

## **BELIEVER'S BAPTISM**

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THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENCES in church traditions and practices of baptism. Godly men have differed for centuries. Yet it remains a basic command of the Lord Jesus for all of His true followers. The Scripture uses the word "baptism" in reference to several things, including; Jewish ceremonial purification, John's baptism of repentance and Spirit baptism. It is not in the scope of this paper to address these and other uses of the word "baptism". The discussion that follows refers to Christian baptism. It is our hope that this handout will help clarify some of the issues and explain our church's position and practice regarding baptism.

## **WHY BAPTISE?**

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- A. It was instituted by Jesus Christ: Just before His departure from the earth and ascension to the right hand of the Father, Jesus commanded his followers "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..." The word of our Lord is sufficient warrant for the perpetual practice of baptism until His return.
- B. It was the practice of the Early Church: The practice of the early church gives the interpretation put upon the Lord's words by those who heard him speak. We read concerning the converts on the Day of Pentecost (soon after Christ's departure): "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized." In Acts 8 we read of Philip's preaching to the eunuch from Isaiah 33. As they went on their way, the eunuch inquired if he might be baptized? "And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And 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."] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him" (Acts 8:36-38). Further examples of apostolic practice may be found in Acts 10:44-48, 16:31-33 and 18:8.

## **WHO SHOULD BE BAPTISED?**

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There is no evident record of anyone in the New Testament receiving Christian baptism apart from at least professing faith in Christ. Baptism prior to conversion is a practice in many churches, and has been for centuries, but one cannot find such a policy commanded or described in Scripture. In the Bible the order is first faith, then baptism. In the New Testament, it involved:

- A. Those who were to be taught as disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).

B. Those who had received the word: "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

C. Those who had received the Holy Spirit: "'Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?' And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:47-48).

D. Those who had repented: "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..." (Acts 2:37-38).

It is evident that in the New Testament, faith, repentance, discipleship and baptism were closely related. They were all components of the one "conversion/initiation" experience.

Though baptism does not contribute to salvation, it is expected to follow immediately. New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce underscores this when he writes, "The *idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament*" (Commentary on the Book of Acts: Grand Rapids, 1954). This is the reason the apostle Peter can speak of baptism as summarizing the conversion experience when he says "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins..." in answer to the question, "What shall we do?"

We conclude from the testimony of Scripture, that baptism is limited to those who have already responded to the call of God in faith and repentance. It is therefore the practice of Grace Community Bible Church to baptise those who possess a "credible profession of faith" as prayerfully estimated by the Elders.

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## WHAT DOES BAPTISM MEAN?

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Baptism is one of the two ordinances or sacraments given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ. An ordinance or sacrament is an outward visible sign of God's inward invisible grace. Like a sign on the street, an ordinance/sacrament points to the reality which it signifies. The ordinances/sacraments use material elements as visible signs of God's blessing. In baptism the sign is the water. Ordinances/sacraments do not make people Christians nor keep them as Christians. However, they are channels of God's blessing to us because they reveal Christ and the gospel blessings of His cross to our senses. God uses this as He does the preached Word to stir up our faith and encourage us. What is baptism a sign of?

A. **Identification:** Baptism is an outward visible portrayal of a believer's identification (union) with Jesus Christ by faith. Every believer is spiritually united with Christ in a real yet mystical way. This union is a union with Him in His life, death, burial and resurrection. Everything we possess as believers is as a result of this union with Christ. The most common formula used to express this union are the simple words "in Christ" or "with Christ" which are found repeatedly in the New Testament. Baptism portrays on the outside all of the benefits of being united with Jesus by faith.

Romans 6:3-5

*Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus  
have been baptized into His death?*

*Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as  
Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might  
walk in newness of life.*

*For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall  
also be in the likeness of His resurrection,*

Baptism by immersion symbolizes a believer's union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Being united with Him in his life and death we now possess all the benefits of His perfectly righteous life under the law and His atoning death. This includes the perfect righteousness which we need before a perfectly holy God and the forgiveness of sins. We now are able to live a new life of obedience and holiness because we are united with Christ in His resurrection and have risen to a newness of life. Baptism does not accomplish this union or create the blessings. These are received by faith alone.

Another benefit of being united with Christ which baptism portrays is the blessing of the forgiveness of sins. The water speaks of the washing away of our sins by a holy God. "And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name." (Acts 22:16)

**B. Proclamation:** Baptism is a visible proclamation of the believer's faith in God and a visible proclamation of God's grace to the believer! Something is being declared in baptism. Declared is both by the believer and the Lord. Most of us are aware that baptism involves a declaration of our faith in Christ but this is often overemphasized to the exclusion of the other.

1. It is a visible proclamation of the believer's faith in God. All throughout the book of Acts baptism is closely associated with faith in Jesus as the Son of God. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter states that baptism is an outward expression of an inward appeal to God. Just as the confession of our lips that Jesus is our Lord saves us in the sense that it is an expression of the faith of the heart, baptism saves us in the sense that it is an outward act of the faith of the heart.

*"...baptism now saves you--not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..."*  
" (1 Pet 3:21).

2. It is a visible proclamation of God's grace to the believer. Everything that baptism portrays - union with Christ, the new birth, death to the old life, the washing away of sins, rising to a new life - are the gifts of God's grace. Baptism is therefore an announcement or declaration of the gospel of God's grace. The sign was given to us by the Lord to remind us what He has accomplished for us by His grace and to encourage our faith. We should not view baptism merely as a "token of our obedience." All the emphasis in this is on what we bring to God in baptism and not upon what God has pledged to us in this gospel sign.

**C. Initiation:** Baptism is an act of initiation [incorporation] into the visible community of faith:

*"So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer"*  
(Acts 2:41-42).

After Peter preached the gospel and urged the listeners to repent and be baptised those who "received his word were baptized." Notice that Luke goes on to say "and there were added that day about three thousand souls." These new believers were immediately added to the visible local church through the ordinance of baptism. Throughout the book of Acts baptism was the immediately administered sign of initiation into the full fellowship of the church. Following this initiation the new believer enjoyed the Lord's table, fellowship with the saints, praying and the instruction of apostolic doctrine. This has led some to say that baptism should be associated with initiation and not graduation. That is to say, baptism is not a sign at the end of a long process of discipleship, it is an outward sign of the journey beginning.

Therefore, we should not burden baptismal candidates with the need to display evidences of regeneration for some long undisclosed period of time. The vast majority of New Testament baptisms were immediate.

In summary, baptism is an outward visible sign of God's inward invisible grace. It portrays the believer's identification with Christ, the believer's proclamation of faith in God as well as God's proclamation of His grace towards the believer and was the sign of initiation into the local church.

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## **HOW SHALL WE BAPTISE?**

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For all the rich symbolism with which the New Testament authors surround baptism, they nowhere tell us or instruct us directly as to how to do it. As a result Christians have disagreed passionately on this issue and will even deny the validity of baptism

when it has not been performed according to their view. Immersion, sprinkling and pouring are the three ways in which water has been historically used in Christian baptism. We believe that dogmatic insistence upon the precise detailed copying of the outward mode of baptism should never take precedence over the inward significance of the sign. Baptism by immersion is clearly in the New Testament and is perhaps the most common. At Grace Community Bible Church we practice baptism by immersion.

**A. Mode:** A reference to a lexicon or to an English-Greek concordance reveals two truths:

1. That baptism is not a translation of an original Greek word, but a transliteration (bringing a word into another language without changing or translating it). The original word is "baptizo."
2. The meaning of this word, in all Greek lexicons is; I place into, dip, immerse or submerge. Greek writers, Pagan and Christian, ancient and modern, unite in their testimony that this is the meaning of the word.

Why then was it not so translated? Sprinkling had already been introduced in Britain and been widely accepted. With so great a public opinion in favour of sprinkling, the 1611 translators of the KJV passed on the responsibility by transliterating instead of translating. Immersion is the correct mode not only because of the meaning of the word but because it better reflects our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. It is also consistent with the idea of "washing away" (Acts 22:16).

**B. Formula:** The formula or pronouncement at baptism is "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." This is consistent with the text of Matt. 28:19-20 as already indicated. The words "in the name of Jesus" or "in the name of the Lord" (or variant forms) are used in Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48. They appear to be an abbreviated reference, especially in an effort to distinguish believer's baptism from the baptism of John (Acts 19:3-5).

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## CONCLUSION

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We are commanded by Christ to be baptized. From the first days of Christianity, believers in Him have submitted to baptism. As we are commanded to lead a moral life of good works, to remember Him in the Breaking of Bread, to witness to our faith in Christ and to meet with fellow believers, so we are to be baptised. It is not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary for obedience, the maintenance of a clear conscience before God and as a means of grace it brings great blessing to the believer and the church body. The sole condition of baptism is a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.