

The Apostles' Pattern In The Practice Of Baptism

by Dub McClish

Perhaps there is no teaching of the New Testament over which more controversy has raged than the subject of baptism. This is not the case because the New Testament is ambiguous on the subject, nor because men are incapable of understanding its teaching. As we explore this subject it shall be our premise that God is the author of baptism through the teachings of the Bible. In the final analysis, it makes little difference what any man says on the subject, but it makes all of the difference what God says. If the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of baptism is unimportant, then how can anyone logically contend that the teaching of the New Testament on any subject is important? The Lord, through his word, must be allowed to tell us what both the action and purpose of baptism are.

THE "WHAT" OF BAPTISM

In the minds of most people, baptism is an act that may be administered in either of three ways: sprinkling water on the candidate, pouring water on the candidate or immersing the candidate in water. Some English dictionaries state that baptism is administered by either of these three actions. [1] However, it must be remembered that modern English dictionaries reflect the current usage of words, rather than their original meanings.

Consider the following evidence in the New Testament, apart from the original meaning of the word "baptism." The baptism of John, which involved the same action as the baptism commanded by Christ and preached by the apostles, required "much water" (John 3:23). A case of baptism is described in Acts 8:38-39: "And they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water. . . ." The apostle Paul twice uses the term "burial" to describe what takes place when one is baptized (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). This evidence obviously points to only one action -- immersion.

A study of the Greek word for "baptism" yields the same conclusion. "Baptize" and its related forms was not an English word, originally. It was transferred into English directly from the New Testament Greek word, baptidzo. One may consult any standard lexicon of the Greek New Testament and learn that baptidzo means to dip, plunge, submerge or immerse when used literally. [2] When used figuratively (e.g., Mark 10:38), it means to overwhelm. If this Greek word were translated, rather than merely transliterated, the New testament would read "immerse" everywhere it presently reads, "baptize."

For those who truly believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God, the description of baptism in the New Testament is sufficient, regardless of what mere men may say on the subject. However, it is worthwhile to notice a sampling of what religious leaders have said on the subject. The reader is asked to please understand that these are not cited for the purpose of embarrassing anyone or to "prove" some right and others wrong. Our only purpose is to exalt

the truth of God's word. Consider the following:

Martin Luther ("Father of the 16th century Reformation," founder of the Lutheran Church): "The term 'baptism' is a Greek word; it may be rendered into Latin by *mersio* -- when we immerse anything in water, that it may be entirely covered with water." [3]

John Calvin (16th century reformer, a founder of the Presbyterian Church): "The word 'baptize' signifies to immerse and the rite of immersion was practiced by the ancient church." [4]

John Wesley (founder of the Methodist Church): "Buried with him -- alluding to the ancient manner of baptizing by immersion." [5]

Catholic Dictionary: "In Apostolic Times the body of the baptized person was immersed, for St. Paul looks on the immersion as typifying the burial with Christ, and speaks of baptism as a bath." [6]

All of the above quotations have two things in common: (1) They are unanimous in their definition of baptism as immersion; (2) They all come from members of churches that have substituted sprinkling and/or pouring for immersion. Their scholarship and honor require them to refute their own practice, however. It cannot be rationally argued that New Testament baptism was and is anything less than immersion. To adopt any other view requires a denial of New Testament authority.

THE 'WHY' OF BAPTISM

There are two basic schools of thought on the purpose of the baptism commanded by Jesus Christ: One says that baptism is an act of obedience of one who has already been saved, providing access to denominational membership after salvation has been granted through faith alone. In this view, baptism is part of one's obedience to Christ because he is already a Christian. The other view contends that baptism is the final act of obedience one submits to in order to be saved or forgiven of his past sins. In this view a person is not saved until he is baptized, at which time he is also added to the church because he is saved. What does the Bible say?

Jesus told the apostles that as they preached the gospel, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). Note the order: (1) believe; (2) baptized; (3) saved. The order is not (1) believe; (2) saved; (3) baptized if one wished to join a church. In this verse baptism is made a condition of salvation, as plainly as is faith.

When the apostles began to fulfill the command to "go preach," they told people, "Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins. . . ." (Acts 2:38). What relation does repentance sustain to remission (forgiveness) of sins? (Notice that baptism is on

the same relation to forgiveness of sins as repentance.) Those who argue that baptism follows forgiveness instead of preceding it, must also place repentance after forgiveness to be consistent. However, there is not a single instance of forgiveness granted apart from repentance in all of the Bible. "Remission of sins" is placed after baptism in this passage, even as "salvation" is in the previous passage. Saul of Tarsus was commanded to ". . . be baptized and wash away thy sins. . . ." (Acts 22:16). This statement makes no sense at all if one's sins are forgiven before one is baptized.

The objection is sometimes raised that to insist that immersion in water is a scriptural condition of salvation equals a doctrine of "water salvation." If that is the case, then it is such scriptures as Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16, etc., that should be blamed for the teaching, rather than those who believe it. However, such verses attribute no merit to water as a spiritual cleansing agent whatsoever. These verses do not say what the cleansing agent is. They only tell us when the cleansing occurs. It is plain from other scriptures that the blood of Christ is the agent of cleansing or forgiveness (1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 1:5, etc.). The old song is absolutely correct: "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

When does this washing occur or how does one gain access to the precious cleansing blood of Christ? Besides the references already cited, consider also Romans 6:3: "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" It was in the act of his death that Jesus' cleansing blood was offered for the sins of mankind (Hebrews 9:26-28). By what means is the sinner able to participate in the death of Christ, where he offered his precious blood? The inspired apostle answers conclusively: "we are baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:3). This is in perfect harmony with every other scripture on baptism. The purpose God has revealed in his word for baptism is not that of Christian obedience, done because one has already been saved. Rather, it, along with a confessed faith in Christ and repentance of sins, is the act in which one comes to participate in the death of Christ. It is therefore the act from which one comes forth to live a new life (Rom. 6:4). It is the act upon which one is added to the church of Christ, because he has been saved and the church is God's depository of saved people (Acts 2:41, 47; Ephesians 5:23). Only when one understands that salvation is not bestowed until one is scripturally baptized, can one appreciate the apostle Peter's pronouncement that baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21).

SUMMARY

The Scriptures teach that the baptism, which Christ ordered to be preached to all men, is a burial in water. It brings one into salvation, or forgiveness of sins, through the blood of Christ. It is our earnest plea that all men return to what the Bible teaches on this subject, both in their teaching and practice.

Footnotes

1 William Allen Neilson (Ed.-in-Chief), et. al., Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Company, 1957). p. 216.

2 The Analytical Greek Lexicon (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), p. 65; and Joseph

Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 94; and Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.131; etc.

3 T. W. Brents, The Gospel Plan of Salvation (Nashville, Tenn.: Gospel Advocate Company, 1957). p. 280.

4 Ibid., pp. 280-281.

5 Ibid., p. 334.

6 O. C. Lambert, Roman Catholicism Against Itself (Winfield, Ala.: O. C. Lambert, 1954), vol. I, p. 173.