

# *What is Baptism?*

**Different people may mean different things when they speak of baptism.**

Some think of the sprinkling of a little water on the head of a young baby. Others mean complete immersion of a person old enough to have stated before others belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God.

- Did Jesus Himself mean baptism to be an easy formal rite, or an act in which a man deliberately could surrender his whole life and personality to God?
- Did Jesus mean baptism to be an act so arresting and expressive that it would fully symbolise His Own death and rising again into boundless life?

Our Lord gave to His apostles this clear charge:

*"All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* (Matthew 28: 18, 19).

He Who had all authority commanded baptism. The question of how and upon whom the rite should be performed should receive reverent consideration by all who wish to obey Him.

## ***Baptise — how?***

There is no doubt that in the earliest days of the Christian Church baptism was carried out by the complete immersion of the person beneath the water, and his being raised up again out of it. Scholars of all the Churches are agreed about this.

John the Baptist baptised *in Aenon . . . because there was much water there.* (John 3: 23).

Jesus was baptised *in the Jordan.* Mark adds that, after his baptism He came *up out of the water.* This last phrase is also used of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 38, 39).

The Greek words for "baptism" and "baptise" carry with them the meaning of immersion. Greek lexicons, acknowledged to be



the best, define the word for "baptise" by "immerse" or its equivalent, never by "pour" or "sprinkle."

Liddell and Scott's (1925 edition): *To dip or plunge.*

Cremer's: *The peculiar New Testament and Christian use is immersion, submersion for a religious purpose, etc.*

Abbott-Smith (1922): *Dip, immerse, sink.*

Grimm's (Thayer's translation): *Christian baptism, according to the notion of the apostles, is a rite of sacred immersion commanded by Christ, etc.*

The most telling argument for immersion is that it alone preserves the symbolism Paul attached to baptism.

*Are ye ignorant that all we who were baptised into Christ were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6: 3, 4; see also Colossians 2: 12).*

A symbol should be an outward illustration of an inner truth. Immersion speaks of a death to the old self-centred life; the laying aside of it as a body at burial, and a resurrection to a new life, linked with the risen Christ, and lived in His power.

If the view of scholarship is so unanimous, why do the majority of Christian Churches pour or sprinkle water on the candidate for baptism, rather than immerse him completely?

In almost every case it is admitted that this is merely a matter of convenience. But surely no consideration of convenience is sufficient ground to alter the method of baptism in such a way as to deprive the rite of its essential meaning.

## Baptise — whom?

In every instance of baptism recorded in the New Testament, the one baptised has personally believed in the Christ presented in the Christian gospel, accepted Him as Saviour and Lord, and indicated a true repentance — a turning away from old sinful habits and attitudes.

Those who claim that infants, who cannot believe or repent, should be baptised, ought to prove that in New Testament days baptisms occurred when belief and repentance were not present.

The very heart of Christianity is at stake here; the call of Christ to a man is so personal, so penetrating and so demanding, that no one can answer for another.

*And Peter said unto them: Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2: 38).*

*They then that received his word were baptised . . . (Acts 2: 41).*

*When they believed Philip preaching good tidings concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. (Acts 8: 12).*

*And Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptised. (Acts 18: 8).*

## Baptise — why?

In the New Testament, baptism has a threefold purpose.

1. It represents, pictorially and outwardly, what happens to a man who believes in God's offer, through Christ, of forgiveness and renewal. His old life is laid aside, his past sins are washed away, and he receives the Holy Spirit, in Whose power he henceforth lives the Christian life.
2. It is an act of obedience to Christ; a promise in action that, as Christ is obeyed in this matter at the outset of the Christian life, so will he be obeyed throughout all our days.
3. It is an act of initiation, linking us with Christ and that society of which He is the Head — the Church.

When these three things are true of a baptism, then we can be assured, on the authority of the New Testament, that we are saved and accepted by God.

In the New Testament baptism and salvation are linked together in such a way that no man ought to take it upon himself to separate them.

- *He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned. (Mark 16: 16).*
- *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. (John 3: 5).*
- *Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptised every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, unto the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2: 38).*
- *And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptised, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name. (Acts 22: 16).*
- *For as many of you as were baptised into Christ did put on Christ. (Galatians 3: 27)*

Christian baptism is essentially a moral act performed in the name of the Lord. To the penitent believer it is a divinely appointed means of his entering the kingdom of God and of taking unto himself the salvation in Christ. Paul teaches that in baptism we enter into fellowship with Christ. Salvation and the remission of sins are promised to baptised, penitent believers.

## *Luther, Calvin, Wesley said . . .*

Do not take this survey as your authority. Go to the New Testament itself. You will be in the company of great leaders and scholars of many Christian communions who have done so, and have come to these conclusions:—

MARTIN LUTHER: "*Baptism* is a Greek word, and may be translated *immersion*, as when we immerse something in water, that it may be wholly covered. I would have those who are to be baptised to be altogether dipt into the water, as the word doth sound and the mystery doth signify."

JOHN CALVIN: "The very word *baptize* signifies to immerse, and it is certain that immersion was the practice of the primitive Church."

JOHN WESLEY: "Baptism when administered to real penitents, is both a *means* and a *seal* of pardon; nor did God ordinarily in the primitive Church bestow this on any terms unless through this means."

## *Today's scholars say . . .*

CANON ALAN RICHARDSON (Anglican): "The symbolism of baptism by total immersion is that the going down into the waters represents a death 'burial with Christ' (Romans 6: 3) and the coming up out of the waters again represents the new birth . . . in Christ — a sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ." (*Interpretation*, July 1949.)

DR. N. SNAITH (Methodist): "The modern difficulties in interpretation are caused by the transference of the rite to infancy. When this change took place, it ceased to be believers' baptism, and the intention was thereby changed. With the further alteration from immersion to pouring and even more to sprinkling, the ceremony became very different from what it was originally. The conclusion is unavoidable that infant sprinkling can scarcely have the same significance as believer's baptism." (*I Believe In . . .*, 1949.)

DR. KARL BARTH (Reformed Church): "From the standpoint of a doctrine of baptism, infant-baptism can hardly be preserved without exegetical and practical artifices and sophisms." (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, Eng. ed. 1948.)

DR. GEORGE MACLEOD (Presbyterian) — speaking of early Christian practice in Britain: "They knew the early baptism . . . entering the water for total immersion; then, after the plunge, and by the sacred act, they would be joined to the Fellowship of all believers . . . To become a Christian is a total affair, a mind-spirit-soul-and-body affair: a total immersion." (*We Shall Re-build*, 1947, p. 57.)

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