

Why Water Baptism?

The most direct biblical passage concerning water baptism is found in Acts 2:36-41. In his inspired sermon on the day of Pentecost, A.D. 31, the apostle Peter convicted his listeners for their part in having put the Messiah, Jesus Christ, to death.

Several thousand became filled with guilt and shame. Their spontaneous response was, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (verse 37).

A very good question.

When a person comes to recognize, as this first-century group did, that he has been living contrary to the laws and purposes of his Creator, what should he do?

Notice the inspired answer to that question: "And Peter said to them, '*Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*'" (verse 38, Revised Standard Version).

Last month's study made clear the necessity of real repentance for salvation. But the very next step, as stated in Acts 2:38, is baptism. In this study, let's look into the Bible to learn the real meaning and purpose of baptism, and why it is a required step in God's great master plan of salvation.

There is great confusion in the religious world about how baptism should be done. Some churches sprinkle or pour only a small amount of water; others practice complete immersion. What does the Bible instruct regarding this commanded practice?

The method practiced by the majority of professing Christian churches today is sprinkling. Yet the word *sprinkle* occurs only a few times in the New Testament, and always in connection with the blood of Jesus Christ — but never does it refer to baptism. *Pouring* is also mentioned several times — but not in regard to baptism.

The word *baptize* is not an English word per se. In translating the New Testament from Greek into English, the translators left this word untranslated. The Greek word is *baptizo*.

The definition of the word *baptize* is "immerse." It means "plunge into" or "put into." It does not mean "sprinkle" or "pour." The Greek word for "sprinkle" is *rantizo* and "pour" is *cheo*.

Therefore, sprinkling and pouring are not

forms of baptism. Immersion — being placed *completely under water* — is. Water baptism has great symbolic meaning, as we will soon see.

But first, let's notice several examples of immersion (baptism) as recorded in the New Testament.

1. Why was John the Baptist baptizing in the river Aenon? John 3:23.

John would have needed only a handful of water to sprinkle or a cupful to pour — but baptizing requires "*much water*."

2. Even though Jesus Christ had no sins to repent of, was He baptized by John, setting an example for us to follow? Matthew 3:13-15, I Peter 2:21. How does Jesus' baptism prove that He was immersed? Matthew 3:16.

Jesus had to be put *down into* the water, for He "went up straightway *out of* the water" (Authorized Version). It would have been impossible for Him to have come "up . . . out" of a sprinkle or pour!

3. When Philip baptized the eunuch, did they both go into the water? Acts 8:38.

There was no reason whatever for Philip to go into the water, except that there was no other way he could plunge the eunuch *into* the river. Had sprinkling or pouring been a proper method of baptism, Philip would have needed only to bend over and scoop up the water while standing next to the water.

The above examples clearly show that total immersion in water was the method practiced by the Church Jesus founded. And that is the method we are to practice today!

But what is the purpose of baptism? What does it mean?

The meaning of baptism is strictly symbolic. We need to understand that symbolism to know why God requires baptism of those He calls to become true Christians.

Water baptism itself has no mystical or magical effects. Its only physical effect is to get a person thoroughly wet! Nor is the Holy Spirit given by water baptism. Yet baptism is commanded by God for salvation (Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 2:38).

Baptism is simply an outward sign of inward repentance. It demonstrates to God one's willingness and desire to permanently put away his

or her old life of sin and begin living a new life of obedience to God. Let's make sure we understand clearly.

4. After Jesus was crucified for our sins, what happened to His dead body? I Corinthians 15:3-4, Romans 8:11.

After three days and three nights in the grave, Jesus Christ was made alive and given immortal, spirit life by God's Spirit. His resurrection shows He triumphed over sin and death.

5. Is baptism symbolic of one's death, burial and resurrection from a "grave"? Colossians 2:12-13, Romans 6:3-13.

Just as Jesus died for our sins and was buried, our baptism — being immersed in a watery "grave" — pictures the symbolic death and burial of our old sinful life. And as Jesus was resurrected "in newness of life," our coming up out of the waters of baptism is symbolic of our being brought out of the "grave" to live a new life of obedience to God, free from the guilt of past sins and the death penalty those sins have incurred.

Baptism, as these verses show, pictures the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It also pictures the death and burial of the sinner and his resurrection to begin living a Christian life surrendered to God — to walk henceforth "in newness of life." After baptism he reckons himself as dead, so far as sin is concerned, but alive to God through His Son Jesus Christ (Romans 6:11).

6. After baptism and the receipt of God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), does Jesus Christ begin to live within us through His Spirit? Romans 8:9-10, Colossians 1:27-29.

God's Spirit gives us the spiritual strength, as we yield to God, to resist the sinful influences of the devil, the world and our carnal natures. And it imparts to us the faith and love of God to obey His spiritual law of love (Romans 5:5, 13:10).

The apostle Paul said: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, AV).

Water baptism is simply an ordinance by which we express our faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior — our acceptance of His death, burial and resurrection for us. Baptism is also an expression of our repentance from sin and our desire to totally destroy and bury our old, sinful life.

Baptism clearly shows our realization of our own sins, vanities and wretchedness. It is an outward acknowledgment that our selfish, vain and sinful old self must die so that we might rise to live a new life of spiritual obedience to God's

commandments as made possible through His Holy Spirit.

Finally, baptism shows our total, absolute surrender to God. It symbolizes the complete burial of the old sinful self and our beginning a new life surrendered to the will and authority of God.

Have you already been baptized? If so, was it done by immersion as God commands? Had you really repented? Did you know what repentance is? Did you come to feel deeply broken up over and thoroughly abhor your past way of life, which was contrary to God's way?

Did you not only feel this as a deep and very real emotion, but did you thoroughly understand that you are to strive to obey the living God and His law from that day forward? Had you really come to Jesus Christ in unconditional surrender, admitting your rebellion against God's way? Had you really repented of living by the standards of this world?

If you were baptized by immersion, did you fully understand that you were being buried, and that a "new you" was to emerge from the water?

Did you have hands laid upon you, and prayer given for the receipt of God's Spirit? (We will learn more about the Holy Spirit of God in next month's study.)

If you did not properly fulfill all the requirements for baptism that we have covered in this and the previous study, then your baptism was not valid in God's sight!

In this brief study we were able to cover only a few major points about water baptism. For additional information, be sure to request your copy of the free booklet *All About Water Baptism*. Also, an entire lesson of the Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course covers this important subject in depth. Be sure to enroll in the course today, if you are not already a student.

No matter what your previous religious history and experience may have been, you need to check up on yourself to see where you stand with God. □



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