



2704 38TH STREET
ROCK ISLAND, IL 61201

(309) 786-7913

WWW.EDGEWOODBAPTIST.NET

INFO@EDGEWOODBAPTIST.NET

INTRODUCTION

Note: I'm grateful to Ray Pritchard, John MacArthur and John Piper for their insights on this topic.

The story is told of a pastor who had just starting serving a new congregation. For eight Sundays in a row he preached about baptism. Finally, the chairman of the deacons approached him and said, "Preacher, we get the point about baptism and so I'd like to pick your text for next Sunday's sermon. Please preach on Genesis 1:1." The deacon thought that there was no way the pastor could preach on baptism from the very first verse in the Bible. The next Sunday, the pastor got up in the pulpit and read Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He then added, "The earth is two-thirds water. Today's subject is water baptism."

Of all the issues that divide Christians, none is more hotly debated than baptism. For centuries, godly men and women have come down on different sides of this question. Entire denominations have sprung up as a result of disagreements over the mode, meaning, and purpose of baptism. I came across a book title some time ago that sums up what is far too often the case: "Baptism: The Water That Divides."

The widespread response to such controversy and confusion has been predictable: many believers refuse to enter the discussion. Clearly, the Bible does speak about baptism and those of us who accept its authority must search the Scriptures until we find satisfactory answers. There is no virtue in ambiguity when the Bible speaks with clarity.

John MacArthur observes: "We have a largely unbaptized church which includes some of you...it's amazing how many people who proclaim Christ and confess Christ have never been baptized...there's been a sort of indifference to this very, very important matter...May I be so bold as to suggest that a failure to be obedient in the matter of baptism...is at the root of some of the immense problems in people's lives and in the church in general because it allows the church to fill up with people who are unfaithful to the simplest commands of the Lord and of His Word and that's serious."

BAPTISM IN THE GOSPELS

One of the best ways to study a biblical theme is by simply doing a Scriptural survey. Let's begin by looking at Mark 1:4: "John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins." Ceremonial purification and washing with water was common among the Jews.

Drop down to verses 7-8: "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." We see here that John the Baptist was calling people to repentance from the way they had been living. God used John to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, who would baptize believers with the Holy Spirit when they put their faith and trust in Him for salvation.

In Mark 1:9, we discover that baptism is important because Jesus Himself was baptized: "It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan." The Unger's Bible Dictionary points out that the Levitical law required all priests to be consecrated when they were around 30 years of age (Numbers 4:3) through a twofold process of

washing and then anointing (Exodus 29:4-7). When Jesus was “washed,” or baptized in the Jordan, the heavens were opened and He was anointed with the Holy Spirit. We see this in Mark 1:10: “And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove.”

One commentator suggests that Jesus walked about 60 miles just so John could baptize Him in the Jordan River. We also learn that the disciples were baptized and in John 4:2, they in turn baptized others. Guy Glass points out that “Jesus identified with us and now Christ asks us to identify with Him.”

Let’s look now at Matthew 28:19-20 where we see that baptism is to be a distinctive mark of discipleship: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” Simply put, we believe in baptism, and we practice it, because Christ commanded it.

Matthew records these words as explicit instructions of Jesus before He ascended to heaven. This passage is called the Great Commission because it is the foundation for our evangelism and missionary outreach. If going is a part of the Great Commission and if making disciples is a part of the Great Commission and if teaching is a part of the Great Commission, then so is baptizing. I like what John Piper writes: “Making disciples is the main verb...the defining participles are ‘baptizing them’ and ‘teaching them.’ So...making disciples of all nations includes baptizing them.”

Baptism and involvement in missions are clear commands of Jesus Christ. They go together, don’t they? We obey him when we baptize and we disobey him when we don’t. Now, let’s see how this command to be baptized is fleshed out in the Book of Acts. There are ten accounts of active obedience to this ordinance in Acts alone.

BAPTISM IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Acts 2:38, 41: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

Acts 8:12-13: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”

Acts 8:36-38: “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”

Acts 9:18: “Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.”

Acts 10:47-48: “Then Peter answered, ‘Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.”

Acts 16:14-15: Referring to the conversion of Lydia, we read, “...The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ So she persuaded us.”

Acts 16:31-33: “So they said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.”

Acts 18:8: “Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.”

Acts 19:4-5: “Then Paul said, ‘John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.’ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Acts 22:16: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized...”

A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

One overriding truth as it relates to these verses is that baptism always takes place after belief. And, if the meaning of baptism could be boiled down to one word, that word would be identification.

In his pamphlet called, “Water Baptism,” M.R. DeHaan puts it this way: “In the early days of the church...baptism was a declaration that the believer was definitely identifying himself with that group of people who were called Christians and were despised and hated. To be a Christian meant something. To identify yourself with those who were called Christians meant persecution, maybe death; it meant being ostracized from your family, shunned by friends. And the one act, which was the final declaration of this identification, was BAPTISM. As long as a man gathered with Christians, he was tolerated, but when once he submitted to baptism, he declared to all the world, I BELONG TO THIS DESPISED GROUP, and immediately he was persecuted, hated, and despised. In baptism, therefore, the believer entered into the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ. A person might be a believer and keep it strictly a secret and thus avoid unpleasantness and suffering, but once he submitted to public baptism he had burned his bridges behind him...” (Page 27).

When you are baptized you’re declaring that you’ve burned your bridges to bondage. As you stand in the water waiting to be baptized, you symbolize Jesus dying on the cross. As you are lowered into the water, you’re providing a visual demonstration that Jesus was buried in the tomb. As you shoot out of the water, you’re picturing Jesus rising from the dead. Once again, Piper catches the significance well: “Baptism gets its meaning and its importance from the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died in our place and for our sins, and from his triumph over death in the resurrection that guarantees our new and everlasting life.”

And since you personally are being baptized, you are also saying, “I died with Jesus Christ, I was buried with Him and now I am raised with Christ to a brand-new life, and it’s my intent to live my life under His leadership and for His glory from this point on.” In essence, believer’s baptism is a funeral. It’s an act of faith in which we testify, both to God and to the watching world, that the person we used to be is dead and buried, and that we’ve been raised to new life as 2 Corinthians 5:17 states: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

BAPTISM ILLUSTRATED

Two illustrations will help us understand the concept of identification. The first is the Pledge of Allegiance. When a person pledges allegiance to the flag, he or she is openly identifying with the United States of America. Likewise, when a person is baptized, he or she is pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ by openly identifying with Him.

The second illustration is the wedding ring. When a man (or woman) gets married, he (or she) almost always begins to wear a wedding ring or a wedding band. The wedding ring does not make someone married because some people choose to not wear a ring and yet they are still legally and truly married. But, if a person does not wear a wedding ring, you can generally assume that he or she is not married. In a similar way, if a person in New Testament times was not baptized it was assumed that he or she was not a believer.

The ring represents the solemn commitment of a man and a woman to become husband and wife. It is a public testimony to that commitment. A wedding ring identifies a wife with her husband and a husband with his wife. It is a public symbol of a private commitment. Just as the ring declares, “I’m taken. I belong to another,” so in baptism the believer declares, “I’m taken. I’m a believer and I belong to none other than the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.”

Having said all that, baptism is much more than just a symbol of salvation. Piper reminds us that there are two ways of symbolizing something. If we write the word “love” on a blackboard for a group of second graders and tell them that this word represents an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person, that’s one kind of symbolism. But when I took Beth out on a pier on a starry night in Wisconsin almost 30 years ago, and nervously stuttered and sputtered as I asked her to marry me, giving her a diamond ring as a sign of my love, that was something much different than simply writing out the letters L-O-V-E. When I gave her the ring, I was expressing my love through a symbolic action. In a similar way, baptism is a sweet symbol of our faith and it’s an expression of love and a commitment to live under the Lord’s leadership for the rest of our life.

MODE OF BAPTISM

Throughout Christian history three primary modes of baptism have been followed: sprinkling, pouring and immersion. The Greek work translated “baptize” is the verb baptizo. According to contemporary lexicons, the primary meaning is “to dip, plunge, or immerse.” The secondary meaning is to “bring under the influence.” The root means “to totally overwhelm.” Interestingly, while there

were Greek words for sprinkling or pouring that were available to the authors of Scripture, they consistently chose the word baptizo, or immersion, to describe the mode of baptism.

A brief survey of the how of baptism in the New Testament reveals the following fascinating facts:

- ◆ Baptism requires water. John the Baptist said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance...” (Matthew 3:11).
- ◆ Baptism requires plenty of water. It’s interesting that John baptized at a certain spot in the Jordan River where it was not shallow. Check out John 3:23: “Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized.” After the Ethiopian ruler came to faith in Christ, he stopped his chariot, and said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36).
- ◆ Baptism requires going down into the water. After the chariot stopped, the Bible says that Philip and the man “went down into the water and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:38).
- ◆ Baptism requires coming up out of the water. This man went down into the water, and then came back up out of the water (Acts 8:39). Jesus did the same when He was baptized (Matthew 3:16).

Clearly, immersion is in view here. In addition, the figures of speech used by the Apostle Paul are consistent with immersion. Baptism is called a “burial” in Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12. Baptism is “into his death” and involves being “raised to walk in newness of life.” It is difficult to see how sprinkling or pouring could convey these meanings.

So, what does all this mean? As far as we know, in the New Testament, water baptism was always by immersion and that’s why we practice baptism by immersion at Edgewood.

QUESTIONS ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM

Of all the questions related to baptism, there’s one that raises a lot of confusion. Here it is: What About Infant Baptism? If it’s OK for babies to be baptized, then our entire understanding of baptism will reflect that fact. The same is true if only believers are to be baptized. There really is no middle ground between these positions. Let me make two points.

First, faith is always the prerequisite for baptism. Note again, the order of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go...make disciples...baptize them.” It doesn’t say, “Go...baptize...make disciples.” In the Bible, belief always precedes baptism. In fact, baptism has no meaning without faith in Christ because it’s the personal belief of the one being baptized that gives baptism its meaning. Without the ingredient of faith, baptism becomes just another church ritual. Someone put it this way: “Unless you have already come to faith in Jesus, being baptized does no more than get you wet.”

Second, there are no cases of infant baptism in the New Testament. That comes as a surprise to many people, but it is absolutely true. In his book on Systematic Theology, Millard Erickson writes: “The only people whom the New Testament specifically identifies by name as having been baptized were adults at the time of their baptism” (“Christian Theology,” page 1097). I would add that there is not a single case of baby baptism recorded anywhere in the Bible.

Let me briefly address three arguments that are made in favor of infant baptism.

1. **It is sometimes suggested that when Christ blessed the little children and said, “Of such is the kingdom of heaven,” (Matthew 19:14), He by inference sanctioned the principles upon which infant baptism rests.** When Christ blessed the little children, he invited them to come to Him, not to a baptismal service – in fact, there’s no mention of water anywhere. There is no doubt that Jesus welcomes children. In fact, He honors and loves children much more than we do, but there is a big difference between blessing and baptizing.
2. **Some people believe that there must have been infants in the several cases of household baptisms in the book of Acts.** In the case of Lydia (Acts 16:13-15), we don’t know if she was even married. In the case of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-34), the text goes to great length to stress that all heard the Word (16:32), all were baptized (16:33), and all believed in God (16:34)-- factors which would seem to expressly rule out infants.
3. **Others believe that infant baptism in the New Testament takes the place of circumcision in the Old Testament.** The Bible nowhere suggests that baptism replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. More importantly, the Lord’s Supper, not baptism, is expressly stated to be the sign of the New Covenant Christ made with His own blood in Luke 22:20.

The most tragic fact about infant baptism is that it leads many people to think they are Christians when in reality they are not. Multitudes go through life supposing that a few drops of water sprinkled on them as a baby suffice to establish their relationship with God. Sadly, some reject a personal relationship with Jesus Christ because they think their infant baptism paved the way to heaven. I’ve heard some people say, “I’m good to go. I’ve been baptized.”

I can remember a Christian guy asking me if I was saved when I was in high school. I told him very bluntly: “Of course I am.” He said, “How do you know?” To which I replied, “Because I was baptized as a baby.” I used to think that this was all it took. I had been led astray, just like millions of other people who have false assurance of their salvation just because they were dabbed with some water when they were a week or so old.

The most important issue is your relationship to Jesus Christ, not whether or not you were baptized as a baby. The fact remains that the practice of infant baptism has actually led many people away from personal, life-changing faith in Jesus Christ.

ANSWERS TO OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM

1. **How important is baptism?** If you are not yet a believer, don’t get hung up on baptism. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ first, and then be baptized. If you’re already a believer, don’t argue with someone who is not saved yet about baptism. Instead, do whatever you can to help them become a Christian. Paul had this focus in 1 Corinthians 1:17: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel...”

2. **When should baptism be performed?** As soon as possible after conversion. In fact, in the book of Acts, it often happened immediately after someone got saved. Baptism was one of the first things a new believer took care of. There's no reason to put it off. If you haven't been baptized, then you need to do it and the sooner the better. Remember, baptism is not a mark of spiritual maturity, but rather a statement of personal identification with Jesus Christ. You don't have to wait until your spiritual life is where you want it to be. It's an obedience issue, not a maturity issue.

Perhaps you're wondering if it's too late to be baptized. Maybe you've been putting it off because it's too scary to even think about. Maybe you haven't been convinced. Over the years I've had the privilege of baptizing individuals who were brand new Christians and some who have been believers for most of their life. Please let us know if you're ready to take the plunge. We can make arrangements to have you baptized at one of our weekend services.

3. **If I was baptized as an infant do I need to be baptized again as a believer?** Yes. Remember the biblical order: belief first, baptism second. Baptism is an active part of discipleship and a response of obedience to what God has said. The problem with infant baptism is that it reverses the natural order by putting baptism first, then (years later) belief in Jesus Christ. For that reason, many people who were baptized as infants later decide to be baptized again as believers. Since baptism is a public statement of your own personal faith in Jesus Christ, then it's important to make your statement as a believer. Actually, you're not really being baptized again because, in my view, when you were sprinkled as a baby it wasn't biblical baptism. When you follow the Lord as a believer into the waters of baptism, it will be your first baptism.
4. **How old should children be before they are baptized?** They should be old enough to make an intelligent profession of faith in Christ. Children raised in a Christian home may come to such a profession much earlier than other children. Some young children will truly understand the gospel and the meaning of baptism; others will need to wait a few years. In any case, Christian parents, in consultation with a deacon or pastor, should be the ones making the final decision. As a general guideline, some children are ready to be baptized when they are seven or eight years old. Make sure your child is old enough to not only understand but to remember it for the rest of their life.
5. **How can I prepare my children for baptism?** There are several key things you can do that will make a difference with your children.
- ◆ Take time to explain the gospel to them. As parents, we are the primary teachers and shepherds of the flock that meets in our home. Sit down and carefully explain the meaning and purpose of baptism and do whatever you can to mark this major step in your child's life so that they never forget it.
 - ◆ Make sure your children attend Sunday School, AWANA, Edge Students and other ministries of the church that evangelize and equip children and teenagers. These ministries are designed to partner with parents in the evangelizing and discipling of children.
 - ◆ Do not pressure them into making a decision, but help them to definitely trust Christ when they are ready.
 - ◆ Make sure they observe a baptism service. You might even want to make sure your kids are with you the next time we have a baptism.

- ◆ Ask a pastor to explain to your children what baptism is all about.
 - ◆ The week they are to be baptized, have a family talk about the importance of what they're about to do.
 - ◆ Invite your child's friends and relatives to be present for the baptism service.
 - ◆ Make it a festive celebration and an occasion to remember for years to come.
6. **What actually happens at a baptismal service?** The service includes these elements: The pastor and the person to be baptized stand in the water facing the congregation. The person to be baptized is asked to affirm his or her faith in Jesus Christ and desire to be baptized. The pastor will then say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" and then you will be immersed. After coming up out of the water, the congregation will burst into joyful celebration. The actual act of baptism (including the questions) may take only a few minutes.
7. **Should I invite my friends and family to my baptism?** Absolutely! Nothing could be more appropriate. Remember, baptism is a public sign of what has happened on the inside. It is also a visual re-enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Your baptism is your opportunity to preach a sermon without saying a single word. So, yes, by all means invite everyone you know to attend your baptism. Make it a festive, joyous occasion and pray that God will use your witness to influence your friends for Christ.

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON BAPTISM

When the early Christians declared their faith in baptism, they would shout out, "Jesus is Lord!" Baptism has always been a sign of submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. William Barker tells of a machinist at Ford Motor Company in Detroit many years ago who became a Christian and was baptized. Shortly after he got saved, the Holy Spirit convicted him of his need to make restitution for some car parts and tools he had stolen from the company before he had become a Christian. The next morning he brought everything back to his employer, explaining how he had just been baptized and wanted to make things right. His boss was dumbfounded so he sent a cable to Mr. Ford, who was out of the country, asking him how he should handle the situation. Mr. Ford sent an immediate reply: "Make a dam in the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city!"

Are you serious about following Christ? Then demonstrate your discipleship and get ready to take the plunge! If you believe and have been born again, it's time to be baptized. Talk with a pastor, call the church office at (309) 786-7913 or send an email to Info@edgewoodbaptist.net.