long-suffering God waited and gave these people almost 100 years to repent, Noah was delivered. That is used as an illustration by St. Peter of the baptism that delivers us now. This particular concept of baptism does not focus on the *washing away of the filth of the flesh*. (That would be obedience to the Word in our lives that *cleanses us* and makes us acceptable in the sight of God.) This passage is about that *baptism of fire*. It is a baptism of trouble and the baptism of patience wherein we undergo death for the sake of Christ. In this way, we experience His resurrection and His life. In other words, here the emphasis is on *suffering*, rather than *washing*. Both are embodied in baptism, but they are different thoughts that are developed differently in the Scriptures.

A third meaning of baptism in the Christian Church has to do with the death of the old body and the receipt of the new, immortal body. The death of this old body is a matter of suffering — who can deny it? But at the Second Coming of Christ and the Resurrection, the graves will be opened and the new, immortal body will come forth. This too is a baptism into death, perhaps not as vitally important in the present moment to us as some of the others, but certainly important in the long term.

The Letter and the Spirit

In the world of false and humanistic religion, whether legalistic or liberal, there are tendencies to focus upon the letter of truth. Importance is placed on

the symbol instead of the true meaning or the spirit of a thing. These kinds of ceremonial and legalistic religious tendencies always create confusions and problems in God's program and in His work. The essence of idolatry is to place importance upon the symbol and to lose the vision of the truth toward which it is pointing. This has happened a great deal in modern Christianity. Many people have looked for modes and methods of ceremonialism in the Scriptures. The Scriptures do not teach such things. Many people have focused their importance upon the ceremony itself. They are particularly concerned about getting people to undergo it without giving proper thought to the meaning of the changed or baptized life. This creates divisiveness, fractiousness, self-righteousness and legalism, all of which are denounced by the Bible. In I Corinthians 1:11-17, St. Paul said that when things degenerate to that level, he could say with all sincerity that he was thankful that he did not baptize any of them. He told them that God had not sent him to baptize, but to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Was St. Paul saying that Christian baptism can be separated entirely in every sense from Gospel and therefore the Gospel is one thing and baptism is another? Actually, he was not saying that, but he was saying that the ceremony of baptism can be separated from the Gospel and be no part of it or have nothing to do with it. This depends on what the Church and the participant think they are doing. Squabbling over methods and modes, placing importance on who baptized you, and the emphasizing of the letter rather than the spirit is no part of the Gospel. St. Paul was not sent to do that, and he was glad he had not been mixed up in it. That way the Corinthians could not involve him in their carnal bickering. The true meaning of baptism creates unity. This is taught clearly in Ephesians 4, where we are exhorted to keep the unity of the spirit in humility, self-denial and consideration for the other person. In that regard, it is said that there is one faith and one baptism. This may not be seized upon and personalized by those who wish to say that their method and their understanding is the only one. That is the exact opposite of what the Scripture is saying. The instruction is to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit. Truth unites and no one has a corner on it. As for your methods, modes, rituals and ceremonies,

they are just a few of the many thousands that religious men have conjured up through the centuries. Many of them have been sure that theirs is the only way. At times, they have been so sure that they put those Christian brothers and sisters to death who did not agree with them. But they were wrong, were they not? Well, they must have been because they did not do it the way we do, and surely we are not wrong — or are we?

The Letter Kills

Focusing on the symbol and taking the letter of truth instead of the spirit is idolatry. In I Corinthians 3:6 it is the spirit that gives life, but the letter that kills. This is not the Holy Spirit, but the spirit of truth instead of the letter of it. We may be sure that it is living the baptized life that Christ is concerned with, and not the ordinance itself.

He That Believes and is Baptized Shall be Saved

Does the Bible not say that he that believes and is baptized is saved? It does indeed, and that is what it means. If you take into consideration all of the New Testament doctrine about the meaning of baptism and how it bears on the spirit, soul and body, there can be no doubt of it.

1. We must be baptized mystically by the Holy Ghost into Christ in order to enter the New Creation and become a part of His family.

2. We must die to ourselves, be cleansed through obedience to the Word of God, and live the baptized life in order to gain an entrance into the Kingdom of God in this world (Rom 14:7; I Cor 4:20; II Pet 1:11). We must live the resurrected life in order to save ourselves from the power of sin to rule us and the death that comes to those who live carnally. We must suffer for Christ's sake in order to share in His glory.

3. We must eventually die physically in order to experience the resurrection of the new body.

Only the person who believes and is baptized will be saved. In Justification, the mystical baptism of the spirit results in salvation from the penalty of sin. In Sanctification, the physical baptism of the life into the death,

burial and resurrection of Christ results in the salvation of the life, or the soul (the two words are the same in the Greek, in this instance). In Glorification, the body must be baptized into the death of the grave in order to be resurrected in immortality and saved from the presence of sin.

Acts 2:38 ...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 2:39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call.

Acts 2:40 And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.

Acts 2:41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

Justification is where the Great Salvation starts for us. It is that which assures us of Glorification. But it is not where it ends. There is a life to save from the power of sin. We are locked in a mortal struggle with the forces of evil in this world over which Satan is the god. By the baptism of our lives into the death of Christ we get freedom from the power of the old world and of the old man, but there is no other way to overcome. When we truly accept Christ as our Savior, our eternal future is assured, but the battle in this life, as we go about to carry out the Mission of the Church, has just begun. Without baptism, the principle of death, burial and resurrection with Christ, there is no chance of success. Baptism, the spirit of it and the truth of it, is essential in all three aspects of the Great Salvation. Whichever application you are talking about, the application of the principle is the same: "He that believes and is baptized will be delivered."