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Baptism

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What people believe about baptism is usually determined by their heritage, specifically, their religious heritage. Debates continue while opinions are formed and lines drawn between different schools of thought that are grounded in denominational teaching rather than scriptural truth.

"I believe Jesus died for my sins, and I have accepted Him as Savior. But I have not been baptized. Does that mean that I'm not a Christian?" "I was christened as a baby. Doesn't that mean I've been baptized?" "I was baptized by immersion when I was twelve, but I didn't really become a Christian until I was thirty-four. Does my baptism count?" "If baptism is not required for salvation, what is the big deal anyway?"

It's easy to see that the issue of baptism is shrouded in controversy and differences of opinion that people cling to with tenacity because "that's the way I was brought up." Things that are a part of our heritage are difficult, at best, to give up. Even when presented with what we can see is the truth, we resist. Thus, we are left with questions about baptism that separate denominations and divide churches, and the struggle to discern scriptural truth, as opposed to denominational dogma, is an ongoing effort.

Let's take an in-depth look at the root word baptize, discover its original meaning, and draw some pointed conclusions. I believe it can resolve many questions that continue to cause so many problems.

The term baptize is not a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or Catholic term; it is a Greek term. Baptizo in the Greek meant to "dunk," "dip," "plunge," "submerge," or "immerse." Originally, it had no religious connotation. Rather, the word baptize was used to describe a ship that had been sunk in a battle or a piece of cloth that was dipped in dye. Other times it was used to refer to someone who had drowned or a cup that was dipped into a pitcher to drink from. Its use was general in nature.

The first time the word baptize was used in the context of religion occurred as a result of its incorporation into the Jewish culture. The Jewish faith was somewhat complicated with ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and laws. The term baptize was used to describe the ritual known as ceremonial washing. Now, we would not say, "Go baptize

your hands before you eat." We would say, "Go wash your hands before you eat." Yet the term baptize was used to describe this function of washing.

There is a second way in which the term baptize was used in the Jewish faith. The Jews developed a way in which Gentiles could become Jewish. It involved a number of things, including circumcision, a covenant meal, the agreement to obey Jewish law, and a ritual bath. The term used to describe the bath was bapto, meaning "immerse." Persons desiring to become Jewish would baptize themselves. The "bath" was an outward sign that they were dying to the old life as a Gentile and were being resurrected to the new life as a Jew. As a pledge of allegiance to the new identity, those who desired to adopt the Jewish faith as their own participated by baptizing themselves as a sign of their commitment.

What happened next involved John the Baptist. John got his name because of what people saw him doing. His unique role of baptizing other people was something that had never been done before, so it was natural that people came to watch. He was literally John the Baptizer. John took an ordinary word that meant to "dip," "plunge," "submerge," or "immerse," and coined it for the specific task he was performing. Soon it became almost exclusively associated with Christianity, and thus the word baptism appears in the New Testament.

A Greek term that was used in a general sense took on a special meaning because of its close association with what was happening. That's how the term baptism took on its religious connotations. Those who saw what was happening associated the word baptize with it, and it wasn't long before baptism became the word to define the event or process. This understanding is extremely important because it allows us to isolate the form of baptism. In the case of baptism or baptize, the word is the form. Baptize, as we determined earlier, means to "dip," "plunge," "submerge," or "immerse." Many who advocate another form of baptism admit that the original form of baptism was immersion. And there is evidence from Scripture. In Acts 8:38, we read, "He commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him." Matthew 3:16 describes this scene: "When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened." Baptism was a public observance whereby a person was

immersed for the sake of a religious decision. Again, because of its original meaning, the form of baptism is defined by the word itself. The next question concerns the meaning or significance of baptism. Why should a person be baptized? From the very beginning, baptism represented the ideas of identification and allegiance. Remember how the Gentiles were changing their identity? Once they baptized themselves, they were no longer Gentiles; they were Jews. People who were baptized by John were identifying with John's teaching for repentance. That is why Jesus allowed Himself to be baptized by John. The identity factor is underscored in Acts where we find that those who were baptized to identify with John were re-baptized in the name of Jesus in order to identify with Him. Therefore, one reason for baptism is that we publicly identify with Jesus' teachings.

Second, baptism is a picture that carries the weight of cleansing and resurrection and allegiance. The visual picture of baptism represents: cleansing from the sin of the old life; dying to the old life and being born to a new life; and a sign of commitment or allegiance to a new Master or way of life.

This visual picture of an inward decision is best summed up in the sentence "I am not ashamed." Baptism is the believer's declaration to the world that Christ is the standard by which he or she intends to live.

Another reason a believer should be baptized is that Jesus commanded us to be baptized, and following in obedience should be a part of every believer's life. In the Scripture reference at the beginning of this chapter, known as the Great Commission, Jesus instructed the remaining eleven disciples to "go therefore and make disciples...baptizing them." The disciples were instructed to lead people to know Jesus as Savior and then to baptize them as a sign of their allegiance and identification with Him. As obedient children, we must consider baptism as the next step after salvation, one that should be taken without delay.

Many people express one last concern about baptism and its connection to salvation. Baptism is an act of obedience whereby the believer identifies with Christ. Believing in Christ comes first, then baptizing. Think about the thief on the cross. He believed in the moments just prior to his death on the cross. There was no time for baptism; yet Jesus assured him that they would meet in paradise that day. Were baptism required for salvation, the thief would have missed

out. It is clear from Jesus' words that the thief was saved the moment he believed. Paul says, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Baptism should be a part of every believer's experience, but it is not a requirement for salvation. Since obedience is an integral part of becoming a mature follower of Christ, baptism is something that every believer should participate in. It is called "believer's baptism" to underscore the connection between believing and baptism. Baptism is not merely about being immersed, making a commitment, or joining a particular denomination or church. None of these things convey the real meaning of baptism. Baptism is about publicly identifying with Christ. It is an act of obedience. Baptism is an outward expression of an inward decision to align oneself with Christ and what He lived and died for.

If you were sprinkled as a child or christened, you have not been scripturally baptized. If you were immersed as an adult but had no intention of following Christ, you were not scripturally baptized. If you were sprinkled and have followed Christ since that time, you have not been scripturally baptized. If you were immersed and became a Christian later, you have not been scripturally baptized. Does that mean that Christ does not accept you or loves you less? Absolutely not! Does it mean that you are not saved if you haven't been baptized? No. It means that as a believer, you need to be obedient and be scripturally baptized.

If you struggle with the issue of baptism, find a church that teaches the scriptural truth about baptism, and seek the counsel of someone who can help you resolve your struggle. If you have come to understand that you were not scripturally baptized, I encourage you to take the steps to follow in obedience to Christ's command. Finally, if you are struggling with a part of your religious heritage that taught something different from what you now understand to be true concerning baptism, ask God to renew your mind through His Word and through prayer. Hanging on to the past just because it's a part of your upbringing is not a reason for resisting obedience to God. Ask for willingness to release the part of your heritage that prevents you from being obedient. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you into the truth of Scripture. God will answer your prayers and enable you to move forward as you seek to be obedient to Him.



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