

Baptism

Matthew 3:13-17

The baptism of Jesus was a momentous event. It is recorded in three of the Gospels (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22) and alluded to in the fourth (John 1:29-34). Here is the example of the one person who did not need to be baptized being baptized while multitudes today who need to be baptized seem to feel it unimportant. Why was Jesus baptized? It certainly wasn't because He was a sinner, since He had no sin. Jesus said it was to "fulfill all righteousness". Baptism, therefore, by the very word of Jesus is pronounced a righteous act, not a work.

The sheer number of passages that speak of baptism in the New Testament should give us a sense of the importance of the act. Some of the more familiar passages and their teachings concerning baptism are Matthew 28:19, where Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize; Mark 16:16, where Jesus links faith and baptism and says without them a person cannot be saved; John 3:5, where Jesus speaks of being born again of water and Spirit; Acts 2:38, where Peter commands those on the day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins; Acts 10:48, where Peter commanded the household of Cornelius (the first Gentile convert to Christianity) to be baptized; Acts 22:6, where Ananias commanded Saul to arise, be baptized, and wash away his sins; Romans 6:3, where Paul tells us that we are baptized into the death of Jesus; 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul tells us we are baptized by one Spirit into one body; Galatians 3:27, where Paul tells us that when we are baptized into Christ, we put on Christ; Colossians 2:12, where Paul tells us that we are buried with Christ through baptism, and raised through faith; and 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter tells us that baptism saves us.

All of these verses speak of baptism and tell of the resultant benefits. Why, with all of these verses is the Christian world so divided over the form of baptism and the design of baptism? Virtually every Christian body in the world admits and teaches that baptism is needed in some form or another. We wish to see exactly what the word of God teaches about this topic, one of the basic truths of the Christian faith.

To see something of the importance of baptism to the Savior we need only understand that Jesus gave relatively few direct and specific injunctions to His disciples. One of these commands is to love one another (John 15:12, 17; John 13:34-35). Another command was to "do this in remembrance of Me" in the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-20). A third command, or injunction is baptism. In Romans 6:4, the Apostle Paul tells us that we are buried with Christ unto death through baptism that we might also rise to walk in newness of life just as Jesus was resurrected from the grave. Jesus himself commanded baptism in John 3:3-5 by saying explicitly, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God". Baptism is therefore both a declaration of faith on the part of the one who is being baptized and a memorial of the sufferings and glory of Jesus. Baptism pictures the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

John the Baptist employed the act of baptism as the distinguishing feature of his work. This is why he is known as John, the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-6). He preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins and told the people that they should follow after the Messiah. When Jesus began His ministry it was with the same message (Matthew 4:17), but little was said about baptism during the greater portion of His public ministry. It seems that Jesus was not known as a baptizer in the same way that John was (John 4:1-2).

However, at the close of His Earthly ministry, Jesus commanded the act of baptism (Matthew 28:18-20). Now, the act of baptism was to be an ordinance of the church, not just an observance. Baptism has several purposes, one of which is purification. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:21 it is not the removal of dirt from the body that makes baptism important, it is rather, the answer of a good conscience toward God. Baptism is to the soul what a bath is to the body. It cleans and purifies the soul. Baptism is also a remarkable portrayal of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. But, baptism is more than just a portrayal, it is a representation of the Christian's death to sin, his burial of the old life, and his resurrection to the new life of the Spirit.

The old life is gone because baptism marks the definite point of separation. As Paul tells us in Romans 6:3, we are buried into His death, we die. We now have freedom from our sinful past. Paul continues in Romans 6:6, "that the body of sin might be done away with". We now enjoy the new life in the Spirit, as Paul wrote in Romans 6:4, "we should walk in newness of life".

The importance of baptism is underscored by the fact that it is mentioned in every single example of conversion found in the New Testament. In some accounts of conversion we find preaching mentioned, in some we find faith mentioned, in some we find repentance mentioned. Never in all of the accounts of conversion are all aspects of obedience to the Gospel found in one single example. However, baptism is never omitted from any of the accounts. While faith, repentance, or confessing the name of Christ might not be found in any of the several accounts of conversion, baptism is always there.

If you look at Acts 2 (the conversion of those on the day of Pentecost), Acts 8:26-40 (the conversion of the Ethiopian), Acts 9:1-19 (the conversion of Saul), Acts 10 (the

conversion of Cornelius), or any other conversion passage in the New Testament you will always find baptism mentioned. Not that baptism was or is more important than the other factors of conversion (faith, repentance, confession), but it was the one visible proof of the believer's new relationship with Christ. Baptism is an act sufficiently formal and explicit to test obedience and also manifest faith publicly.

In the conversion of Saul, baptism is made imperative (acts 22:16). Ananias asked, "Why are you tarrying? Arise, and be baptized". Baptism is not something that should be delayed. When an individual manifest faith in Christ there should be no delay in allowing them to complete their obedience to Christ. Baptism is the public ceremony of allegiance by which we enter the service of the Lord. It is the oath by which the foreigner becomes a naturalized citizen.

When a person from another country wishes to become an American citizen, they are required to do certain things. They are required to learn some things about the history of our country, about our laws and Constitution, they are supposed to learn our language. Suppose a person from another country does each of these things. Are they a citizen of the United States? Absolutely not! They must appear on a certain day before an official from our government and take upon themselves the oath that makes them citizens. In much the same fashion, faith, repentance and confession lead us to the act of baptism by which we put on Christ.

Without faith, repentance, and confession baptism is nothing. Baptism is not an end to itself, but the means to an end. As Jesus said, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). For the Christian, baptism accomplishes several very important things: we receive the remission of sins, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,

we receive the promise of eternal life, and we are added to the Church. Without baptism we would enjoy none of these benefits. Truly, baptism an act commanded by Christ, is one of the basic truths of the Christian faith.