

"Being Baptised As A Believer"

Series on "Four Fundamentals For Lifelong Followers"

So far in this series of talks I've spoken about two essentials for followers of Jesus – repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. Today, I want to talk about baptism of believers. I realise that in talking about this subject I'm crossing into territory that some here might find difficult, because you were brought up in Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Nazarene, Orthodox or Reformed traditions where baptism means something different than what I'm talking about. Baptism for you means the parents bring their baby to church, and the Priest either dips the baby's head in water, or will sprinkle water over the head of the baby. For a few parents, this is just a ritual, where they talk about "getting the baby done". But for many parents, this is a deeply spiritual and meaningful event, for they want the very best for their child. However, for the baby, it has no meaning because the child is too young to understand or even remember. In many traditions, baptism of babies is followed by confirmation, when the child is old enough to understand what a commitment to follow Jesus really means.

This practice of baptising babies was not known in New Testament times. There are indirect references in the New Testament to whole households being baptised, but we don't know the age of the children in the household, or if they were capable of belief. The first explicit mention of the baptism of a baby was around the end of the second century. The major reason why the church began to baptise babies hundreds of years after the resurrection of Jesus was that they believed that baptism saved people from hell. What the New Testament teaches is that baptism is for believers.

In the New Testament, the first mention we have of baptism is where John the Baptist was baptising Jews who repented of their sins. That was remarkable turnaround, because up until then it was Gentiles, non Jewish people that were baptised into the Jewish faith. The gospel writers give us an account of people capable of belief who are baptised by dunking them right under the water of the Jordan River to wash away their sins. The people that John baptised were not infants, but people capable of repentance. Then of course we have this remarkable account of Jesus, who didn't need to repent, being baptised by John.

1. How should we be baptised?

The New Testament was written in the Greek language, and the Greeks had some very specific words to describe specific events. The word used to describe baptism means to sink, to immerse, to dip, or to plunge. It is the same word used of a ship that sinks. Or the dipping of a cup in a bowl of wine. It's the same word used to describe soaking a cloth in a vat of dye. That's why John the Baptist and Jesus go into the Jordan River. It's why when Philip baptised the Ethiopian official, in Acts Chapter 8, they both went down into the water and came up out of the water. Jesus was baptised by John, and he commanded his followers to make disciples and baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the book of Acts we read of people repenting of their sins, coming to faith in Jesus Christ, and being baptised. It was the people who were capable of belief who were baptised. In the New Testament, that was the only way baptism was done. The question for every person who chooses to follow Jesus is whether they are going to follow a New Testament teaching or a church tradition.

2. Why should we be baptised?

There are more than 30 references to baptism in the New Testament. When you study them all it becomes clear that people were baptised for two reasons.

- **Baptism is a bath for those who feel dirty.**

Those who had repented of their sins, and had put their faith in Jesus Christ, wanted to be washed clean. They wanted to show that that what had happened in the inside, was expressed on the outside. They needed a clear conscience before God. Through baptism their conscience was washed clean.

Baptism was a bath for the dirty. When Ananias went to Saul, who was to become the Apostle Paul, he said **"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."** (Acts 22:16 NIV) That's what baptism is for. It's for washing away of sins. Peter describes it in different language. **"And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God."** (1 Peter 3:21 NIV) The cleansing action of baptism is not an outward cleansing of the body, but an inward cleansing of the conscience.

Have you ever been in a situation where you have had no opportunity to wash or shower for several days? Your hair feels greasy. Your skin feels sticky. You just feel dirty and long to be clean. Other people may not notice, but we have to live with ourselves, and we know how we feel about ourselves when we are not clean. It's the same with cleanliness on the inside. Sin pollutes us from the inside out. We feel dirty. We feel guilty. It doesn't matter how much people tell us we shouldn't feel guilty about our sin, we still have those feelings of guilt inside. We just know there is something wrong. We need a bath. And baptism is God's bath that deals with what's wrong on the inside. Baptism is the bath God has made for us so that we know we are clean.

- **Baptism is a burial for the dead.**

Baptism is the funeral service for the Christian. It's the vital link between our death to the old life, and our resurrection to the new life in Christ. It's not just a public testimony of our faith in Christ, or some sort of wet witness. It's a means of God's saving grace. It's a complete identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus. This act was so powerful and so important in the minds of the New Testament writers, that Peter compares it to Noah being saved from the flood. Paul compares it to the saving power of God when Israel crossed the Red Sea.

Let me explain this a bit more. When someone dies, we bury the body as soon as we can after death, because we know that decay sets in right away. When we bury the body, we don't leave an arm, or a leg, or the head sticking out of the ground. We don't lie that stinking, smelling corpse on the ground, and sprinkle a bit of dirt on it. We bury it. We bury it deep. We cover it right over because it stinks. It's decaying. It's dead. It's rotting away. That old life is no use any more. No one wants to keep a dead body.

That's why we baptise those who have repented toward God and put their faith in Jesus Christ. Because their old life stinks, and smells, and is rotten, it has no place with the new life of Christ. It needs a proper burial. All our sins that make our old life stink and smell, get buried with Christ in baptism. We have a funeral service, and leave it all behind. The water we drain out of that pool is a lot dirtier than the water we put in. If you have never been baptised, it's time to take a bath.

- **Baptism is a resurrection for the living.**

When we are baptised, we are baptised into Christ. We are baptised into his death. But we are also baptised into his resurrection. Here is how Paul links baptism and resurrection when writing to the Christians in Rome.

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Romans 6:1-4 (NIV)

When you die, what's going to go into the grave? Your old worn out, decaying body will. Your false teeth will. Your glass eye will. So will your artificial hip and the steel pins that hold your broken bones together. All that will be buried. Now, when Christ raises you from the dead, how many of you expect to be raised with the same old worn out body, false teeth, glass eyes and artificial hips? How many of you want to take your pacemakers and hearing aids to heaven? I hope not!

We expect to have brand new bodies. A new kind of body, just like the resurrection body of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection body looked like the old one, but it wasn't the old one. He could walk, eat food, touch, and speak, but he could also travel anywhere in a moment. He could travel through locked doors. He could even ascend straight upwards.

When we are baptised into the resurrection life of Christ, our new life looks a bit like the old life, but it is something absolutely new. It can never die.

3. Baptism is a central part of the whole salvation package.

Do you see now why the New Testament makes baptism a central part of the whole salvation package? In the New Testament, repenting of our sins, putting our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, dying to our old life and having the funeral service, and being raised up into the resurrection life of Christ, are all joined together. To repent of your sin, and put your faith in the Lord Jesus, but not be baptised, is as crazy as not burying a dead person, but leaving their stinking, rotting, body lying on the ground. Apart from the dying thief on the cross, I can't find any record in the New Testament of someone who repented of their sins, put their faith in the Lord Jesus, who didn't then straight away have the funeral service, and be buried with Christ and raised with him.

I want to say something to those of you that were baptised as babies, but have never been baptised as a believer. Being baptised as a believer doesn't minimise what your parents did for you then. I believe it's actually endorsing everything they wanted for you. They wanted you to be saved. They wanted you washed clean from your sin. They wanted you to be part of the covenant community of God. Making your own decision to be baptised as a believer according to scripture isn't undoing any of that. It's affirming the desires of your parents. If you were confirmed in your teenage years, it's reinforcing all that was meant in the act of confirmation, and expressing that in the way Jesus prescribed for us.

Baptism is a very joyful event. It's the happiest funeral service you will ever be a part of. There is such joy in celebrating the death of your old life and the embracing of the resurrection life of Christ. Don't short change yourself of all that God intends for you. Repent of your sins toward God. Put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Be baptised as a believer in water, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Don't settle for anything less than all that God has for you. If you have never been baptised as a believer, and you believe that this is what the scripture teaches us to do, and you know the Spirit of God is prompting you to do this, I want to invite you to publically declare that today. In the weeks ahead, we will arrange a place and a time when you can be baptised.

Invitation to respond.

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