

Baptism Purpose

Acts 2:38

Most fundamental believers understand baptism to be the process of dunking a believer under water to symbolize a spiritual reality of our death, burial and resurrection that we have by being in Christ. They understand that dunking is the proper form of baptism because baptism means to be identified with. They say the complete identification with water (complete submersion) equates with our complete identification with Christ. This, however, contradicts the biblical example of baptisms as shown in our previous lesson, where sprinkling is the usual mode.

Too many people trust their church, or spiritual leader, to explain what the Bible says about baptism. It's important to go directly to the source for accurate information, not to a (perhaps biased) individual who tells you what they have been taught by someone else.

A fresh look at baptism

To begin with, everyone approaches Scripture with a bias. It's impossible not to. The Covenant Theologians see one people of God and many allegorical passages of Scripture. The Dispensational Theologian sees God changing in how He deals with mankind. They generally understand Scripture to be taken very literally. As a mid-Acts proponent, I agree with that last statement, plus I believe the Church, the Body of Christ, began with Paul's conversion. Along with these different biases come different interpretations concerning baptism. In general, covenant and early-Acts believers see baptism as necessary for today, but not for salvation. Mid- and late-Acts believers see no biblical basis for baptism in this Age of Grace. Let's try to take a fresh look at what Scripture says.

Baptism is a ritual that was instituted by God through the Mosaic Law. According to Hebrews 9:10 there were a variety of washings (baptisms) practiced in the temple service. These baptisms included washing in a laver (Exodus 30:17—21), sprinkling water with a hyssop branch (Numbers 19:17—20), sprinkling, washing and bathing with water (Numbers 19:19) and sprinkling with blood (Leviticus 16:18—19). When Aaron and his sons were inducted into the priesthood, they were washed with water and then sprinkled with the blood of a ram (Exodus 29:4, 21). These were a part of the diverse washings of Hebrews 9.

Baptism was a ritualistic means of purification, and acted to separate and identify. Numbers 19:18—20 gives Israel instructions about purification. If the water of separation is not sprinkled on the defiled man, he will not be considered purified, and will be cut off from the congregation. This meant eternal damnation, since the only way to come to God was through Israel. It was not the water that purified the man, it was God, because of his obedience to God. It is called the water of separation because it separated the man from the penalty of his sin and separated him unto spiritually cleanliness. The man who was once defiled became identified as being pure by submitting to the God-defined washing with water.

Ultimately, those who were ritualistically purified by the washing of water became identified with others who had also been baptized. When Aaron and his sons were baptized, they were purified, and made ready to take on the duties of a priest, and were all identified as priests. The same can be said of the tribe of Levi when they were set apart as a priestly tribe (Numbers 8:6—7). They were separated from the rest of the tribes and were identified as priests.

John's baptism

Most (mis-)understand that John was baptizing because of a new command given to him by God. Although some see John the baptist as ministering in a whole new way through baptism, he was actually following an old mandate, found in the Mosaic Law, one that demanded purification by baptism. This is evident from the questioning of the religious leaders of Israel when they came out to the River Jordan to

see what John was doing (John 1:19—23). John introduced himself by quoting Isaiah 40:3, claiming to be the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord. Their response to his claim is quite interesting and revealing.

They asked him why he was baptizing if he was not the Messiah or the prophet Elijah (John 1:26). First note that they didn't ask him what he was doing. They understood what baptism was because it was required in the Mosaic Law. What they couldn't understand is why he was baptizing, since he was not the Messiah or Elijah. They expected baptism, but not from a no-name like John.

John's baptism is also seen by many as being different from what was commanded by Jesus through the so-called Great Commission, and also demanded of by Peter in Acts 2:38. However, Jesus was born under the Law and fulfilled every part of the Law (Matthew 5:17), and therefore He needed to be baptized as part of His ministry to Israel, in obedience to the Law.

Purpose of baptism

Baptism was instituted in the Mosaic Law to ritualistically cleanse people and items. When the Israelites agreed to conform to the Law, this covenant was sealed by sprinkling the people with blood. They were, in effect, separating themselves from the world to follow God. This was a sanctifying act. When the temple and its contents were made ready for God, they were baptized (sprinkled) with blood (Hebrews 9:18—22). Again, it was an act of separation and sanctification, setting it apart for God. When people were baptized by John in the Jordan River, they were identifying themselves as a member of the Little Flock of believers coming out of Israel (Matthew 21:43). They were sanctifying themselves (setting themselves apart) for God.

This water baptism was absolutely necessary for them to be included into the believing remnant of Israel. This is evident from Luke 7:29—30

²⁹ And all the people that heard *him*, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John.

³⁰ But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.

Those who rejected the counsel of God, who wanted nothing to do with becoming a part of the Little Flock of believers, did so by rejecting to be baptized. In other words, baptism was necessary for an Israelite to be saved. This is no longer the case, in this dispensation of grace. We are no longer under the Mosaic Law and therefore do not need to follow its mandates.

Dispensation of Grace

The standard fundamental explanation of why we should be baptized is that we need to follow Jesus' example. By doing so, we are then demonstrating the inward change that came about when we were saved. Our spiritual death, burial and resurrection is acted out by a physical baptism into water. Being "buried" into water and then raised up out of the water is supposed to symbolize our spiritual condition at the point of our regeneration. Verses used to bolster this idea include Romans 6:2—4 and Colossians 2:12. However, these verses speak only of a spiritual reality and have nothing to do with a physical ritual of water baptism. They argue that the one baptism of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13) needs to be demonstrated through baptism into water.

Instead of embracing the one baptism of the Spirit that Paul talks about in Ephesians 4:5, most fundamental churches accept two baptism, one spiritual for salvation, and a water baptism as a necessary step to properly follow Jesus. All this has come about because of the failure to rightly divide Israel's Prophetic program from the church's Mystery program. Instead of following what Jesus Christ taught the Apostle Paul, that he was not sent to baptize (1 Corinthians 1:17), they include instructions meant for the nation of Israel, under the Law (Acts 2:38). They are, in effect, following two different sets of instructions to build one church. Is there any wonder that churches become so confused on this issue?

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